

A-0375

Interview

with

MARIE WATTERS COLTON

October 23, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

~~Original transcript on deposit at~~
~~The Southern Historical Collection~~
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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project**TAPE LOG -- MARIE WATTERS COLTON**

Interviewee: MARIE WATTERS COLTON

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: Oct. 23, 1995

Location: Her home, Asheville, NC

Tape No.: 10.23.95-MC (cassette 1 of 1)
(total length 80 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Marie Watters Colton, who has been an important figure in Democratic Party, women's, and cultural political developments in NC across the last several decades. Colton served eight consecutive two-year terms in the NC House of Representatives from 1979-80 to 1993-94. Having chosen not to seek re-election in Nov. 1994, she is presently semi-retired in Asheville, NC. Colton was born Oct. 20, 1922, in Charlotte, NC; reared in Edenton and Chapel Hill, attending the public schools; and later attended St. Mary's Junior College in Raleigh 1939-40 and UNC-Chapel Hill 1940-43, earning a B.A. in Spanish. She married in 1943, and moved in 1948 with her husband, an attorney, from Chapel Hill to Morganton, and thence in 1953 to Asheville, where she has since made her home. Her first political involvements came in the early and mid-1970s, when she managed several of her husband's campaigns for city council and served in Democratic women's political groups. She ran unsuccessfully for the NC House in 1976, but prevailed on a second attempt in 1978. In 1991, Colton was chosen as Speaker Pro Tem of the NC House, the first woman ever to hold this position, and she remained Speaker Pro Tem through the 1993-94 term. She is currently a member of the national board of Common Cause, a role that suggests the increasingly progressive character of her politics over the years. In her tenure in the House, her chief legislative concerns centered on the environment, education, child health, and related issues.

Substantively, the interview is organized around these major themes: (1) biographical information, (2) the evolution of women's political involvements in North Carolina since the 1970s, (3) the re-emergence of the state Republican Party in these years, and (4) issues of cultural politics, including gay rights and the influence of the Christian Right. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion, with a focus on Colton's political involvements.

See Also: For further discussion of Colton's biographical and professional history, see the phone interview conducted by Suefan Wellons, a UNC-Chapel Hill undergraduate, on Nov. 24, 1994. This interview, conducted for the History 62 course, has been made a part of the Southern Oral History Program's collection, and will ultimately be deposited at the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library.

Subject
Headings: North Carolina Politics & Government; Women in North Carolina Politics; North Carolina Democratic Party; North Carolina Republican Party; Gay and Lesbian Rights.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 10.23.95-MC]

*NOTE: While voices on the tape are at all times audible, the audio quality is intermittently diminished by wind and other noises (the interview was conducted on Colton's front porch).

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 009 Biographical description opens. Childhood in Edenton, Raleigh, and Charlotte -- life during the Depression, father's career and early death when she was in the third grade, two years on a farm near Charlotte during fifth and sixth grade, etc. Colton moved during the seventh grade with her mother and brother to Chapel Hill, where she subsequently attended the public junior high school and high school.
- 093 Details of the ways in which her family's experience was shaped by her mother's employment, first for an Episcopal conference center, and later in Chapel Hill briefly operating a boarding house before beginning a long career with the Southern Historical Collection as the first (and for many years only) assistant to Dr. [J. G. deRoulhac] Hamilton, the Collection founder.
- 158 Details of her mother's work for the Southern Historical Collection.
- 187 The influence of Colton's mother and her sisters, who were sent as young single women by Colton's maternal grandfather to pursue education and career training in New York City before World War I. Colton's mother was a "career woman," and Colton was very close to her and much influenced by her example.
- 234 Details of Colton's life after her graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Dec. 1942 -- marriage, relocation to Morganton and subsequently to Asheville.
- 249 Reasons Colton chose to marry upon graduation, rather than later after beginning a career as she had thought she would. After beginning a family, she focused on raising her four children and did not anticipate having a career outside the home.

