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**An Oral History of Dr. Charles E. Watts
Conducted by Leroy Graham**

Title: An Oral History of Dr. Charles E. Watts
Interviewer: Leroy Graham
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Abstract: Dr. Charles E. Watts (1899-1992) was a Baltimore-based dentist and treasurer of the Baltimore branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a position which allowed him to work closely with Lillie May Carroll Jackson. In this oral history interview, Dr. Watts gives insight into Dr. Jackson's determined personality and strong influence in the local civil rights movement. He also discusses the Jackson family as a whole, as several of her children, particularly Juanita Jackson Mitchell and Virginia Jackson Kiah, were also involved in the NAACP's efforts.

Note on Oral History: Oral history is a methodology of gathering, preserving, and sharing the voices and memories of individuals and communities. As primary material, it documents personal reflections, commentary, and recollections, and is not intended to present a verified or "complete" history of events.

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An Oral History of Dr. Charles E. Watts
July 6, 1976

Dr. Charles E. Watts was interviewed on June 23, 1976, by Leroy Graham at 2428 Arunah Avenue in Baltimore City. The recording begins mid-conversation; time stamps only reflect progress from this midpoint.

Graham [00:00:02] —family?

Watts [00:00:05] Yes. We—

Graham [00:00:08] Your mother and father?

Watts [00:00:10] My mother and father. We were Virginians. We had a family of seven: five children and mother and father, of course. And we were born—the children were born in Staunton, Virginia. Some people call it "Stanton." In the Shenandoah Valley.

Graham [00:00:38] Is that the home of President Wilson?

Watts [00:00:41] That's the home of President Wilson, yes.

Graham [00:00:45] Alright.

Watts [00:00:45] Uh—

Graham [00:00:45] How long have you been in Baltimore, then?

Watts [00:00:46] Well, I've been in Baltimore going into 51 years.

Graham [00:00:50] 51 years?

Watts [00:00:50] Yes. We went from Staunton to Appomattox County, Virginia, where my father farmed for a year. Then we moved to Washington, where we went to school. We stayed in Washington until we boys were around 12 years old. No, I'm ahead of my time—we went to Washington when we were around 12 years old. We stayed there until we finished Howard University. Which was—I'm speaking of myself now—I finished Howard University Dental College in 1924.

Graham [00:01:51] 1924. So was that when you came to Baltimore? After you finished?

Watts [00:01:54] Yes, I came to Baltimore in 1925.

Graham [00:01:56] 1925, mhm. Well, when did you first, um—What church did you attend to when you came to Baltimore?

Watts [00:02:03] Well, I attended, uh—Since I've been in Baltimore I've been attending Macedonia Baptist Church.

Graham [00:02:13] Oh, Macedonia Baptist.

Watts [00:02:14] Yeah.

Graham [00:02:14] Right.

Watts [00:02:14] Yeah.

Graham [00:02:15] Well, can you tell me when the first time you met Lillie May Jackson or—?

Watts [00:02:20] Yes. I met Lillie May Jackson around 1935—

Graham [00:02:37] Mm.

Watts [00:02:38] —when she became president of the Baltimore branch NAACP.

Graham [00:02:46] Well did she invite you to the organizing meeting or what? Or did you come on your own?

Watts [00:02:51] (speaking at the same time) No. No, I came on my own. I was not at that time connected with the organization. Just visited the meetings that the NAACP had. Those meetings were on Sundays—membership meetings—and there was a program called "Talent Night." They would have talent night once a year and give prizes to the different contests: oratorical, and vocal, and such as that. I always contributed to that contest.

Graham [00:03:39] You mean as a participant or—?

Watts [00:03:41] No, not as a participant.

Graham [00:03:42] —buying a ticket?

Watts [00:03:43] No. Financially.

Graham [00:03:46] Oh.

Watts [00:03:46] See the—for the prizes.

Graham [00:03:48] Oh.

Watts [00:03:48] See? Yeah.

Graham [00:03:52] Mhm. And you became—Well, when did you become—seek active participation in the NAACP?

