

MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Oral History Office

MRS. PEGGY WAXTER

Interviewed by Ellen Paul

The Governor Theodore McKeldin-Dr. Lillie May Jackson Project
An inquiry into the Civil Rights activities
of
two Maryland leaders
during
the mid-twentieth century

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Interview with Mrs. Peggy Waxter
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Transcribed by Ellen Paul
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I: Let me ask you some questions about Governor McKeldin too, because that's who the project is concerned with.

What kind of relationship did you have with McKeldin on a personal level? Were you and the judge friendly with him?

A: Oh, very. We went to Liberia with him, to Africa, in nineteen, , when did we go to Liberia, I guess it was 1956, wasn't it? We celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Liberia.

I: So that on a personal level you really were quite friendly with the man.

A: Yes, very, and Mrs. [McKeldin] too. She was wonderful. When I danced with that black man over there in Liberia, I said, "What do you think my children and my grandchildren will think when they go up in the attic and find all these things from Liberia?" He said, "What they will do," he said, "They will rise up and call you blessed," this black man said. But McKeldin was great that night, when I, after it was over. She doesn't dance, Mrs. McKeldin, and she was asked to dance with the president of Liberia and finally he said to her, "Well, you have to." So she got up and danced a few steps, but I like to dance so I danced, heartily, they had an black band, you know, an African band, and an American one.

And when we got through I remember they gave me, the govern--
ment gave me a star of Africa or something. And when I got
through he came up to me and said, "You did your country more
good tonight than all the ambassadors and everybody else, just
having a good time."

I: And because it was honest and came straight from the
heart.

A: That's right.

I: You told me a story about this picture of your husband
and how he used to show people around the city of Baltimore
and the slums, and you said this was in the forties? This
picture is of the poor housing conditions and the outhouses.
You told me an amusing story about Governor McKeldin when
your husband took him down there. Would you like to repeat
that for me? Because I think its worth saving.

A: He had a way of being, he always used to say to me, "If
people only knew-if they would face up to what the problems
of poverty and what the people were.—If they knew what was
happening they would feel as kindly or would want to help
people as much as anybody. It's the people that don't know."
So he used to take his more conservative friends, business
friends and people, out to lunch and they would always go
on tours. Down to City Hospital or housing or health or
something. And one day McKeldin, who had appointed him in the
Welfare Department, and he took him on one of these tours.
And McKeldin always told this story. And they went and stood
in front of this old house down in South Baltimore, and he
said, "Look at that, isn't it terrible, the way these people,

citizens, the way they live?" And McKeldin started to look very upset, and smiled, and I guess cried a little bit, and said, "That's my old homestead. That's the house I was born in." So he often told that story.

I: How did Judge Waxter come to be appointed by McKeldin? Were they friendly before, did they know each other?

A: Well, of course McKeldin ~~being~~^{was} a Republican, but we always used to think he was a Democratic Republican, because he was so liberal, at least certainly on the subject of race. He [Waxter] was in there under Jackson first, you see, and then he had to be reappointed, rather than just picking him out of the blue. So he kept him on. But he always spoke about how that was one of the things McKeldin was very much backwards [old-fashioned] about, people. And he had to get the right people in the right spot to help him.

I: Judge Waxter certainly has an impressive record of his own involvement with social welfare and civil rights. Can you tell me a little bit about how he himself became involved with that, your husband? What stimulated his interest and what kind of events he worked with besides his official job?

A: He always used to say that his grandfather, who was General Shryock, I think he was a Republican too, Thomas Jacob Shryock. When he was a little boy they took a walk and he remembers General Shryock, who was a businessman, he was a big ~~M~~ason, and when he died I think they had a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a Protestant all saying prayers at his funeral. So maybe General Shryock started the whole thing, I don't know.

But he put his hand on his head, and he said, "Tom, the most important thing in the world is people."

I: I would take it that you and your husband were not concerned with just black civil rights or any kind of specific social welfare, but just with the general welfare of all people.

A: But you had to fight, and you still do, for people who were underneath you. And he used to tell me, Jake said,

"You cannot treat children like we have treated black children. Send them to schools and tell them they're going to be president of the United States someday and then suddenly when they get to be about a teenager, they find that's all a lie. And they have a great deal of resentment and they go in gangs, and they start taking dope, and they get mad, and they kill and rape, and we've set it up."

