

Interview

with

HENRY E. FRYE

August 21, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

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

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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project

TAPE LOG

Interviewee: HON. HENRY ELL FRYE, Assoc. Justice, Supreme Court of North Carolina

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: August 21, 1995

Location: Justice Frye's chambers, Raleigh, NC

Tape No.: 8.21.95-HF (cassette 1 of 1)
(approximate total length 50 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Hon. Henry E. Frye, Associate Justice, NC Supreme Court. Frye has been a twentieth-century pioneer in black politics in NC, and in turn an important political figure, black business leader, and jurist across the last thirty years. Born August 1, 1932, in Richmond Co., NC, Frye attended local segregated schools and later graduated from North Carolina A & T in Greensboro in 1953. From 1956-59 Frye attended the University of North Carolina Law School, where he was, while not the first black graduate, the first black student to graduate after attending the standard three-year law curriculum. In 1963, Frye was appointed NC's first black Assistant U.S. Attorney, serving in that position until 1965. He ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the NC House in 1966. In 1968, Frye won the chance to represent Guilford Co. in the NC House, becoming the NC's first black legislator in this century. He served six consecutive House terms (1969-80) and a single term in the NC Senate (1980-82). He chose not to seek reelection to the Senate in 1982, and in January 1983 was appointed by Gov. Jim Hunt to fill a vacancy on the NC Supreme Court. He won reelection to the Supreme Court in 1984 and 1992. Additionally, in 1971 Frye founded the Greensboro National Bank, and served as its president until 1981.

Substantively, the interview focuses primarily upon the evolution of black political activity in NC from the mid-1960s through ca. 1980.

See Also: For further discussion of Frye's biographical history see the interview by Amy E. Boening, Feb. 18 and 26, 1992, for the Law School Oral History Project, UNC-Chapel Hill (on deposit at the Southern Historical Collection).

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

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

* researcher must obtain interviewee's permission
to quote from interview

Restriction: Permission from Frye required for quotation.

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 8.21.95-HF]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 009 Reflections on the state of affairs for blacks as voters ca. 1964-65.
- 031 His appointment as NC's first black Assistant U.S. Attorney in 1963, including the role of John Wheeler, president of Mechanics & Farmers Bank in Durham, in encouraging Frye's appointment.
- 062 Further details of the behind-the-scenes details related to his appointment as Assistant U.S. Attorney, including views of Senator Sam Ervin.
- 076 How Frye viewed the prospects for future black political activity after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the short run in NC, the Voting Rights Act tended mostly to shift the terms under which white Democrats were elected, rather than to facilitate the election of black candidates.
- 100 Why he chose to enter politics with a run in 1966 for the NC House. Factors included his observation that Durham was far ahead of Greensboro in promoting black economic institutions, the earlier unsuccessful efforts by several other black candidates in Winston-Salem, and the fact that the NC House still had not a single black member.
- 130 Organizing and gaining financial support for his 1966 campaign, a largely local effort.
- 139 Important black leaders in NC in the mid- to late 1960s.
- 154 His experiences upon arrival as a member of the NC House in 1969, after winning a seat in the 1968 election. Political issues of concern to him as a new legislator, including abolishing the "literacy test" for voter registration. How he lobbied for and gained broad support for his bill to abolish the literacy test, which passed both houses ca. 1969. Subsequently in 1970, the voters of NC rejected amending the state constitution to abolish the literacy test; why the NC Bar Association did not support the literacy test amendment.
- 272 His relationship with Gov. Bob Scott (1969-73).
- 284 Reaction of leaders of the state Democratic Party to the expanding presence of minorities and women in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the creation of new Second Vice Chair positions reserved for blacks and women in the state Party structure.
- 320 The 1972 election victories of Republicans Jim Holshouser and Jesse Helms, and the response of Democrats in the legislature.

- 350 Views of Democratic Party officials ca. early 1970s about the pragmatic political issues related to bringing minorities into the Democratic coalition.
- 400 His efforts as a legislator to abolish the death penalty.
- 438 Key black leaders across NC during the decade of the 1970s, including black newspaper publishers and businesspersons.
- 488 The history of the Legislative Black Caucus, which began very informally across the early 1970s as the number of black legislators slowly increased. The relationship of the black caucus to the Democratic Party leadership, and the legislative concerns of the caucus. "Race was only one part of the agenda."
- 572 Frye has difficulty evaluating the array of private interest groups working to influence state politics during the 1970s; he does recall that across that decade "single-issue" politics became much more common, including among voters.
- 649 Why he chose not to seek reelection to the NC Senate after serving one term from 1980-82, including in large part because he was giving serious thought to a later run for governor and felt returning to the practice of law would best position him for a later political race whether for the governorship, the lieutenant governorship, or for U.S. Senate.
- 691 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 8.21.95-HF]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 002 His concerns that he not be characterized narrowly as a black political figure, and further discussion of how returning to law practice would assist a later run for high public office.
- 021 [End of Side B. End of interview.]