Frankie Muse Freeman

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ABA Senior Lawyers Division

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

FRANKIE MUSE FREEMAN

Interviewer: Nicole Colbert Botchway

Dates of Interviews:

May 18, 2014
July 20, 2014
August 10, 2014
October 12, 2014
Ms. Botchway: This is the first interview of the oral history of attorney Frankie Muse Freeman, which is being taken on behalf of the Women Trailblazers in the Law, a project of the American Bar Association Senior Lawyers Division. It is being conducted by Attorney Nicole Colbert Botchway. Today is May 18, 2014. Attorney Frankie Muse Freeman and I are together in her wonderful home in the Central West End of St. Louis, Missouri. Ms. Freeman, can you please state your full name and when and where you were born?

Ms. Freeman: My full name is Frankie Muse Freeman. I was born in Danville, Virginia, on November 24, 1916.

Ms. Botchway: Tell me about your recollections of Danville?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, my (amused). Well, my recollection of Danville, Virginia? You mean when I was really raised . . . because I was born in 1916.

Ms. Botchway: Yes, your first memories of Danville?

Ms. Freeman: Well, my first memories of Danville were in my home. I was two years old or three years old, or whatever. We lived 215 Ross Street, Danville, Virginia, in a large home. I remember playing in the backyard. I was the oldest; I'm the first child of Will and Maude Muse. So there's not much that I can remember other
than until maybe my brother was born who is two years younger than me.

Ms. Botchway: Your father, you mentioned was Bill Muse?


Ms. Botchway: William Brown Muse. And your mother?


Ms. Botchway: And were they from Danville also?

Ms. Freeman: Well, my father was born and grew up and educated in Franklin County, Virginia, which was in Penhook, which is a small community in a county near Roanoke. My mother was born in Danville -- in a community that was close to Danville . . . all Negro. Prior to her marriage, my mother was a teacher. She had graduated from Hampton in 1911. However, after she was married she was a homemaker. I am not sure whether it was because they had rules about teachers being married during that time. My father was a railway postal clerk. He was the third black person who was employed by the state of Virginia to at least be a postal clerk on the train. It was a very good position so we had no financial problems that I knew about.

Ms. Botchway: And did they meet at Hampton?

Ms. Freeman: No. They met in Danville. See, he went to a technical school in Franklin County, which was as I say closer to Roanoke. They met in Danville. How they met I don’t remember. Or what they say about how they met, I don’t remember.

Ms. Botchway: So, they were educated individuals and you were the first child?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes. Yes.

Ms. Botchway: So your family life was very positive?

Ms. Freeman: I was the first of eight children. One child died at . . . when she was a few
months old. My sister, the other one who died when she was twenty, she
became ill after her first year in college and I remember that because she died in
early September of 1944, which was about a couple weeks before I started
Howard Law School. Her name was Maudina. Named for my mother; we called
her Maudina.

Ms. Botchway: So, were your grandparents around?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, yes, yes.

Ms. Botchway: Who were they?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, my grandfather Frank was, for whom I’m named. They had a farm in
Penhook and my grandmother Mary, in fact both grandmothers were named
Mary. One lived in Franklin County, which is where my father was from. And
he went to a technical college at... I am not sure whether it was in Gretna or
near there. But, anyway, it was for his training for the job that he got for the
postal service. Both of them were living and they were tobacco farmers. Frank
did very well. Farmers brought all their things to Danville to sell... it was
tobacco. We’d all, each of us during our younger years, while we were in
school, would just go to Penhook and visit and stay with them for about two
weeks each time during the summer.

Ms. Botchway: Were your grandparents descendants of slaves or were they...

Ms. Freeman: Well, I am sure they were. I’m sure they were. However, grandfather Frank was
known. The farm was very large and there were a couple of times that some
people came on his property because he was doing very well and they thought
they were going to take some horses or something. This was what we were
often told. He would not let them take them. He told them to leave his property
and they left because Frank was known as a person who didn’t take no stuff.

[Laugher] And very often when I was growing up, when things would happen.

Well, I’m named for my grandfather, so [laughter].

Ms. Botchway: So . . . you don’t take any stuff either? Oh, I love it, I love it.

Okay. So that was Penhook.

Ms. Freeman: That was where they lived.

Ms. Botchway: of Franklin County . . .

Ms. Freeman: Yeah, Penhook . . .

Ms. Botchway: . . . and you have fond memories of spending some of your summer vacations there on the farm?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. My grandmother and father, I remember what they did . . . their cooking.

They had all of that they raised and so I knew that when I saw her wring the chicken. That was a shock to me and I said, “How do you do that?” I’d never killed a chicken because I’d seen it but it didn’t stop me from at least enjoying the chicken [giggles], . . . they would take us to some of the farms with tobacco.

They would give us some instructions as to what to do, but I don’t think we did very well because they didn’t keep us there. They would say, “You can go to do something else now.”

Ms. Botchway: So, as the oldest child and a girl child, were you ever treated differently than the boy children in your home or with your family?

Ms. Freeman: No. In fact that was one of the things my parents wouldn’t have. Whatever assignment we had they had to be done by all of us -- wash the dishes, or whatever was done depending on who was there at that time. There was no assignment in the home that was ever restricted to whether you were a boy or a
Ms. Botchway: What about education?

Ms. Freeman: We all went to school from the beginning. We walked to school. It was close enough, I guess about five or six blocks. You did more walking then.

Ms. Botchway: What kind of school? Were the classes separate classrooms?

Ms. Freeman: Well, first of all, it was good building. In other words, they were racially segregated, but the separation was during the time we were growing. There was no discussion of integration during that time by any of the public school people.

Ms. Botchway: And your neighborhood was segregated as well?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, well, in my neighborhood, on Ross Street, the first block, the 100 block, all of the people who lived in that block were white. The second block down the street from Main Street and for the rest of the street down onwards were black. There was actually no incident that I recalled. On the 100 block there was a white shoe repair place. If we had shoes that we wanted to be repaired, one of the children would go up the street to the 100, to that store and leave the shoes. When they were fixed, one of the white children would come down and bring them.

Ms. Botchway: Hmm...

Ms. Freeman: So there was an interesting situation because there was no social communication in terms of visiting each other homes or anything except when my mother died in 1954... and she died suddenly. I got the word at my home here and got a call from the person who was taking care of the home, and she called me and said, “Your mother is gone,” and I said, “Gone where?” And she said she died that night and that she made the call to those of us who were around. That night every child came to Danville. And when we got into that home, when we went into the...
dining room, the table was full with food that had come from the people who lived in the 100 block -- the white families. So you knew what was happening. You didn’t go into each home and visit, but they were nice. They had at least compassion when something like that happened... cause my parents had both been very active in the community and in the church, of course.

Ms. Botchway: What church did you all attend?

Ms. Freeman: Calvary Baptist Church. My grandfather on my mother side -- the Smiths -- was a chartered member of Calvary Baptist Church. My mother was a teacher. My father was a deacon. They were very active. On Sunday morning, every child went to Sunday School. You went to church, but after she had prepared breakfast. We did not leave home any morning without our breakfast. And you went to Sunday School; then you went to Church. If there was something happening at church in the afternoon, you went. You went to BYPU.

Ms. Botchway: What is BYPU?

Ms. Freeman: It was Bible Study, but it was maybe like in the evening.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

Ms. Freeman: And if you said you’d didn’t feel well, and if you stayed home from Church, you stayed home the rest of the day. There’s no way you’d be going anywhere else if you didn’t feel well enough to go to church. That’s it. We went to church and we were all participants. We were all trained. Everybody had to learn some musical instrument. I was trained as a pianist. So when I was in high school, I’d also be the pianist for the Sunday school. Edward B. Muse was the one who had a beautiful singing voice. They said every member of our family all six... of the six of us, four could sing and had beautiful voices. But the two oldest,
Frankie and Bill, you just don’t need to sing with us. (Laughter)

Ms. Botchway: So was the church connected to the school or it was separate?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, no, no. That was little public . . . that was a Danville public school. The church was the church.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

Ms. Botchway: So you went to Danville Public School and spent a lot of time at Calvary Baptist Church?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, then when I finished high school, there was college. My mother had graduated from Hampton in 1911 so actually the expectation was that I would go to Hampton. I was aware of that. Although they also said to us we would send you wherever you wanted to go, but it just ended up that three of us went to Hampton. But everybody had a degree beyond the college . . . no, all but one. Bill didn’t. He was the one who was a banker, but everybody had a degree.

Ms. Botchway: So, you have accomplished a lot of extraordinary things in your life, can you recall when is the earliest point in your life that you felt like you could do anything or you could accomplish anything?.

Ms. Freeman: I remember when everything in Danville was racially segregated. The NAACP lawyers were coming but that was no change. What happened was my parents--and the Black community which you’d have called that a middle-class community -- decided, well, if we can’t borrow money from a white bank, we’ll get our own. So my father and some other people, they started the bank. The same thing was true with respect to a hospital. Because everything was racially segregated, all of us felt we had to do what we could to change it.