I: During the time that your husband was involved in both the city and the state welfare agencies was it harder for black people to come and get welfare and to get help? Did they find resistance from local officials and from the lower-level government and the bureaucrats?

A: Not when he was the head of the department, I can assure you. Not ever. There may have been some incidents, there probably were, with prejudiced welfare workers, but this I think, so often trickles down from the top. It depends on who is at the top. Of course, he was criticized much more by other people, called a Communist, and people would get upset because he always told a story about little boys and how they

couldn't treat people like that and what was going to happen if we couldn't see that people had better health and food and all the things that bring up a normal group of people. and he always used to say that when the revolution comes you and I will be the first ones to go. I've always remembered that. Because we knew what was happening all the time and we couldn't persuade other people. And so the most resentment will be for the people who have helped the most.

I: So he was certainly a godd deal ahead of his time. It's too bad we don't have someone like that running the welfare agencies today.

A: That's right.

I: Let me ask you this. There has been some criticism of Governor McKeldin because some people felt that he was only active in civil rights to the extent that it would help his political career, and he wouldn't step too far forward and yet at the same time, he wouldn't lag behind.

A: This is McKeldin?

I: Yes, McKeldin. Right, Governor McKeldin.

A: Absolutely not true. He was a very political animal by nature but underneath that was that deep caring, for people. I can prove that by an incident. Do you want that incident? We were in Portugal, on the way home from Africa, on this trip where we had seen great poverty, and my husband wanted to set up a Welfare Department, right away, quick, and they weren't quite ready for that. But McKeldin took us on a trip to a big cathedral where they have alot of healing. Oh, I'M so bad about names. But anyway, we went in this car and it was through a very desolate part, and it was a cold, windy

day and we stopped to see a windmill. It was making or doing something very primitive and the driver wanted us to see this. And down the road there was a little house, the only house nearby. Some children came out with flowers they must keep ready for tourists or something and they came out holding these flowers to give us, and as we were looking at the windmill they came up the hill and he (McKeldin) started biting ^[George Washington]. And my husband nudged me, because when he travelled with him he'd seen him do this. He got out his picture, he got out the button of the state of Maryland, the black-eyed Susan, and he kept saying, "Now I'm the governor of Maryland and I want you to have my picture and I want to talk to you," and he talked to them just as if they were going to come back the next day and vote for him. And Jake said to me afterwards, "You see, its just perfectly natural for him. He wasn't doing this for any real reason, it was this real feeling about him." He just went through this act, up on that lonely hill with those children from Portugal, just the same as if he'd been in any one of the districts of Maryland, trying to get votes. So I think people misinterpreted this enthusiasm of his, and this caring, as being so automatic. And in a sense, I think politicians do bet that way. But his was never really automatic, because when the chips were down, he never failed.

I: Did McKeldin initiate any civil rights movements? Was he pushing, as far as you know, for legislature?

A: Always. I can't say specifically, but in the same way my husband did, turn over backwards to do more for the people that have less. It was as simple as that.

I: So it was a constant concern with him, not just something he did at election time?

A: That's right. Never. Absolutely never.

I: Your husband wrote a long, long letter^{*} concerning the welfare in the city of Baltimore and he talked about race relations and also certain other political things like capitalism that some people didn't like and felt that he shouldn't have talked about. How did McKeldin respond to that letter?

A: I think it wasn't, was it D'Alesandro at that time or was it McKeldin?

I: McKeldin was the governor and D'Alesandro was the mayor. But I understand a copy was sent to the governor's office.

A: Oh, yes, there was a big to-do, and who paid for it and all that. That was a big-and why should he have to connect up all that? Well, he had to connect up all that because that was the history and you can't, just as we were saying before, take one little piece of this without taking the whole thing, and the race did have a lot to do with that, the way people were feeling.

You asked me if I can remember one thing. I can remember one thing. I can remember back when I really found out. The Junior League, I was president of the Junior League once, and this was after my term, and they had this BEREC, Baltimore, Emergency Relief Committee, and people were, this was when apples were being sold on the street corners, people were hungry and people were in the middle of the Depression. And all of ~~the~~ these people used to bring their old clothes down and these nice Junior League girls, and they were nice, they

* Available at Enoch Pratt,

wanted to do something, they were privileged people and we would have a pile that went to the black people and all the holy ones would go there. And I used to cheat and send as many of the good ones the other way. And that said something to me. I think that was important for me, just as a person, to see that. And the people that didn't know that they were doing anything, it was just, you know, those people (the blacks) were shiftless. Give them... (unclear)

I: Did you have a hard time persuading your own friends of your ideas? Did you ever get into fights with them about it?