- 284 In 1970, with her children out of the house, she first became involved in politics, when her husband ran for the Asheville city council. Reflections on the tumult of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights movement in Asheville. How Colton' at the suggestion of her Episcopal bishop drank a great deal of coffee at the Woolworth's lunch counter in symbolic support of the African Americans seeking to desegregate such places of public accommodation.
- 318 Reasons Colton and her husband supported racial integration, while many of their friends and colleagues did not. The active support of various social protest movements by Colton's oldest child, Liz, who was in college in the late 1960s, brought these concerns directly before the family, and thereby influenced Colton.
- 361 Her daughter Liz also brought the concerns of the women's movement to the family. Liz, who went to Kenya with the Peace Corps [in the early 1970s] and who is now a professor, more than anyone else "raised our consciousness."
- 390 Colton's first direct political activity came in 1970, when she managed her husband's successful campaign for city council. In that year Asheville first elected a black councilman, who like her husband was a Democrat and who became a personal friend of the family.
- 418 How and why Colton chose to run for the NC House in 1976. When her husband chose not to seek re-election to the city council, Colton was encouraged to run for elective office by her husband, many of his supporters, and many of her friends.
- 470 Details of her 1976 and 1978 campaigns, when she ran to oust an incumbent who engaged in flagrant conflicts of interest. Colton's best base of support were school teachers, to whom she had close ties through PTA work and through her children's years in the public schools. She largely self-financed these campaigns, which each cost in the neighborhood of "several hundred dollars."
- 528 Reflections on women and politics in those years. "I never was a militant feminist, like my daughter -- but I'm becoming one. And I'm trying to do it in a gracious way, but, I mean, I take umbrage a lot at some things that go on." How Colton managed her political relationship with incumbent Rep. Mary Nesbitt, who held a seat in the multi-member district and who feared Colton's entry into the race on the grounds that voters might not support two women in the four-member district.
- 587 Details on the gendered political culture of the NC House in 1979: "It was very much an old boy club -- and to a certain extent it has remained an old boy club even when I was the Speaker Pro Tem [in the early 1990s]...."
- 615 Her early involvement with the issue of day care, which her male colleagues viewed primarily as a problem best solved by women remaining in the home.
- 658 [End of Side A.]

- 007 Further discussion of the Democratic Party's view of women in politics.
- 029 How women's political roles have evolved in state politics over the years, and the hostility of many men to women's concerns. How she came jokingly to call the reactionary members of the 'old boy club' the "fat jowls." The example of the Hardison Amendment, with which conservative male legislators for years stymied environmental protections.
- 067 Colton's service as House President Pro Tem, 1991-92 and 1993-94; how she was routinely excluded from the top circles of legislative power, even by Speaker Dan Blue, an African American commonly identified as a progressive. "Basically they ignored me; they didn't often ask me what my opinion was." Colton's view that women remain today excluded from most top roles, though some progress has been made. "We are certainly not on the cutting edge in North Carolina promoting women. And I don't mind saying this to the Democrats: I think the Republicans have done even better" gradually promoting women to leadership roles over the years.
- 121 Colton's key legislative concerns. Extended description of her successful effort, over the considerable opposition of the traditional medical establishment, to broaden the range of legally available modes of medical treatment.
- 188 Why Colton [in 1993] introduced legislation to repeal the state's sodomy law. She views the law, which effectively prevents consenting adults from exercising the same range of choice of sexual practices allowed married couples, as "just outrageous, particularly because it is administered in such a restrictive way against homosexuals." Details of the rejection of her bill by the House committee. Colton's view that sexual preference is genetically determined rather than a "lifestyle choice." Her contempt of the claim by the Christian Right that homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity. [See ca. 340 on the tape, Side B, for further discussion of this issue. Additionally, note that when Colton mentions that heterosexuals legally may engage in certain sexual acts prohibited for homosexual individuals, she misspeaks, since such acts are illegal in all instances as a matter of law; her point is that gay persons alone are prosecuted for certain sexual practices common to heterosexuals and gays alike.]
- 238 Brief description of the influence of the Christian Right in North Carolina politics. Her view that we are presently witnessing a backlash to women's increasing political assertiveness.
- 252 The Equal Rights Amendment in the Legislature. Colton's efforts to modify statutory language to be gender-neutral.
- 304 Colton's explanation for the Republican Party's recent success: "I think a lot of it is ... that some people cannot handle change; they don't understand what's happening in the world...." People feel threatened, and hence are easily manipulated by fearmongers. The Democratic Party's inclusiveness has been a political handicap. Colton's fear that increasing economic inequality in the United States, "the

unprecedented transfer of money" from the bottom to the top of the economic ladder -- which she terms "insane, immoral, outrageous, unfair" -- will provoke increasing class divisions.

378 The Democratic Party did not feel the ground shifting under its feet, and did not anticipate the Republican Party's recent triumphs.

408 Colton's view that the state government does not function as she believes it ought to function. "I think John Q. Public is not represented there." "John Q. Public does not have a pin-striped lobbyist there." Her work on the national board of Common Cause, which seeks reforms to lessen the influence of money on politics. Discussion of her unsuccessful efforts to introduce campaign finance reform laws in the NC Legislature. "I think that in our system [the influence of money] is just completely out of hand, and therefore I do not think government works the way it ought to."

501 [End of Side B. End of interview.]