When I was saying things need to be changed that was when I was in high
school, but I said I'm gonna go to law school. But my decision that actually became a commitment and a passion was to be a lawyer when I was in college. We knew the lawyers. We knew because in our home when people came to visit that came to Danville they'd usually stay with us, because they didn't stay at any hotel. On our block, there were three homes that they would stay...even if they was it was an artist or whoever it was...they would be staying at one of our homes. So we met most of the nationally recognized people whether they were singers or whatever and so that, of course, also helped. My father and my brother both said don't borrow any money from white folks. That was because of the racial segregation. For me through the years, it has meant don't live beyond what you have; don't borrow any money. Only what you can afford. And that is one of the things that has helped me through the years.

Ms. Botchway: You mentioned that you and all of the children -- the Muse children -- were raised to be educated, and to make a change...

Ms. Freeman: Yes, to do whatever needed to be done. And my sister is now...as active in the NAACP now as I was through the years. She has been president of a branch and I was never president because I was doing the legal work.

Ms. Botchway: Was your father active in the NAACP?

Ms. Freeman: He was not real active; he was a member.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

Ms. Freeman: ...because you see as a railway postal clerk he traveled from Richmond, on the train...and so he was a member of course of the NAACP and did whatever. But an active member, he was not. But he was supportive of us and whatever we did.
Ms. Botchway: So after attending public school for grade school, where did you attend high school?

Ms. Freeman: In Danville.

Ms. Botchway: Same public school system?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, same public school system.

Ms. Botchway: And was the school system segregated all the way through it? Was it still segregated when you graduated?

Ms. Freeman: Oh absolutely, Yes, oh, yes, oh, yes. Oh, yes. And very often if you were in a choir you were invited to come to a white high school and sing. If the choir did that, then they would be on the stage. There would be no communication other than the applause. But to come up and say you were great or something? No, there was not that kind of personal communication. But the school, because the choirs were good choirs, they would get invited. They would take another bus or whatever and they would do a good job and get lots of applause, but the personal interaction would not be there.

Ms. Botchway: What influence did your mother have on you being an educated woman? She went to Hampton and I know you attended Hampton, as well.

Ms. Freeman: Oh yes, my mother was, oh, gosh . . .

Ms. Botchway: But you mentioned earlier that once she was a teacher, she then decided to become a homemaker and raise her children . . . Why?

Ms. Freeman: I think that was sort of her decision, but it was also sort of understood at the time. She was having children, but she continued to be a teacher . . . for us. There was always a book out. And that’s why I had so many books to give away and I still have a big library of Black history. Oh, yes. So one of the things we had at
least was knowledge of black history and knowledge of history. And we knew
some of the people who were outstanding to Danville and who would be
invaluable to Danville because they could not stay at the hotel. There were three
homes that they would stay at either or one. And one of the things about
segregation there I recall was that my mother was very active in the community
and she would be the one who arranged for these artists to come and there
would be segregation at the shows. At the armory or whatever it was called, the
black people would sit on one side and the white on the other. They would all
be at that same concert, but it was the right side or the black side. All of the
people on that side would be black and all of the people across the aisle would
be white. The well-known artists at that time came to Danville and one was
staying . . . I remember that one was staying at Mrs. Harrowood, one of the
neighbors. You did get paid, too. So when my mother got the check and would
walk down the street to go and deliver it, the procedure was to send something
in the beginning and then something, the balance on it, later. But anyway, my
mother had gone to the bank and had gotten this check for $3,200 and so she
was walking down to Hardwoods' which was about two doors away and so we
knew the amount of the check. I don't know whether we're to know it or not so
we just watched her as she went down to the Hardwoods' to get the artist and I
don't remember who it was that gave her the check. We . . . [amusement] . . . we
thought that was a lot of money.

Ms. Botchway: Oh, yes. So this was in the early 1900s and the artists could perform but they
couldn't stay in the hotels because of segregation in hotels?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, the white artists could . . . they performed . . . oh, yes. The [Black artists]
were nationally recognized people, but when they came, they stayed with one of us -- you know in one of our homes. The homes were large enough so they got the same treatment they would have gotten anywhere else.

Ms. Botchway: So as a teenager or as a child, how did that make you feel?

Ms. Freeman: If they were our visitor, we got to meet them. You name a famous person back then, we knew them. I remembered feeling good even as this happened, you know during the early years of college, because I remember some of the names would be nationally known and then I remembered that they were in my home or they were next door at the Adams’ or at the Hardwoods’. But I am sure that Danville wasn’t the only place that had various ways at getting the best within a segregated system and at least making it. . . . You see the point is that my mother had two people, white people, that she worked. But, I mean, people worked together but they worked at least not publicly. Because, as I told you, the white family stayed on one side and the black family saved on another. Now who do you think sold the tickets to the white people? So, there were individual points of contact.

Ms. Botchway: Other than your mother, were there other female relatives of yours who you looked up to or were inspired by?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes.

Ms. Botchway: Who?

Ms. Freeman: My aunt Dee. My aunt Delilah Phelps who lived in New York and that’s who I lived with for a while after I left Hampton. My mother had a sister, Zetella and she lived outside of Danville sort of like you’d call it another suburb until she got ill as she got older and became ill she was . . . I think her last days were
living at our home but then again I'm trying to remember.

Ms. Botchway: And what did she do? Was she a strong woman?

Ms. Freeman: All of them were educated. When slavery ended, I think my grandmother was 13 -- that's what they tell me-- and she wanted to go to school, she did go to school but then I think she got married instead. I know she didn't go to college. But she lived in Almagro, and Charles Smith, my grandfather, had a brother who had a grocery store in the same city.

Ms. Botchway: Did the fact that you were named after you father's father mean -- maybe your father named you thinking he was having a boy?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, I'm sure. I was the first child.

Ms. Botchway: Do you think that that had any influence on how strong of a person you became growing up, you know how they say that names are very powerful?

Ms. Freeman: No, I think my parents were strong individuals. I think my mother was independent and active, because first of all how she reached out, that's why I became very active. Because there was no question that both felt you've got to do something, you needed an education and that was it. in other words that is what enables you to do something. But that's not instead of doing something and so every one of us was involved in whatever and educated. My sister is going through this now in terms of the NAACP -- in Raleigh. She has trained all of her three children -- all of whom graduated from Hampton as she was -- to be involved. They are not necessary as involved as we were. they are younger so they don't feel that they have to do as much, but they were involved.

Ms. Botchway: Did you participate in any all-girls organizations or all-girls athletics or any
other activities through church or anything like that?

Ms. Freeman: Well, I think I tried to participate in the basketball, but I didn’t do well on it [chuckle]. I did a lot of poetry . . . if you were invited to be on the program, you were on the program as far as our parents were concerned. So, I know all the speeches, I remember, “Mother to Son.” I had to give that on Mother’s Day. I could talk and so I would be invited to be on the program at church. And we all did, you see as I said, the first two of us, Frankie and Bill, didn’t have a singing voice but all the others had beautiful voices. My sister still has her voice but the others are not here. As we were growing up, everybody was in the choir but that’s how I was asked to play the piano because when I was in the choir they said oh, you play the piano. [Laughter]

Ms. Botchway: It sounds like you had the oratory gift early on.

Ms. Freeman: Ph, yeah. Well, we all were . . . all of us were active. In other words you were trained and you were expected to do something.

Ms. Botchway: And your teachers in school --grade school, high school -- were they predominately female teachers?

Ms. Freeman: I say, maybe predominately.

I remember my mother’s best friend who lived on Cal Brooks Street not too far from us who was a teacher there in terms of at least keeping me on track . . . Ms. Kate -- Kate Taylor but anyway, for me she was Ms. Kate. As people ask me about who I remember most, yes. If there was something that I did that she thought that I shouldn’t do, by the time I got home from school, my mother knew about it. Because she had already called and told her. So there was no question about communication between the teacher and the parent if you did
something, they didn’t fail to let you know. But again, this was back then, you know.

Ms. Botchway: Up until that point in your life, up until you graduated valedictorian, had you ever experienced any type of discrimination, to your knowledge?

Ms. Freeman: Within the school?

Ms. Botchway: Just in your lifetime from the time you were born to the time you graduated from high school?

Ms. Freeman: Experienced discrimination? In terms of our general life? What happened was that the segregation -- we could not do anything about that. Except that we didn’t have to accept it. In other words, we could not ride any bus or street car because we would have to sit in the back. So our parents would say, “Oh, no you walk.” So if someone wouldn’t be driving us there, which was mostly not much, ever, you walked to where you had to go. And when you got downtown and went into a store... if there was something that we liked, we couldn’t try it on and you couldn’t buy it. You could not buy anything that you did not have the right to try one -- no way.