A: Oh, yes. But they used to, I guess, treat me the way that many people treat people now, by saying that you're a racist, you know, if you go too far one way or the other. We didn't say that then, but I think that's what they probably thought. That I was so extreme, that I was doing much more harm than good. And that I was just very stupid and I didn't understand how these things worked. But in a way they have liked me in spite of it. Although I have another friend that told me once that people say dreadful things about me. And she would see me go up to these people and they would be so nice to me and talk to me. I said I don't ~~want~~ want to know who they are. I like people and I don't care what they say.

I: And now of course they realize you were right the whole time.

A: I'm not sure.

I: You still have to convince them.

A: No, I think people are very frightened. I think fear is at the bottom of all of it. Mr. Hutzler didn't know what

would happen to his store if black people came in. And it was-once they came in gradually, into the Lyric, into their place, you know, they were afraid in schools.

I: When McKeldin was governor, and when he was mayor, when he was involved with Republican party politics, there were a good many people within his own party that didn't agree with him, the old-line Republicans as well as all the other people that simply just didn't like his ideas. How did he defend himself? How did he defend his ideas? What did he say to people to convince them or at least to explain to them how he felt and why he felt that way?

A: He laughed alot. And he was tolerant of their intolerance.. I think. Because everybody develops along different lines and, they do wrong or right, or way out one way, and you have to listen to those kind of people. I think he was very strong, and he knew when someone was really raking over things.

I remember another incident. A neighbor of mine in Roland Park, at the meat counter one day. She was very, leader of society, a very conservative person. She came up to me at the meat counter and I was very embarrassed because I had on slacks, and we didn't go to the meat counter in slacks. And I found her coming up to me and she said, "You know, I feel better about myself now. I'm coming along nicely." And I didn't know what she meant. And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "I heard your husband at the YW [CA] talk about Myrdal's book," you know the American Dilemma, "and he reviewed that book, and I was frightened to death. And I thought those

were dreadful things he was saying, perfectly dreadful. And I went back and I've been studying (she was a very intelligent woman), and reading it and thinking about this subject, and I've come a long way," she said. And I thought that was a very honest statement. She was never going to be a great radical but she was, you know, willing, to be honest with herself. She was looking into something that she hadn't maybe paid attention to.

I: And the governor and your husband believed in working with people like that instead of against them.

A: That's right.

I: I think there were probably alot of people like that to work with.

A: That's right. And not just the stubborn. And I think that young people are more impatient usually than older people and you're always impatient when you're young. And you would just get furious. And I noticed as my husband grew older that he used to argue less. He wasn't as much fun in that way, but he wouldn't try to persuade them. He would just say, "Well, they're that way." And I would say, "Well, if they're that way and I was your friend, and you knew how you felt, and didn't even talk to them about it, I'd feel much worse. I think they really thought that I was peculiar enough.

(End of Side one of Cassette I)

They always accept your idiosyncrasies. And I think that was true when people went to hear Guthrie Speers. He's somebody you might want to talk to. A minister, a Presbyterian. They used to sit there and hear him every Sunday and talk about how everybody was the same. But they didn't believe it at all. But they thought it was, you know, they thought it was just Guthrie. And I think alot of people thought it was, you know, just Jake and Peggy, and never were listening. So they were tolerant of you. Either that or they think you're out to destroy their society and that you're very dangerous people.

I: Can you tell me about some kind of project that McKeldin did after he was out of the office-holding positions? When he was just another private citizen?

A: He was always going into churches and pulpits. My husband got a little bit of that habit, too, because he used to say that he didn't go to church as much except when he was in the pulpit. I think McKeldin always was a Methodist, it seemed to me he was always getting up in a pulpit and having people to see him. I just think that black people loved him and they should have.