Watts [00:03:57] Well, I became treasurer around 1950.

Graham [00:04:08] Well, did you—Had you been a part of activities prior to 1950?

Watts [00:04:13] Only as a membership.

Graham [00:04:14] Only as a membership?

Watts [00:04:15] Only as a member.

Graham [00:04:18] Mm. Well, what made you accept the offer to be treasurer? I guess, Mrs. Jackson sort of appointed you instead of—(laughs) instead of you being elected, I would imagine, to treasurer—to the treasurer position.

Watts [00:04:28] (laughs) Yes, at the time I was appointed treasurer.

Graham [00:04:31] Right. Well, what—Can you describe any of that incident, when she called upon you to be treasurer?

Watts [00:04:40] She only asked me to be treasurer. And I accepted.

Graham [00:04:43] Well, what did she have to go on in your background to presume that you would know how to keep her books straight, I would imagine?

Watts [00:04:50] Well, I didn't do most keeping books because we had a financial secretary who kept the books. I had to make the report at the meetings, take the money to the bank, and attend the finance committee meetings. By the way, I became chairman of the finance committee, also.

Graham [00:05:23] Well, is there anything that you can tell us about Mrs. Jackson that is particularly interesting to people who know her now as a legend, but in, say, 1950, I guess, before she became the legend, can you tell us anything about her?

Watts [00:05:39] (coughs)

Graham [00:05:39] What were your early impressions of her?

Watts [00:05:40] Well, my early impressions of her was that she was dynamic, a very determined person, a go-getter. What she started she generally finished. Projects she started, as a rule, she was successful with them. She had a lot of push. We met on Friday's afternoon executive board meeting. I had to read my report. And she always made a long speech. And the meetings were well attended. And she would bring her program to the meetings to be okayed and most of the time they were okayed and that went on for years. Her projects—She was very, very punctual in all of her undertakings.

Graham [00:07:10] How did she handle those who were rather tardy or late?

Watts [00:07:14] Well, she'd reprimand them.

Graham [00:07:16] She reprimanded them right—?

Watts [00:07:16] Reprimanded them, but didn't scold them too much.

Graham [00:07:16] Oh, not too much?

[00:07:16] (both laugh)

Graham [00:07:27] What kind of people made up the brain trust of the NAACP during Mrs. Jackson's leadership?

Watts [00:07:34] A cross-section.

Graham [00:07:36] Mhm.

Watts [00:07:36] A cross-section.

Graham [00:07:37] There weren't a predominant middle-class or business type?

Watts [00:07:40] A cross-section.

Graham [00:07:41] A cross-section.

Watts [00:07:41] Yeah.

Graham [00:07:41] Mhm. What kind of relationship did Mrs. Jackson have with the other members of the executive board? Did she have a close and friendly relationship? Did they hold social gatherings and dinners?

Watts [00:07:55] (coughs)

Graham [00:07:55] Did they go to each other's houses and so forth?

Watts [00:07:59] Yes.

Graham [00:07:59] And visited? Made social calls?

Watts [00:08:04] Social calls.

Graham [00:08:04] Right.

Watts [00:08:04] She was a very friendly person and she mixed well with people—with everybody.

Graham [00:08:09] With everybody?

Watts [00:08:09] She loved everybody. She loved people.

Graham [00:08:18] What was the extent of interracial cooperation within the NAACP? Was Mrs. Jackson willing to cooperate with other whites or bring them in?

Watts [00:08:27] There weren't many whites on the board, but we invited whites and whenever we'd invite them, they would come.

Graham [00:08:41] Why did you invite them just for spe—or?

Watts [00:08:42] Specific things. Yeah, and, um—

Graham [00:08:47] Like what? Can you recall any of the incidents where you might have invited prominent whites, say, like, Hollander or Sondheim or Lizzie Gillman? Can you recall any of those incidents which may have taken place, where some of these prominent liberal whites were in attendance?

Graham [00:09:11] Any reason why they would be called?

Watts [00:09:20] Whenever Dr. Jackson wanted to put over a project that'd involve the city as a whole—such as the school desegregation, and, I might say, department store desegregation, hotel desegregation, and theater desegregation—that is when we would consult the whites—the liberal whites—to have their helping hand.