Ms. Botchway: Okay, you are saying because they wouldn’t allow black people to try on clothes, your parents wouldn’t allow you to purchase anything like that.

Ms. Freeman: Yes, but they didn’t have a problem because we had dressmakers. So we had the dresses that I wore or the other option was to tell our Aunt Delilah who lived in New York and she could buy it there and ship to us.

Ms. Botchway: So there was no segregation in New York?

Ms. Freeman: In New York City, oh, no. No.

Ms. Botchway: So, the discrimination in the form of segregation was a part of your daily life?
Ms. Freeman: Oh, of course.

Ms. Botchway: And...

Ms. Freeman: Segregation was a part of the life. But the discrimination was different because we walked. If you had to go anywhere else, you went on the train, you went on the car, something and if there was something you wanted to do to go to a movie, then there would be friends we would go with away from Danville to Greensboro. It would have been an all-black theater, but anyway we went.

Ms. Botchway: In Greensboro?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. We were not gonna go sit on the top of the balcony. In Danville if you go into a show you go to the top... oh, no. We could not do that. Oh, no.

Ms. Botchway: I know you said the movie theaters, the banks, the retail stores, the transportation, the schools were segregated but what about grocery stores?

Ms. Freeman: Yes but no problems there because my mother would call and send a list of what needed to be done, and if we went there and selected it they would send it back.

Ms. Botchway: So they would have somebody drop it off?

Ms. Freeman: It was very interesting.

Ms. Botchway: Like you could pick it out and somebody would drop it off?

Ms. Freeman: They knew my mother. She would call and give them a list of what needed to be sent down. So, in other words, we accepted nothing that we could avoid. And what happens is that all the white people in the 100 block knew the people in the 200 block. They were doctors and -- I lived next door to the pastor -- we lived next door to the pastor of our church.
Ms. Botchway: Did you ever experience any gender discrimination or differential treatment in school?

Ms. Freeman: Not that I can recall.

Ms. Botchway: Can you think of any advantages or disadvantages of being a female for you at that time?

Ms. Freeman: No. As I said I can’t think of any advantages or disadvantages. There was no question that everybody in our family and in our circle were equal . . . remember that on that street there were people who knew each other and depending on your resources there was no questions that when you finished high school you’re are going to college.

Ms. Botchway: And at that time, were the colleges segregated?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yeah, Hampton, yeah. Except that the teachers . . . we had black and white teachers.

Ms. Botchway: Oh.

Ms. Freeman: In college, oh, yeah.

Ms. Botchway: But in high school or grade school, you never had a white teacher?

Ms. Freeman: No.

But at Hampton . . . yeah. I’m not sure what the other colleges in Virginia had. But, of course, Hampton at that time . . . I can’t say there were no white students but I know it was . . . Of course, it’s different now.

Ms. Botchway: You mentioned that once you got to college you really decided to become an attorney. We’ll talk more about that on our second session, but were there any qualities or anything that stood out for you in high school that you think, looking back in retrospect, that you were destined to be a civil rights leader and
Ms. Freeman: I don’t think of it as that. I think that because our parents and the people around us did not accept the racial discrimination, and therefore, we did what we could. And there were lawyers . . . there was a lawyer in our family but that lawyer lived in New Jersey.

Ms. Botchway: A female lawyer or a male?

Ms. Freeman: No, no, a male.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

Ms. Freeman: When I announced that I wanted to be a lawyer that was when the issue came. There were people who really questioned this. Except that neither one of my parents questioned it. By that time you see, they really knew me. [Laughter]

Ms. Botchway: Did you ever get in trouble in grade school or high school? Or were you a quiet child?

Ms. Freeman: No. I was not a quiet child. I remember -- we lived on Dariland, and then some of our friends in high school were living on the north part of Danville. I remember one afternoon -- I believe it was lunchtime or something -- that I and about two or three friends decided that we were going to the home of one of them, which was on the other side from the school, and we went to her home, and we were having a very good time and then we got a call. They knew where we were -- and we got in trouble because we missed I think two classes or something. Never did that again.

Ms. Botchway: Does your family still have your family home?

Ms. Freeman: No. When my mother died in ’54 and my father died -- but he had a stroke . . . after he remained there . . . that’s until ’58. So he was living there but had
somebody to take care of him. And then shortly after that my brother Andy, who was about to finish school at that time, lived there. It was rented for a while and then they decided to sell it. And they sold it. And it sold. And we knew the people who bought it.

Ms. Botchway: In high school . . . did you work?
Ms. Freeman: Oh, no, no. You mean . . . No. What were you gonna do in high school? No, no, no. There was no way. What could I have done?
Ms. Botchway: What did you do after school?
Ms. Freeman: You came home from school and you had a job at home . . . whatever needed to be done.
Ms. Botchway: And were there any national, social, economic or political events that took place during your early years that you could remember or had a lasting effect on you?
Ms. Freeman: No. I am sure there must have had a lasting effect because we were very active. The family was always very active and knew the names. My father did the background check on every candidate. Oh, he was a Republican . . . but that was a Republican time then. You see that’s when the Democrats were the ones that held us back in the South. Course, now they have reversed it but not during that time . . . and of course as we would come home as children and were getting older and coming home all of us became active Democrats and we would then have some very great discussions with my father.
Ms. Botchway: So you said he was a Republican and the Republicans were helpful to Blacks at that time?
Ms. Freeman: Absolutely, that was then, you see. Remember how old I am now and that long ago. That was then. That was then.
The discussions with my father would always vary -- they were interesting -- in other words, they were not hostile or anything like that. He would want to know what we did so we could have an adult discussion and we could have been in a debate or whatever it was.

Ms. Botchway: Okay, well, I think we can stop our first session of the Women Trailblazers in the Law Project for the American Bar Association Senior Lawyers Division’s Oral history of attorney, Frankie Muse Freeman. We’ve discussed her early life through high school and her wonderful family of Danville, Virginia. A very strong family that has laid a very strong foundation for everything that she has done with her life since then. And we’ll pick up next time with college where you attended Hampton University which was your mother’s alma mater.

Ms. Freeman: Right.

Ms. Botchway: All right. Thank you so much.
Ms. Botchway: This is the second interview of the oral history of attorney Frankie Muse Freeman, which is being taken on behalf of the Women Trailblazers in the Law, a project of the American Bar Association Senior Lawyers Division. This interview is being conducted by Nicole Colbert Botchway on Sunday, July 20, 2014.

I am here with attorney Frankie Muse Freeman in her wonderful home in the Central West End of St. Louis, Missouri. Ms. Freeman and I completed our first interview on May 18, 2014, and discussed her early years in Danville, Virginia. We left off with her high school graduation in Danville, and we will start today with the happenings between the summer after graduation through college and law school and end with her in St. Louis, Missouri. And we will take up our third interview starting from there.

Ms. Freeman, how are you today?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, I am fine. How are you?

Ms. Botchway: I’m good. Thank you so much.

So we’ve discussed Danville, Virginia. It seems like such a wonderful and
nurturing place, and you had a very supportive family. That is so wonderful.

And if we could just start now talking about what you did after you graduated from high school.

Ms. Freeman: After graduating from high school, during the summer, we did what we would usually do and that is just enjoying the summer. However, of course, for me it was a matter of getting ready for college. Getting ready for Hampton, which meant trying to find out what you’re supposed to . . . clothes you’re supposed to get and things that you gotta do.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

Ms. Freeman: September of 1932 . . . First of all, I had to find my application. I had to find my application and I was admitted . . . and my parents paid the tuition. I was fortunate because it was not necessary for them to apply for any assistance for me. For me, it was quite an experience because I was in a dormitory and had a roommate and there was a Dean of Students and somebody who checked on us and checked on the room and how well we kept it. So that was the first week I got there and it was quite interesting and quite an experience. I majored in mathematics. I had always been good in mathematics, except for the time I didn’t do well in algebra [laughter]. So I majored in mathematics. We all referred to Hampton as home . . . our home by the sea because we were near the water and it was beautiful. It was a beautiful campus. It is still. Hampton is still the most beautiful campus of the colleges that I have visited.

Ms. Botchway: So, when you went to Hampton, were the classes separate for boys and girls?

Ms. Freeman: No. No, no, they were not. They were not separate for boys and girls. They also had extracurricular activities and I joined the dance class.
Ms. Botchway: Were there any women's or ladies organizations that you got involved in while you were at Hampton?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. But there were no sororities or any committee there at that time. That was, many years later... but there were other organizations and I became a member of one of those and you know, we are talking about 60 - 70 years ago.

Ms. Botchway: Were you a member of some women's organizations?

Ms. Freeman: Yes... one that I was a member of was called Action and, in fact, I became a president of that group.

I was a leader in that organization. This, of course, was for women. There were no fraternities or sororities, but there were organizations. And, of course, they had a band.