Lillie Jackson loved my husband. I can tell you a story about Lillie Jackson. Lillie Jackson told me when he (Judge Waxter) died, she came up to me in tears, and she said to me, "The black people of Maryland have lost the best friend they ever had in Judge Waxter." And she had told me, in public,

she had a story, when my husband was a very young man, maybe in the juvenile court, I guess. She used to tell this story that she had ^[had] young children. And Lillie Jackson wanted to have a new life ~~when~~ her children were grown up and she was at this meeting and she heard this young man in a navy blue suit say a very important sentence that just hit her between the eyes. And he was fresh out of Yale Law School, and that was my husband, that was Judge Waxter. And he said, "Until the black people of Baltimore and in Maryland do something for themselves, the white people will do nothing." And she started the NAACP, right from that moment on. And they started doing things and she always ^[stay] said that, sometimes in embarrassing places, because she was putting him, my husband used to say, "Don't do that to me, I have enough problems as it is with getting money for welfare work and for people who need...." (unclear). So it wasn't always the opportune place that she would tell that story. And she told it many times.

I: That's quite a tribute. That's great inspiration.

A: Anything good or bad that happens from now on end is all that little man in the blue suit.

I: You and your husband, you were both concerned with general civil rights for everybody and not just for anyone group, although I think there are certain years you can say, from 1954 on, when black civil rights was in the forefront and most prominent nationally. But you did work in other areas, especially in social welfare. Did Governor McKeldin also get involved in other areas, say with Jewish people? I know that

he appointed some of the first Jewish people to official offices.

A: My, yes. Mental health, that was very unpopular. Everybody who was interested in mental health in those days was supposed to be a Communist or anybody who didn't like....

(unclear)

I: Do you think that Governor McKeldin's background, coming from a poor family, an immigrant family in an ethnic area, helped to stimulate his interest in getting to work for people who were poor? Do you think that had a great effect?

A: I do. When we were in Estorial, that's where we were in Portugal, he would never take any drink, never do anything like gamble, I think. But my husband persuaded him to do into one of these gambling dens and he went. And we were walking through this very handsome place and it was this beautiful christening dress for a baby, all hand-made and real lace and things. And they both stopped and looked at that. And they both stopped and looked at that. And it was enormously expensive, and she turned ~~me~~ to me, Mrs. McKeldin, and she said, "You know, when we were first married we didn't have very much money (they both worked in a bank), and we bought a dress very much like that for young Teddy." The oldest child, was he the oldest child? Maybe it was the daughter.

I: I think it was Teddy.

A: "And we [the McKeldins] really couldn't afford it at the time but we just decided that nothing could be too good."

If people haven't had a lot of things, they're more apt to spend that kind of money on those kind of things. I know it

did as far as the alcoholism was concerned, he was very much concerned with that. He had a brother who had problems. So I think that does influence a person.

I: What kind of approach did Governor McKeldin have to creating, for example, offices and agencies to help people who needed it? Was it easy for your husband to do his job?

A: That's right. If he felt he had chosen the right person, he gave them a lot of leeway. I mean, we used to go down on that boat and talk about my husband. Sobeloff, of course, was his big advisor, Judge Sobeloff. But he would get people like that around him and then he would pick their brains and ask for the names of people to get. And if he got somebody into a job and he would oversee it, he would choose the type of person who was so smart that he would give them leeway to do what they wanted to do, and they would get the money. He'd get the money.

I: Would you consider social welfare and civil rights to be Governor McKeldin's primary interests?

A: Well, yes, except that health and it all goes together and it's all related to children and old people. They didn't talk as much about old people in those days. But then that was later on.

I: That was going to be the next question. That was very good timing. I wanted to ask you about the Waxter Center, if Governor McKeldin or Dr. Jackson had anything to do with that.

A: Yes. Governor McKeldin had a great deal to do with it and many people have told me, I didn't know all the ins and outs of the politics, but if it hadn't been for him two or three times along the way, and other people too, they would have never followed through. He kept them to it and he was very-be sure to keep that money.

I: What kind of role did your husband play in the development of the Center?

A: None, because he was dead. And it hadn't been conceived really, before he died. And then DR.Mason Lord was the one that asked me to have it named for him. But he had been the commissioner, the first commissioner, for the commission on aging, and he, with Nathan Shark, and these people, Dr. Nathan Shark, brought in the idea that, you know, you don't just do for children, you do for old people too. The whole process of geriatrics and all that started right then.

I: That, too, is quite ahead of its time. ~~That's~~ That's just now becoming a major concern.

A: That's right. And one thing figgres when these things happen. People think that they discovered it, you know. The young people think that this was their baby. And then they go back and they find that it was talked about many years ago. Like it never happened.