Graham [00:10:06] Were these predominantly Jews or were they Quaker in background or what? Or were they a mixture of all—?

Watts [00:10:11] A mixture. Mixture.

Graham [00:10:11] —of all kinds?

Watts [00:10:11] Mixture, yeah.

Graham [00:10:17] Mhm. Do you have any recollection of any close and personal relationship Mrs. Jackson may have had with any white person at all? I mean, beyond the fact of, you know, trying to get them involved in her cause, did she have any rather close relationship with any white?

Watts [00:10:34] Mrs. Jackson had a close relationship with Sidney Hollander.

Graham [00:10:38] Sidney Hollander?

Watts [00:10:40] Yes. She was consulting him frequently.

Graham [00:10:44] On what types of matters?

Watts [00:10:46] Things that I just spoke of.

Graham [00:10:48] She spoke with him?

Watts [00:10:50] Yeah, yeah.

Graham [00:10:50] Well, can you recall anything about Sidney Hollander? I guess he's not any longer with us.

Watts [00:10:55] No, he isn't here.

Graham [00:10:57] Mhm. You can't recall any—?

Watts [00:10:59] I can recall that he always intervened to help us with those projects.

Graham [00:11:06] Yeah. Uh, can you recall any Hopkins faculty members taking part in, uh—?

Watts [00:11:13] Hopkins faculty members. No, I can't, no.

Graham [00:11:15] Uh, what NAACP fights stand out in your mind as particularly noteworthy in which you may have taken a part in, and in which you may have seen Mrs. Jackson move or operate in a sense?

Watts [00:11:30] Mhm.

Watts [00:11:38] Uh—The school desegregation fight—

Graham [00:11:40] In 1954?

Watts [00:11:42] In 1954. The, uh, Gwynn Oak Park desegregation fight.

Graham [00:12:00] That was in 1963.

Watts [00:12:02] Yeah, around '63. The Ford Theater desegregation fight. That was in—I don't remember when that was. It was 19—you know I'm guessing here.

Graham [00:12:12] Right, I think from the 1950s up to about—I think 19—well, the late forties to about the mid-fifties, I think it was.

Watts [00:12:20] Yes, around there. We picketed and such as that at those places (unintelligible).

Graham [00:12:30] Were you aware of aware of what kind of a relationship Mrs. Jackson may have had with Theodore McKeldin when he was mayor the first time and later governor and then mayor again? Do you know—Can you give us an insight on what kind of relationship they may have had?

Watts [00:12:51] (coughs) It was a very close relationship. And in all of these things that she would call on him for assistance. Well, civil rights things—civil rights projects. She would call on him and he would assist her in most of it—

Graham [00:13:07] Right.

Watts [00:13:07] I can't—I don't remember any specific thing.

Graham [00:13:12] Did she think he was sincere and genuine?

Watts [00:13:14] Yes.

Graham [00:13:14] She did?

Watts [00:13:15] Yes. And we all thought he was sincere and genuine, Theodore McKeldin. Did you know him?

Graham [00:13:21] No, I didn't know him. I didn't know him.

Watts [00:13:27] Oh, he was (laughs)—

Graham [00:13:27] How was fundraising done? And was there any special approach to it to keep it from seeming like huckstering and just badgering people and pestering people about—?

Watts [00:13:38] No, no. (coughs)

Graham [00:13:38] What special techniques did you use to—?

Watts [00:13:43] Now, now, now—We had the NAACP campaign in the fall, the baby contest in June—

Graham [00:13:58] Who thought of the idea of the baby contest? Do you know?

Watts [00:14:01] No, I don't because it was going on when I became active in it. But it was one of the main fundraising projects, and—

Graham [00:14:16] Churches sponsored these, didn't they?

Watts [00:14:18] They were—

Graham [00:14:19] Churches sponsored—

Watts [00:14:19] Churches would sponsor babies and individual babies.

Graham [00:14:23] Oh.

Watts [00:14:23] See?