Ms. Botchway: So did the women's organizations that you participated in at Hampton provide you any kind of encouragement or any kind of support in your educational pursuits?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes, of course. I was leaving home... and living away from home for the first year. So first of all there were the restrictions with respect to gender... where we could go. If we wanted to leave the campus and go shopping, you only did that with permission. And you didn't ever do that by yourself, you see. There was supervision with respect to the dormitory where you lived.

Ms. Botchway: While you were at Hampton, did you ever feel like the women weren't treated equal to the boys?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, no, no. No.

Ms. Botchway: So would you say you felt free to pursue whatever educational pursuits you were interested in?
Ms. Freeman: Absolutely. And then when we went from the campus into the city, you also had to go with somebody. But when I went into the city of Hampton, I found the same problems with discrimination in terms of not being able to shop places. So I didn’t do that very often. My third year I said, “I know I’m gonna go to law school.” But I started thinking about it seriously the first time I went from the campus into the city and found that the same conditions that existed in Danville, Virginia, which is where I lived, which meant that it was true across the South.

Ms. Botchway: So you felt discrimination when you left?

Ms. Freeman: I recognized the discrimination . . .

Ms. Botchway: . . . when you left the campus?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I recognized it but you see I knew then . . . there were some things you don’t do. When you go to some of the stores that you could go to you knew that it was not a problem but sometimes when you go shopping, you’re just looking and maybe you say, “I’ll try that on”. Well trying on clothes in a store was, of course, something that we could never do and so . . .

Ms. Botchway: So as a student at Hampton, did you ever leave campus to go to the movies, dances . . .?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, no, no.

Ms. Botchway: Why not?

Ms. Freeman: If you went to school, and of course our parents kept reminding us, you went there to study, you see? You didn’t go there for fun. [laughter] There were things you did that were fun but you had a purpose.

Ms. Botchway: Was Hampton a Black college . . .
Ms. Freeman: A historically Black college . . .

But we had a large number of white faculty and . . . female faculty, in the
dormitory. There was one of the Deans, her name was Hampton. The faculty of
Hampton, as was true of many historically black colleges, is racially diverse.

Ms. Botchway: OK.

Ms. Freeman: I could say that actually, my experience at Hampton during those years was
more social than political . . . that came later.

Ms. Botchway: Why?

Ms. Freeman: During the time that I was at Hampton I didn’t participate in what is usually
defined as any civil rights activities.

Ms. Botchway: Gotcha . . .

Ms. Freeman: . . . in terms of participation . . . that doesn’t mean I wasn’t aware of them

Ms. Botchway: OK

Ms. Freeman: . . But I was a college student.

I was in the class of ’37 but . . .

I didn’t graduate . . . I received an honorary degree from Hampton although I am
not a graduate. But when the class of ’37 had its 50th anniversary, I went back. I
was then and am still now identified by Hampton as a member of the class of
’37. When I get in the mail from Hampton, they put class of ’37. Although I’m
not a graduate of Hampton but I have an award for best outstanding
achievement.

But that was several, many, years later. Because during the time that I was at
Hampton, I was not extraordinary. My performance was average. I was more
social. [laughter]
Ms. Botchway: So, when you left Hampton in '36 . . .

Ms. Freeman: Yes . . .

Ms. Botchway: . . . what did you do then?

Ms. Freeman: It was during that time that I decided that I am gonna be a lawyer. And when I looked and found out that there were law schools in which they would admit you after three years of college, you didn't have to get an undergraduate degree . . . that I decided -- that was when I decided that I would at least go to law school.

Ms. Botchway: So you left Hampton early to go to law school?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, yes. That was my intent. I didn't get in there right away but anyway . . . that's something else. I wanted to go to . . . but there were only a few law schools that I'd read about that would accept you without a college degree.

During the summer of '36, I moved to New York City to live with my Aunt D, Delilah Phelps, and I had applied for admission to St. John's Law School. And I got a communication and . . . . I went over to St. John's - over in Brooklyn, and after a week I was going through all of the papers, I got a letter from them that they were not accepting my credentials from Hampton. They did not recognize the credentials of Hampton so I was not admitted to law school. Since that time, I was told, but I did not pursue it, that since my name is Frankie M. Freeman -- that it was gender problem—they initially thought I was a man. They did not accept any women in the law school then. But that was not what I was told. I was told that they did not accept the credits that I had, which were not that exciting anyway. So I was not in law school . . .

Ms. Botchway: Wow.

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Ms. Freeman: ... and let me tell you this though ... I graduated from Howard Law School in 1947, second in my class. My professor at that time during the graduation or the week of the graduation said to me, “Frankie, I would like to recommend you to Harvard Law School, but they do not accept women.” That was in 1947. Harvard at 1947 did not accept women!

Ms. Botchway: So that was . . . 1936. So once they sent you the letter and said they wouldn’t accept the credit from Hampton then how did that make you feel?

Ms. Freeman: First of all, what am I gonna do? That was my question. What am I gonna do? I was living with my aunt and her two children . . . adults, you know, pretty close to my age.

Ms. Freeman: So, I knew I had to do something else. In the meantime, my aunt D, Delilah Phelps, who I was very close to, was a member of Abyssinian Baptist Church. And I became a member of Abyssinian Baptist Church. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was the pastor but Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., later was the associate and very active in the community against discrimination. In the meantime, he had pulled together a group of young people who’d be working to do the same thing. We looked at City Hall, because there was racial discrimination and especially in terms of employment and many other areas in New York City and in Harlem. So I became a member of Abyssinian and I joined that group. It was racially diverse . . . which was the first time in my life that I’d been a part of a group that was racially diverse. It was a significant number of people around our ages and we met at Abyssinian and then on to conduct projects. The projects included travel and Adam was not the only person in charge but he was a leader . . . that was his work.
Ms. Botchway: Was this 1937 or '38?

Ms. Freeman: . . . '38. This was like in '38. In the meantime that's how I met my husband, Shelby. Shelby was from St. Louis, Missouri, and he told me he was a graduate of Lincoln University and it was in Jefferson City. I had never heard of Lincoln University in Jefferson City; I knew of a Lincoln University, you know, that's in Pennsylvania. Anyway, he had graduated from Lincoln. He wanted to go to graduate school at the University of Missouri. They denied his admission to the University of Missouri, but said they would pay his way somewhere else. So they paid his way to Teacher's College in New York City. And so when he was not in college and he was in graduate school, he became a part of this group and so that's how I met him. And, as I have said, of all the evils of segregation, at least I met a person who later became my husband. So that was least some benefit. [Laughter]

Ms. Botchway: Was the Abyssinian Church group a youth group?

Ms. Freeman: It was a young people's group; I'd say. Not everybody was in college, but they were all people who were interested in activities such as this, and that is how I started in terms of my activity with respect to civil right. But we were not identifying it as civil rights at that time. But you see that was like in '38. Then we got married which was, oh my God, my parents [laughter] shake down. But anyway, in the meantime . . . he was working . . . then the War, World War II, was starting.

Ms. Botchway: Was that tough time?

Ms. Freeman: Yeah. We're living in Washington. And in the meantime, my daughter had been
born and so there was three of us. We first lived in Alexandria.

Ms. Botchway: So you put your pursuit of law school on hold for a while . . .

Ms. Freeman: Yes.

Ms. Botchway: . . . to be a wife and a mother?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. So I was working with the Treasury Department and then I did -- I don't know how many years there -- maybe two years. Then the UPS, another agency offered me a job and I took a course in statistics at the Department of Agriculture and I became certified as a statistician.

Ms. Botchway: Ok.

Ms. Freeman: Then, I was at some event or something and Martin Martin from Danville, Virginia, a lawyer with the Justice Department . . . was there.

Ms. Botchway: Who was Martin Martin?

Ms. Freeman: Martin Martin.... our families have known each other all our lives . . . saw me and he said, “What are you doing?” He said, “What about law school?” I say, “Uh, uh, uh.” That’s about the way I responded. He said, “You said you were going to be a lawyer.” I said, “Oh okay, I will.” I left him and went home. I went to Howard Law School. I said I would like to see the Dean. “Let me see Dean [William Henry] Hastie,” I said. I told Dean Hastie I came to talk to him about the law school. Dean Hastie looked at me and said, “Mrs. Freeman, have you applied?” And I looked at him and I felt so stupid. I was there taking the time of the Dean of Howard University, and I hadn’t done the first step. I said, “I will.” And then I went home, Shelby came from work and I said, “I want to go to law school.” He said, “What”? I said, “I want to go to law school.” He said, “Well, let’s see what we can do.” So I knew what I had to do. I’d to call
my parents because law school wasn’t cheap. Law school wasn’t free. And I knew that I would not be working. Because of all things the Dean lectured me about before I left, he said, it’s gonna have to be a full-time thing . . . because he knew about a lot. So I called my parents and I told them that I wanted to go to law school. There was a pause and I think they wanted to know how much it was, and they knew what it meant . . . they had been so disappointed that I had not gone already . . . so they said OK. And so even though the Dean had told me that I couldn’t handle the whole family, work and school situation, I decided that I was going to stay working because we would need the money. That lasted for two weeks. It was about two weeks before I realized that, no, I couldn’t do it. And so after two months, I resigned and that’s the last time I was employed by the federal government.

And I was in law school the full time. And also I was determined that my family was not going to suffer from what I was supposed to do as a wife and mother because I was in law school. And so that’s when I determined that I would do my studies at night after I had done everything I was supposed to do. So every morning, I did what I always did -- prepared breakfast, took care of my daughter, and after I entered law school, I met two or three people that I identified with and we studied together. And so sometimes I’d study there -- we would study different places.

Ms. Botchway: So you quit your good federal job . . .

Ms. Freeman: Uh huh.

Ms. Botchway: And you took classes in the daytime?

Ms. Freeman: Of course.
Ms. Botchway: ... but studied at night after you'd taken care of your husband ...

Ms. Freeman: That's right ...

Ms. Botchway: your child ...

Ms. Freeman: That's right ...

Ms. Botchway: ... and the house ...

Ms. Freeman: Sometimes, I'd get up at 3:00 am. Yup, oh yeah.

Ms. Botchway: How hard was juggling all of that?

Ms. Freeman: I don't know ... it probably was difficult. But, for me, it was something that I'd said I was gonna do. I should have been doing it and I did it.

Ms. Botchway: What kept you motivated?

Ms. Freeman: Because as I was in law school and the civil rights issues were gaining attention ... more publicity ... and the more I read in Washington the interested I was. The NAACP was handling cases, and I'd said I'd focus on Constitution Law. We were always active and members of the NAACP so therefore anything involving that I'd always be interested in. But, I was not active with the NAACP during the time I was in law school. The faculty of Howard were also active in the law and the civil rights cases, and so therefore they knew my interests. So when Thurgood [Marshall] or some of them are gonna come and argue a case before the Supreme Court, there were about three or four of us that let them know that we were interested. And so they came the night before and we would hear the argument before it was in the Supreme Court

Ms. Botchway: Oh, wow.

Ms. Freeman: I already knew then that I was going to be a civil rights lawyer. But I also knew -- and, in fact, other faculty members said -- you can't just focus on that. I did
all of the courses in economics with respect to business and things that any other law school gave, because actually as it turned out in my law practice my focus was on civil rights but I represented companies throughout the years.

In my second year of law school, I became pregnant with my second child. The senior year was to begin in September, on September 10th. Of course, the faculty all knew that I was pregnant. However, it was in early September that... probably late August... that the doctor had told me when my son would be born. So I wrote a letter to the Dean of the law school asking for permission to register after my son was born. The Dean contacted me and said, “Oh, no, that’s against the rules. Only the Registrar of the University could even permit a late registration. You cannot enter your senior year.” On September 10, I asked Shelby to take me to Howard Law School. I went over to the Registrar Office of the University and said, “This is my senior year and I would like to register late after my child is born.” He looked at me and he said, “Mrs. Freeman, I think you should just... just take a year off.” And in the meantime, the war was over with. Shelby was headed back to St. Louis. We knew we were going back to St. Louis. And so I knew that I could not take a year off. So I said, “Thank you,” and I went back to Howard Law School and got in line to register for law school and the line suddenly got short. I registered for law school and I got tapped on my shoulder and the secretary of the dean was there and said, “The Dean would like to see you.” So I went into the Dean’s office and he said, “Mrs. Freeman, you are now registered for your senior year. You are in good standing. You may go home, now and when the doctors release you, you can return and take your studies. And so then I called Shelby and he took me home.
and my son was born four days later.

Ms. Botchway: Did you go back for classes?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I returned when the doctor released me two weeks later . . . my parents had arranged for somebody to come live with us and take care of my children and to help me. So I always had help from the family. I had financial help and I'd a support system.

I graduated second in my class.

After the commencement, during the reception afterward, a faculty member came up to me and said, "Mrs. Freeman, now I can tell you, when you stood in line waiting to register, you looked like you were going to give birth then, and we were scared." [Laughter] But anyway, in the National Bar Association, they had a little article about my child being born. But just a slight article . . .

In the meantime, Thurgood offered me a job working for the NAACP Legal Fund. But, of course, I knew I was coming to St. Louis.

Ms. Botchway: Wait. Thurgood Marshall offered you a job?

Ms. Freeman: Yeah. That was right after working for the NAACP. But on legal defense stuff.

But I said I was gonna be a civil rights lawyer. I'd do whatever for the NAACP in St. Louis. So, in the meantime, I went back and forth when we had time, we'd come back to St. Louis.

Ms. Botchway: To visit your husband’s family?

Ms. Freeman: Yeah, uh huh. And he had a lot of rental property. He was a Pullman porter, but he also had a lot of rental property and income. I was blessed that at least I had family -- both sides of the family had enough resources to do the things that needed to be done. And that was a blessing because he was an only child of his
mother. He found out later that his father had... a child before that [chuckle]...

but otherwise he was an only child.

Ms. Botchway: So you turned down a job with Thurgood Marshall to come back to St. Louis?

Ms. Freeman: No, I didn’t do that to come back to St. Louis. I was coming back to St. Louis.

Ms. Botchway: You were coming back already?

Ms. Freeman: Yes.

Ms. Botchway: Did you work with him?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I met Thurgood, then we filed a couple of cases... here and Thurgood was on the petition...

Ms. Botchway: ...out of St. Louis...

Ms. Freeman: We’d filed a number of cases on behalf of the NAACP but that was through the years.

Ms. Botchway: So you initially became acquainted with Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund when you were at Howard?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes. Yes.

Ms. Botchway: Okay, so this would have been... 1947 when you graduated from Howard?

Ms. Freeman: Yes ’47 when I left... graduated.

In June, I took the Bar in Washington, D.C., the District Court and the Court of Appeals and was admitted... I passed that. In the meantime, Shelby was working in upstate New York and we left Washington after all of that...

because we were on our way back to St. Louis, but he’d finish the year in Sampson, New York.

During the war, New York and some other states created junior colleges for the veterans who would be coming back. This was one of those. So in the
meantime, I started studying for the Missouri Bar. And then in 1948 on our way back here, I took the Missouri Bar and was admitted to the Missouri Bar, December 11, 1948.

When we came back after the end of that year -- of his school year -- when we came back to St. Louis, we lived in one of my father-in-law’s homes.

Ms. Botchway: Was that in the city of St. Louis?

Ms. Freeman: In the city of St. Louis . . . we moved back in St. Louis in 1948.

Ms. Botchway: So you Shelby, your daughter Shelbe and your son . . .

Ms. Freeman: And my son . . .

Ms. Botchway: What was his name?

Ms. Freeman: Butch. I mean Shelby, his name is Shelby, III, but we called him Butch.

Ms. Botchway: Okay. And your daughter’s name is Shelby also?

Ms. Freeman: S-h-e-l-b-e .

Ms. Botchway: . . . with an “e.” All right, so she was born before law school . . .

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yeah, she was born in 1939.

Ms. Botchway: And he was born in your third year of law school?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. In my senior year . . .

He was born September 14, 1946.

Ms. Botchway: Where did you live?

Ms. Freeman: In 1964, we bought another house on 91 Waterman Place where we stayed. We were there for 34 years. He took leave and he had a business -- Shelby Photography -- but then there was not enough money so then he went back to work. Then after he retired from the federal government, he was teaching for the State of Illinois in East St. Louis Community College. He taught there until
he became ill and died in 1991.

Ms. Botchway: Sorry. Sorry to hear about . . .

Ms. Freeman: But he was also very active . . . but his field was technology, computers, math, physics.

Ms. Botchway: So, when you moved to St. Louis you had your D.C. Bar license and your Missouri Bar license?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, that’s what enabled me file the first court records that I filed in federal court. I didn’t have to worry about it because I was already recognized.

Ms. Botchway: Really?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, . . . the federal courts. A lot of lawyers were admitted to the state court, but they were not admitted to practice in the federal court. So, in 1952, when we filed a suit against the St. Louis Housing Authority because of the fact that it was one of discrimination cases the NAACP was filing cases around the country against segregation in public housing.

We won the case.

Ms. Botchway: What other cases did you handle?

Ms. Freeman: In the meantime, I opened my own law office in 1949 because although many of the lawyers in Washington wrote letters to friends that they knew and recommended me, nobody offered me a job and that included the Black law firms, too.

For them, I could work for them, but I wasn’t going to be a trial attorney. I could do their research or I could do their typing only. And so I opened my own law office as a solo practitioner in June, no, November 1949 on the second floor of the Jefferson Bank Building, which at that time was located at Jefferson
and Franklin avenues.

Ms. Botchway: So you mentioned that at that time no one offered you a job -- whether it was a white firm or a black firm.