Graham [00:14:23] So something like tickets or—

Watts [00:14:26] No, we had little books.

Graham [00:14:26] Books?

Watts [00:14:27] Little books to sell, \$2.50 apiece. Little books, little tickets, you know. Chances—well, not chances, but just little books, you know.

Graham [00:14:42] Right.

Watts [00:14:44] So, yeah.

Graham [00:14:44] Right. To what extent was politics and religion allied in NAACP activities? Were they closely allied or what?

Watts [00:14:51] You see, the NAACP is a nonpartisan organization.

Graham [00:14:58] But was it really nonpartisan?

Watts [00:14:59] It was really nonpartisan.

Graham [00:15:01] I mean, even back then, when you were involved in voter registration campaigns?

Watts [00:15:05] (speaking at the same time) Yes, yes, yes. Nonpartisan.

Graham [00:15:06] I got the impression from Morris Callaway or Calloway (??), I guess you can recall him—

Watts [00:15:09] Yeah.

Graham [00:15:09] —that he rather criticized Mrs. Jackson for using the NAACP as an organization to puff, I guess, Democratic candidates. He was sort of under that impression when Mrs. Roosevelt came to town, and I think in 1944. Can you enlighten us on the—?

Watts [00:15:31] No, I can't. I wasn't active in it in 1944. See, I became real active around '50.

Graham [00:15:40] Mhm.

Watts [00:15:40] Now—

Graham [00:15:43] Well, how about even after '50? Did it really keep a nonpartisan—?

Watts [00:15:46] Nonpartisan, and today it's nonpartisan.

Graham [00:15:50] Well, how about Mrs. Jackson? Did she have another way, a rather quiet way of indicating to candidates that she preferred them over some other candidate or that she was trying to swing some support in the community for one particular candidate over against another? Did she do that at all or what? I understand that she was rather nonpartisan, but that may just be a story, but is it actually true?

Watts [00:16:12] It's actually true! She was nonpartisan. And that is the rule of the organization from the national body: being nonpartisan.

Graham [00:16:22] Well, how can you account for her children or rather her grandchildren and I guess some relatives seemingly getting all the votes now at this present time?

Watts [00:16:36] Well—

Graham [00:16:36] What's the reason for that?

Watts [00:16:38] I think it's a background. A background. Everybody knew Dr. Jackson was a civil rightist and an activist and everybody knew that she—Oh, she believed in politics, no doubt about it. But no special politics for the NAACP. She'd tell them to vote like they wanted, but vote! But rest and vote!

Graham [00:17:18] Um—What association, if any, did the NAACP have with left-wing organizations like the Communist Party and Socialist Party? Can you remember?

Watts [00:17:29] None.

Graham [00:17:29] None whatsoever?

Watts [00:17:30] None whatsoever.

Graham [00:17:31] Did they get involved in DuBois's fight I think through, uh—when he was called before the McCarthy committee in Washington D.C.?

Watts [00:17:38] No, no, no. Not to my knowledge.

Graham [00:17:46] Not to your knowledge, hm. Can you recall anything about Judge Soper, who was chairman of the board of trustees at Morgan State College in the forties and fifties?

Watts [00:17:54] No, I can't.

Graham [00:17:56] You can't recall him?

Watts [00:17:56] (speaking at the same time) No, no, no, no.

Graham [00:17:58] What about the NAACP police school? How did they finance that? Or the citizenship school? Do you know how they financed that?

Watts [00:18:06] No, I don't know how they financed that, but I know the NAACP backed that project. But you know, that was before the fifties—yeah, that was before 1950, see. And I only became active in 1950—around 1950.

Graham [00:18:28] Well, how long did you stay active?

Watts [00:18:30] How long did I stay active?

Graham [00:18:32] Mhm.

Watts [00:18:32] I'm still there.

Graham [00:18:32] Oh, you still active, uh-huh.

Watts [00:18:32] (laughs)

Graham [00:18:33] Well—Right—

Watts [00:18:36] I'm still the treasurer (laughs).

Graham [00:18:40] Right—Oh!