Ms. Freeman: Not a job that would enable me to practice . . . I could work for them but as their secretary or as a . . .

Ms. Botchway: . . . paralegal?

Ms. Freeman: I could do some research . . . Robert Wilson was in a law firm by himself. He was in the NAACP . . . I contacted them and told them and told them that I would be willing to work with them on any cases. I became a member of the St. Louis NAACP. The first NAACP-sponsored civil rights case in which I was involved was filed against the St. Louis Board of Education in 1949 in the city of St. Louis in which the all of these schools were racially segregated at that time by law. But they were under the 1896 civil rights case law -- separate but equal -- they are supposed to be equal but were not. Washington Tech, the black school, was "equal" -- supposed to be equal to . . . I've forgotten the name -- but anyway that's in the record.

Ms. Freeman: When they announced that they had a course in airplane mechanics it was in the public papers and all. There were three brothers who got very excited about that. They wanted to go there and their father said, "You can't." But he said he would do what he could. They denied it, then we filed that case. The circuit judge in the city of St. Louis decided in our favor. The Board of Education appealed to the Supreme Court of Missouri. We filed briefs and then we travelled after -- when the case was set -- to Jefferson City and that case was argued. The case was decided again that the Board of Education could not have
a course in airplane mechanics in the white school without having one in
Washington Tech. So the Board of Education closed down the course in
airplane mechanics.

At the white school.

In the meantime, in 1937, the federal legislature had created housing for low-income families. There was no law requiring segregation, but St. Louis and many other cities had separate units. Clinton Peabody was on the South Side—all white. Carr Square Village was low income on the North Side—all black and, of course, the low-income families in both were there. When the war broke out in 1941 they had been building some more, but that was interrupted because of the war. However, in 1952, when it was over with, they completed Cochran [Gardens], which was designated for white families and black families. Veterans were coming back and all were waiting for homes. I was a member of the NAACP and very active. There was a chairman of the Housing Committee of the NAACP and who had several families contact her. They stated that Cochran is there and wanted to know why can’t they move in. They contacted us and told us they were informed it was for white families only. We filed suit in federal court filed in the name of the NAACP, all of the attorneys (Constance Marley, Frankie Freeman, Constance Baker and Thurgood Marshall’s) names were on that petition. They answered it, the Housing Authority answered and, of course, there were other defendants. They answered it and they indicated that separation was a common pattern in the city of St. Louis. They named the YWCA, all these organizations that also had separated black and white. And indicated that these people who filed this case were actually wrong for filing.
Now whether they called me a trouble-maker in the petition. I don't remember.

. . . I have a copy of the Answer, though. Anyway, that case was argued and we argued, and they tried every kind of motion they could. I was in St. Louis and Constance Marley lived in New York. Robert Witherspoon is also listed as an attorney, but he was also very actively involved in protecting the smear factor defenders. The people who were being accused . . . there was a period in which there were many people who were being accused of being communists and so on. So he, his name was on it but he was not able to do anything with that case because he was protecting his clients -- his other clients. So that it turned out that the two people who were actually busy with that case were Constance Marley, who lived in New York, and me. And so we argued that case and I think in October of 1954, which was after the Supreme Court ruled on other segregation cases -- they had at least come with this other case with respect to school desegregation which meant that there was progress being made.

However, there was a question in housing, and we didn't know what they were going to do. And in the meantime, I was still very actively involved in my private practice. And you didn't get paid by the NAACP, but you did get a lot of publicity and sometimes that brought in some clients. [laughter] So it worked out.

In the meantime, Jordon Chambers and I had been appointed as assistant attorneys, but then somebody had to go down to take care of those cases and that's what I did for about a year.

Ms. Botchway: . . . When was that?

Ms. Freeman: . . . in 1956. And I think I did that for about a year. In the meantime, when the
case was decided in favor of us and Cochran had to be opened to blacks, then after a few months, I got a call from the head of the St. Louis Housing Authority. The leadership had changed and he said, "Frankie, you won the case, given us work to do so I'm gonna offer you a job." By that time, I was ready for more employment. So what I did was, I resigned from that which was just a part time position anyway . . .

Ms. Botchway: Oh, from the attorney general's office . . .

Ms. Freeman: Yeah, which was part-time anyway and then I had another part-time with another attorney. Then I became the associate general counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority.

At that time they had an independent agency and the Housing Authority that were all together with one staff. However, I was the associate general and I handled all litigation and everything involving the St. Louis public housing. Then there was a point . . . I don't remember what year now . . . in which they separated the agencies so I became the general counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority.

In the meantime, we were in the 60's, there were these civil rights actions and it was in 1963 . . . and as I said, I was also active as much as I could be. I was a Democrat, knowing the Democrats and Jordan Chambers who was very active and Howard Woods -- there were many people who were active in the community -- to the extent that I could -- I was always active with them. There were people in Washington who knew about my activities if they wanted to get some information, they would contact me . . . back and forth so it was widespread communication about the people who were interested in trying to
bring about change. I got a call that somebody in the White House wanted me. John Kennedy was the president. And so on November 17 I was at the White House and I was being interviewed. I had been recommended to be a U.S. Commissioner on Civil Rights. One of the things that President Kennedy had done in his campaign was to announce “that hence from then on, more women would be appointed to executive positions,” and so that was what he was doing. The Civil Rights Commission had been created in the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and had been very active with six commissioners all of whom were male -- five white and one black. Three of them were presidents of colleges and they were all very prestigious and they worked to eliminate racial discrimination. And so this was the position that I was asked to take, and I said that I would be honored. But, of course, I knew what I had to go through with the FBI vetting, And, of course, one week later, on November 22, President Kennedy was assassinated. That was devastating.

Ms. Botchway: So up until that point, when President Kennedy announced that he was going to add more women in leadership positions and then his cabinet when he would be president, had you felt any gender discrimination during the years that lead up to 1963?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes. I felt it . . . in my law practice. I felt actually from the beginning. Yes, that was gender discrimination, but one of the ways that I had dealt with it was through my faith, my Christianity. The extent to which there is discrimination, don’t let it stop you if you can do something. Just move on. When I first opened my law office it was well equipped and everything, and the very first person who came in my office after I opened it wanted a lawyer. I said I’m a lawyer.
He said, "I don't want a woman." Oh, it was just so bad...

Ms. Botchway: Was this an African American person...?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, yes. Gender discrimination was racially inclusive. There were as many black people... people who I knew and who knew me... who would go to a white lawyer before they would go to a female lawyer. Now that changed over the years, but oh, yes. But the point is that I was determined that the fact that there was discrimination on the basis of race or gender -- to the extent that I could do my job -- that was your problem.

Because I was determined and I prayed each day. "God, let me do what you want me to do." So the fact is you have to fight discrimination. You cannot acquiesce in it. I am sure that there are issues -- there are people who say that you should be on a board. Well, somebody told me, I recommended you for a board, but they said you were too old. [Laughter] But all I just said was that was not something that I wanted. I didn’t have the energy to try to fight everything so I decided what I would fight for. And I have fought those fights and I been called a trouble maker and I’ve said that’s good.

Ms. Botchway: Was there prevalent gender discrimination pre-1963 when Kennedy made that statement, which seemed to have been a profound statement to recognize that there was gender discrimination?

Ms. Freeman: Well, that’s right. There has been gender discrimination from the beginning of the world. The point is that you have to combat it, but you have to combat it consistently and when people see women doing things as well or better than men, then, it will change. It isn’t easy. It isn’t over yet. But you still fight. The struggle continues but continue... don’t give up.
Ms. Botchway: Yes.

Ms. Freeman: But also, much of it depends on your attitude.

Ms. Botchway: So would you say that a tool for fighting gender discrimination is excellence? Excellence in your work or whatever you undertake?

Ms. Freeman: I don't call anything excellent.

Ms. Botchway: Do you think women striving for excellence is a good way to fight against discrimination... or how should women fight against it?

Ms. Freeman: I think that women should do what they should do. If there is something that they believe that they are being discriminated against, they should take what action is appropriate under those circumstances. You see the action that needs to be taken may be varied depending upon what it is or where it is. First of all, it should be identified, But again, you know that the people who are doing this may have the power that you don't have. So therefore there are ways in which to work. There is no one way that you can ever do the right thing all the time. But you do the best you can and you work with people who believe in you and also, the important thing, is to always exercise integrity. But I say do your homework. Get involved. Stay involved -- through the churches or whatever agency you can. But don't neglect your basic duties either.

Ms. Botchway: Which would be?

Ms. Freeman: Take care of yourself and your family.

Ms. Botchway: And that is the balance that women -- wives, mothers have...

Ms. Freeman: ... we have to do it. Yes.

Ms. Botchway: Agreed.

Ms. Freeman: And know that there is no one word that could describe all women -- we are all
together but we all different. We are different people -- different people have
different attitudes.

Ms. Botchway: Okay, we discussed college, the birth of your daughter Shelbe, your break, law
school, the birth of your son, Shelby III, Butch and . . .

Ms. Freeman: We have not discussed his . . . he died. He became ill. The first time in 1949

Ms. Botchway: . . . 1949. Were you still in D.C. at that time or were you in . . . in St. Louis?

Ms. Freeman: That was 1949. I was practicing law

He was in school . . . daycare center . . . and they gave me a call because he
kept falling. He was taken to the hospital. I, of course, went and I don’t
remember what that diagnosis was at that time. He was there for a while. Then
he came home and he had to go back. Then they told us that he was incubated --
post virulent staphylitis. I'm not sure what the diagnosis was but that he would
not recover. That he would require care, but he would not recover. So we had
someone come to help take care of him. She was here . . . so we paid for
somebody to help take care of him every day. Our nurse was Dr. Nash. He lived
for nine years. And whenever he'd go to the hospital -- the money from me,
Shelby and his parents would pay the doctor's bill. So the value of health
insurance -- nobody has to tell us. Only my friends and family who I associated
with at church and so forth, knew anything about my family. And my law
partners and all of the staff -- things that I was doing -- they did not know. And
some instances, some of the statements that were made to me after a law case,
somebody didn’t even know that I was married to somebody. [Laughter] But he
got care, and he lived for nine years. So during that time, our financial
resources they were used. But in terms of the value and need for Obamacare . . .
. of course, I support all of that . . . but I know what it means not to have. We didn’t have it but at least we were blessed -- we paid what had to be paid.

Ms. Botchway: Was Dr. Nash an African-American female doctor?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yeah.

Ms. Botchway: Dr. Nash that just recently passed away.

Ms. Freeman: So you know we became friends. But we paid her.

Ms. Botchway: So you have been through some serious suffering during your life?

Ms. Freeman: Yes.

But, I think we’ve all been through some suffering, if you’ve lived for as long as I’ve lived. But your prayer is what keeps you. And you deal with the challenges. And still be thankful.

Ms. Botchway: Yes, we have to be.

Ms. Botchway: Okay, let’s finish with this first and then we can start next time which will be before September 14 which is your 50th anniversary of being appointed a commissioner. And then our next meeting we’ll dedicate to everything -- all the hearings and everything -- all the hearings for this country as a commissioner of civil rights and then we may meet one more time. So at this time, which it is 4:39 in St. Louis, unless there is anything else regarding this time period that you want to add before we close, I can close this second interview.

Ms. Freeman: Thank you.

Ms. Botchway: Okay.

END OF SECOND INTERVIEW.
Today is Sunday, August 10, 2014. This is the third interview for the oral history of Attorney Frankie Muse Freeman, being taken on behalf of the Women Trailblazers in the Law, a Project of the American Bar Association Senior Lawyers Division. It is being conducted by attorney Nicole Colbert Botchway, with Ms. Freeman in her wonderful home in the central west end of Missouri. At our last meeting, we left off in the year 1962. At that time, Ms. Freeman was the Associate General Counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority and received a communication from the White House. Ms. Freeman, can you tell us about that?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I can tell you. On November 17, 1963, I was in Washington at the White House with a meeting at the invitation of President Kennedy. I was informed, by Lt. White or one of the other members of the staff that I met with, that the President had already announced, before he was elected, that he was going to appoint more women to executive positions in the government. And, because of my work in civil rights, President Kennedy wanted to consider me; wanted to nominate me as a U.S. Commissioner on Civil Rights, making me the first woman Commissioner. Of course I was honored.

Ms. Botchway: Yes!
Ms. Freeman: And, of course, I said, “Yes, I would like to be considered.” I was, of course, informed that this would require an investigation and would require confirmation by the Senate. Anyway, I said, “Yes, I am interested. I would be honored to accept.” I left the White House very, very excited and I had remembered exactly why I had been in Washington in the first place. I came home and I did not communicate this conversation to anybody. I realized it was confidential and actually, I think I was informed that it was confidential. That was on November the 17th. And, of course, I was back in St. Louis and I was at my work. But on November the 22nd President Kennedy was assassinated. . . . And, of course, the whole country was devastated. I think we spent about three days in mourning. For me I thought the nomination was over with. We were all saddened. In the meantime I continued to be active as an individual with the Democratic Party and immediately following the assassination President Johnson who was Vice President became the President, and I thought that the consideration was completely over with. In the meantime, I heard that St. Louis the Democratic Party invited President Johnson and he was coming to St. Louis on February the 14th for a dinner. I was very close to the members in the leadership. African-American Leadership the Democratic, so my husband and I arranged to be there. I was at work earlier in the day at the Housing Authority and received a call from the White House telling me that President Johnson wanted to meet with me at 5 o’clock. I think this call must have come earlier in the day. I was, of course, surprised to get the call. They told me that he would want to meet with me before the event at the Chase Park Plaza that evening and wanted me to be there be at 5 o’clock. I was writing the notes down on a yellow
pad and the name of the person who talked to me and what he said and I said,

"Yes of course I will meet with the President." Again this was overwhelming . . .

Ms. Botchway: Yes.
Ms. Freeman: Right away I knew that I was going to get myself out of the office then but in the meantime I called my husband at his office because he was waiting and told him that I had received a call from the White House and that the President wanted to meet with me and would he leave office early so that we could get dressed and be ready because at 5 o'clock was before the time of the dinner plans.

Ms. Botchway: Yes.

And I am not sure whether my husband really believed me or not but at least he said, "Okay, okay." I immediately made arrangements because I was the Associate General Counsel and it meant I had the right to leave. I just had to go. I just told my staff that I was going to be leaving early. They knew, of course, that I was going to the dinner. And I went home and we got dressed. In the meantime President Johnson was already in St. Louis meeting with other groups and there were crowds everywhere he was, which is true whenever and wherever the President is. So anyway I got dressed and we left early because we would have to get there early.

We got close to the Chase and I told Shelby I have to get out . . .
... at Maryland and Kingshighway among the crowd and I had the yellow sheet of paper with all of the notes and instructions that I had written/received over the phone. When I got out I tried to get through the crowd and I started across the street. The police officer stopped me and he said, “You can’t do that; I’ve told you you can’t go,” and I said, “President Johnson wants to meet with me.” He looked at me and I hand him my yellow sheet of notes and instructions. He said, “Wait there.” He went across the street, met with some other people came back and said, “Come with me.”

Ms. Freeman: And he took me in to the Chase Park Plaza
and he had me sit in front of the elevator on the seats.
I had got myself all fully dressed and I had a suit on. I think it was a gray jacket and after all you know I was dressed to look good. . . .

[Chuckles]

Ms. Botchway: And members of the Congress passed and said people from the Globe Democrat were there.

Several people passed me and said hello and members of Congress said, “Congratulations” as they got on the elevator.

I was there for a while then someone came and said, “Come with me.” And they took me up to the top floor and when I got off at the floor there were a lot of people as I passed from the elevator to the room. And then I was told to wait and the President would be seeing me soon. I went into the room and was sitting there when finally I think Jack Valenti came first and he said, “The President is sorry to keep you waiting, but he will be you shortly.” Very soon after he came and got me, standing in the front in the door to the room, there he was . . . President
Johnson. And so he had me come in and said, “Have a seat.” And I sat down. But I was absolutely very, very nervous. And he could tell that I was nervous, and so he talked and he talked and as I sat there and listened to him then I released and stop holding on the lapels of my coat. And so finally I think I got to where I could at least talk and answer him. He told me that he had checked me out. He had received all the information that had been provided for me that I had been recommended very highly and the Civil Rights Commission was as an independent agency that had six Commissioners. It had been created in 1957 and all of the Commissioners who had been confirmed had been active in civil rights or lawyers who knew what they were doing and were all male. And so, when he checked me out with the NAACP and Urban League, he said Roy Wilkinson asked him about me. But he did not tell them the position for which he was considering me for because if he had told him they would have still given him a recommendation for another man and he was not going to accept a recommendation for another man. And so he told me that I would be checked out; that the FBI would have me investigated and he would need to know everything, and they would of course be checking me, my taxes and the organizations that I belonged to and that he would want me to give him the names of any other organizations that I could think of — as I said I was still probably stunned or nervous and I couldn’t think of any organizations except I said, “I am a Baptist.” He said, “Oh, that’s okay.” And by that time, I could relax at least.

Ms. Botchway: Yes.