Watts [00:18:40] (laughs)

Graham [00:18:40] Well, I understand that you made some loans to the organization when it was on hard times or at certain times.

Watts [00:18:45] Right. Since you (unintelligible) I'll tell you about it, see (laughs). Well, I wasn't going to mention that (coughs). You know, in the summer, finance became very low.

Graham [00:18:58] Well, do you mean a particular summer or every summer?

Watts [00:18:59] Every summer.

Graham [00:19:00] Every summer?

Watts [00:19:01] Every summer. And I would let them have money—a loan—to tide them over the summer until the campaign started. Then I would be repaid.

Graham [00:19:20] Well, did Mrs. Jackson approach you about these loans or did you—

Watts [00:19:24] Yes, Mrs. Jackson.

Graham [00:19:27] Oh, mhm. She was a rather wealthy or well-to-do lady, at least. Didn't she kick in any of her private funds herself?

Watts [00:19:33] No.

Graham [00:19:34] She didn't?

Watts [00:19:37] No.

Graham [00:19:37] Can you account for this, at all? Or what?

Watts [00:19:40] No, I can't account for it, no.

Graham [00:19:43] Maybe it's because she gave so much of her time that she figured, you know, that—

Watts [00:19:45] Perhaps so, mhm.

Graham [00:19:47] —to do otherwise was just to be, uh, extravagant I would say.

Watts [00:19:53] Yeah, yeah, probably. Perhaps so. Mhm.

Graham [00:19:53] Do you know what relationship Mrs. Jackson may have had with Martin Luther King or other national civil rights leaders? And did she express opinions on people like Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, or Adam Clayton Powell?

Watts [00:20:07] (coughs) Yup.

Graham [00:20:07] Can you recall any of those statements she may have made?

Watts [00:20:10] I can say that she was in accordance corner with Martin Luther King.

Graham [00:20:16] You say she wasn't?

Watts [00:20:17] Was!

Graham [00:20:18] Oh, right.

Watts [00:20:18] Yeah. Now, Dr. Carmichael, no.

Graham [00:20:24] Mhm.

Watts [00:20:24] And she didn't discuss Adam Clayton Powell too much, although we had him as a speaker on several occasions.

Graham [00:20:35] Mhm. Well, what did she think of Goldwater when he ran in 1964? Did she see him as a threat that many Blacks saw him as?

Watts [00:20:44] Yes, yes. But she just didn't discuss him too much—

Graham [00:20:47] Right.

Watts [00:20:47] —no.

Graham [00:20:49] Not many things, I guess, upset her except—

Watts [00:20:50] No.

Graham [00:20:51] —just injustice and discrimination in general.

Watts [00:20:54] That's right. That's right.

Graham [00:20:56] What did she do—I haven't heard any stories relating to her reaction to the Agnew incident when he called down all the Blacks—I think it was down there on one of the state office buildings on Preston Street—and sort of dressed them down. Did she have any reaction to that and—?

Watts [00:21:13] (speaking at the same time) Oh, oh, oh, yes indeed.

Graham [00:21:13] I haven't—

Watts [00:21:14] She had quite a reaction to that, and—

Graham [00:21:16] Can you give us some—?

Watts [00:21:18] I can't give you any specifics, but she had quite a reaction. And I know that her daughter, Mrs. Mitchell, was among the people and they had quite a reaction. They didn't like it at all, and—But anything specific—Well, I can't say, but what they said, I don't know.

Graham [00:21:42] Mhm.

Watts [00:21:42] But they didn't like it at all, and it was discussed, so yeah.

Graham [00:21:47] Mhm.

Watts [00:21:47] Yeah.

Graham [00:21:47] Uh, can you recall, uh—Did she have anything to do with getting Parren Mitchell, I think, selected by McKeldin for that position in the Community Action Agency I think he was head of at one time? Do you recall any—?

Watts [00:22:01] (speaking at the same time) No, no, no, not to my knowledge.

Graham [00:22:08] Mhm. Had you ever attended Mrs. Jackson—Uh, did you ever go to her house on Sunday morning? I mean, I want—I'd like somebody to discuss sometimes, what was it like to be in the Jackson household? You know, we know Mrs. Jackson is a public figure, but what was it like to be in her household?

Watts [00:22:27] Well, she was very, very, very graceful and gracious when one visited her.

Graham [00:22:35] (speaking at the same time) How—Yeah, mhm.

Watts [00:22:35] And I—on several occasions, we were invited to dinner. And, uh—

Graham [00:22:46] I understood that her husband did most of the cooking.

Watts [00:22:49] He did most of the cooking because Mrs. Jackson gave—Really, Mrs. Jackson didn't have time to cook because she gave most of her time to the public, to the NAACP. And since her husband was retired, he took over the chore of housekeeping.

Graham [00:23:12] Mhm. He didn't seem to get too actively involved in the NAACP's activities at all, did he?

Watts [00:23:16] No, he did not. No, he did not. But he looked after the home so she could spend her time with the NAACP.

Graham [00:23:26] Mhm. Well, what—Do you have any comment on the children of Mrs. Jackson? She had some remarkable children, didn't she?

Watts [00:23:30] Yes, remarkable children, all of them, uh, wanted to go places. As you know, her daughter was a lawyer—an attorney. And—

Graham [00:23:49] You're talking about Juanita?

Watts [00:23:51] Juanita. And the other daughter—What's her name?

Graham [00:23:59] Virginia?

Watts [00:24:00] Virginia!

Graham [00:24:01] Mhm.

Watts [00:24:01] An artiste.

Graham [00:24:02] Right.

Watts [00:24:04] And Marion—

Graham [00:24:05] Was a concert singer.

Watts [00:24:07] —was a concert singer. Bowen, he was in business several—I think Bowen was in the real estate business—helped his mother in her real estate business. I think she—Mrs. Jackson had a lot of property and she had to have some help.

Graham [00:24:26] Do people resent Sharp Street Church seeming important in the NAACP's activities? They seemed—

Watts [00:24:36] No, no, I don't think so.

Graham [00:24:37] They didn't?

Watts [00:24:37] No, they don't. No, I don't think so.

Graham [00:24:40] Alright.

Watts [00:24:40] Because—Now, when—We used to have the membership meetings at Sharp Street and we always gave a donation to the church.

Graham [00:24:58] Oh, oh.

Watts [00:24:58] It wasn't for free.

Graham [00:24:59] Oh, I would think—Yeah, yes.

Watts [00:25:02] See? No, it wasn't for free. We'd always give them—I think at that time we always gave them \$25.

Graham [00:25:07] Oh, I see, yes. What were some of the other important churches in that, uh—in—?

Watts [00:25:16] At that time we had all of our meetings at Sharp Street. I think it was due to the fact that Dr. Jackson was a member of Sharp Street and she was chairman of the finance committee for a long time, so there we had all our meetings. And it would—being a large church and centrally located and—People expected to be at Sharp Street (laughs).

Graham [00:25:46] Oh, they expected to be at Sharp Street.

Watts [00:25:47] (laughs)

Graham [00:25:47] Yeah, I've heard it said that Mrs. Jackson, in some sense, ran Sharp Street (laughs).

Watts [00:25:53] Yeah, I—

Graham [00:25:53] Even—Well, the ministers, she wasn't, uh—It wasn't too difficult for her to put the minister in his place. Was that the truth?

Watts [00:26:03] Yeah, well not being a member of Sharp Street—

Graham [00:26:05] Oh, you can't make any comment on it.

Watts [00:26:07] I can't make any comment on it, you see. No. See I'm a Baptist.

Graham [00:26:12] Alright.

Watts [00:26:12] Mhm.

Graham [00:26:15] Well, is there anything that you would like to say that might enlighten us to the importance of Lillie May Jackson, or what you think her future importance will be?

Watts [00:26:32] Well, I can say about Lillie May Jackson, that before she took over the NAACP, it was very, very weak in Baltimore. Uh—And Baltimore is much better today after having Lillie May Jackson as president of the NAACP. That's it.

[00:27:11] *end of recording*