Ms. Freeman: As he talked about what he wanted with respect to the Commission in terms of the elimination of discrimination I could then relax, respond and also participate
in the conversation. And he also then told me, “The other big issue in this country that I want to deal with is the war against poverty.” He was very deliberate in that and we were having a good conversation when there was a knock on the door and they said, “Mr. President, you are needed downstairs.” And that was it; the dinner event. So then they took me downstairs. In the meantime, they had us at a table of all Black African-Americans, well known like Fred Weathers and others who were not at my table but at another table nearby and my husband of course was there because when everything opened at the hotel he had already gone in. He was the only one, of course, who knew where I was, and when I came back I sat down and I joined him and I just greeted him and we went on with our dinner then we came home. I had no other discussion with anybody except that the next morning on the front page of the paper was the article which says that President Johnson had met with Frankie Freeman, she was being considered for an appointment for a nomination, and I got calls from people saying, “You didn’t tell us what you were doing when you were late getting in today.” And I didn’t. I didn’t know. [Chuckles] However, then in the Washington Post it got out and the reporter from the Washington Post called me about it and wanted to know about my nomination. And, of course, because I was the first female, there was more publicity about it because it was not just matter of race, it was gender too.

Ms. Freeman: So they asked me about my background and I told them that I had been active after they had found several civil rights cases that we had won and also I had been involved in protests, and I said I believed we should work to eliminate racial discrimination and I’ve sometimes participated in marches and they asked me
"Well, if you are confirmed would you do that again?" I said, "Well, if it continues, I may do it again." And the next day the paper had it at the top the headline of the article about me that "she has been engaged in protests and she said she would do it again." Right after the paper came out, they said, "Mrs. Freeman, you are being investigated. You have to appear before the Senate. Please don't talk to any more reporters." I said, "Okay." I did not realize what it would be a problem and I still have a copy of that article. Anyway, it was a lot that I had to go through. What I did realize was the importance of my serving as a Commissioner, because I had done my homework, I knew that there would be hearings, that I would be participating investigations and that the hearings would be anywhere in the country, especially where there was discrimination. Of course, this was in 1964, and this was at the height of civil rights. The Freedom Riders were active and there were many other activities that were going on and there were other groups that were working, and so to hear the Commission was holding hearings on civil rights violations was important. I had a meeting with the Head of the Housing Authority to at least ask about what arrangements could be made for me to conduct the hearings. The six Commissioners included John Hanna who was President of Michigan State University, Father Theodore Hesper who was President of Notre Dame, and Ben Griswold who was Dean of the Law School at Harvard, and Rankin was the Head of a Department at Duke University a Department. I am not sure exactly the name of that Department. So everybody had to make adjustments but at least they all had the consent of their Agencies, of course, to do this. So it was arranged. For the job that I had with the St. Louis Housing Authority, you had annual and sick leave. I took annual leave and they
agreed — of course they were not going to pay me for any position that I was not working for them. So we worked it out that they of course said they were proud of my nomination. Whenever I was in Washington for meetings of the Commission I would take leave. I would be not on their payroll.

I had accumulated leave because I had been working there for quite some time and if necessary I would take off without any salary. It was in March of 1964 that he announced my nomination. We had met in February, it was in March and that's when of course the investigation started.

I had many, many meetings and questions and answered the questions and there were people who they checked; they were trying to find out whether I was a Communist. The investigation was not limited to Missouri. There were people wherever I was, members of my family were questioned, they would always go to places in their city to ask about me and whether anything that I did was in violation of law. I had hearings — I have a copy of the Report of the Hearings — but anyway there was a Hearing. After they had completed their investigation, there was a Hearing before the Senate Committee and the Chair of the Senate Committee that I appeared before was a Senator from North Carolina. And of course there were members of that Committee present; several of them were present. I am trying to remember which one of the Senators were there but the Member of Congress there was my Congressman along with people who I had received letters of support from. Later, from the President, when I went to Austin to visit his library, I found out the names of quite a number of people who had written letters in support of my nomination that I had not known about at that time. Anyway, I was confirmed by the Senate and I took office. I was confirmed
on September the 15th — in the meantime, however, right after the nomination was announced, the Staff and the members of the Commission invited me to start working with them, although I would not get paid. If I wanted to come and work with them, I was able to do that. I think probably in April was the first Commission meeting I participated in. I would meet with them and participate in the discussion, I just didn’t have a vote. I could participate in the discussion and by that time there were a lot of things going on and the decisions were being considered as to whether hearings would be held and decisions were made. I participated in that. But not to vote. I was confirmed on September the 15th I believe it was September the 15th, 1964. And of course from then on I did have the right to vote. That was September 15, 1964. I am not sure whether that was the date of my confirmation or whether it was the date of my swearing in. At the time of my swearing in, family members came to Washington for that.

Ms. Botchway: OK
Ms. Freeman: In the meantime, there was intense activity; several people who had been working in Mississippi and Alabama to help people, the black people who were denied the right to vote, were murdered . . . it was pretty bad. We commissioned an investigation — three people had been killed: Schwerner, Goodman, and Cheney. There were other people who had been hurt — four churches had been bombed because there were people who worked at those churches who were members of those churches who were working in the community trying to get people registered — black people — registered to vote. Because of the difficulties, because the hostility was so bad in spite of all of the things that black people were doing, the Civil Rights Commission decided to hold a hearing in Jackson,
Mississippi, on Justice, Equal Justice and voting, focusing on some of the brutalities that had been occurring, as well as the denial of the right to vote. It was in February of 1965 that the Commission started its hearing in Jackson, Mississippi. First of all, the staff had been doing an investigation. We had a General Counsel and several members of the staff who actually had been working in Mississippi on behalf of the Commission, getting information. They also found a hotel for us because one of the things that had to be, that was required, was that there would never be racial segregation and discrimination and denial of the use of hotels. Racial segregation and discrimination still existed but they found a hotel that would admit all of the Commissioners and, of course, any staff and so that's where I stayed. One of the things that I also knew was that at least I figured I would get recognized — that I would get some "special attention" — I knew that. However, I took the week off then, because we were going to have the hearing in two sessions. We were going to meet the officials, of which there had been charges and they had been denied. We had subpoena power and the staff told us that they issued subpoenas for thirty people who had been victimized by denial of the right to vote. I went and when I got to Jackson I saw things that actually I suppose I wasn't supposed to see, but I saw them. However, one of the things that happened was that I got "special attention" from the newspaper because the next morning the newspaper in Jackson had a column, two columns on "the colored woman Commissioner from St. Louis who is here to study us" and then they listed all of the things that were happening in St. Louis and suggested that she should have stayed home because there was no violation of law in Mississippi. That was, as I said, the "special attention" from the press.
there.

One of the other things that happened, four churches — black churches — in Canton, Mississippi, had been bombed because there were people in that church who were working to help people get registered to vote. In Mississippi, if you wanted to vote, you had to read, write and interpret a section of the Mississippi Constitution to the satisfaction of the person who was registering you. And in most cases, the persons who would take a section of Constitution and whatever they said it was; whatever their interpretation of it was, they would use it to deny the right to vote. There were two counties in Mississippi allegedly where there was not one black person registered to vote and in many of those counties they were at least half of the population. Those were the cases that were read about, that were written about in other places other than Mississippi but I had heard of about them. I got to Mississippi a day before the hearing and when we got there we also were told that we had a car, which would be taking us wherever we wanted to go. Because four black churches had been bombed because they were trying to get black people registered to vote, in Canton, I found out that Canton was about only a little more than 10 miles from Jackson, and I decided that I wanted to go to Canton. I wanted to see, because as a Christian, as a Baptist, I just could not see that in the United States somebody would bomb churches. So they said “Oh, no, you can’t go; you can’t go.” I said “I’m a Commissioner, I can go. I will go!” I said “I would like to have a car take me and I said I want a car tomorrow because I would like to go tomorrow morning and so if you wouldn’t go, I will get a car and I will go!” So the next morning I got a call from them.

“There’s a car, Commissioner, there is some car for you,” and when I got
downstairs, Commissioner David Griswold and his wife who had come with him, they were in the car. So the three Commissioners were in. There was staff, and I think there were marshals and there were probably another kind of security. So we went to and we saw where those churches were bombed. One of the things that happened as a result of that visit to the churches was the Commissioners decided that from then on, whenever there would be a hearing, if there was something that needed to be investigated we would go a day early so that they could make the investigation. When the hearing opened, of course the first person there, as a matter of courtesy, was the Governor who appeared before us to tell us how all Mississippi believed in and agreed with and voting laws. After he spoke, then we questioned people who were registrars and were the ones who were actually denying the right to vote. So when one of the registrars, who had denied people the right to appeared under our subpoena, Griswold gave him a copy of the Mississippi Constitution with the section that he had used to get people denied the right to vote. The register witness read the provision of the Constitution, but he could not interpret it. That, of course, was very significant, that he could not interpret the Constitution that he had used to deny many voters the right to vote. There were witness we held over a period of days; we had witnesses for many people who registered and denied. We also had testimony relating to some of the attacks and the whippings and the beatings that had gone on. And then we also had testimony from people who had tried to vote — tried and tried and tried to vote — had been denied the right to vote. And as a result of this hearing, which was the first, we had the officials on the first day, took a break and then had people with respect to the voting appearing actually in two
sections: one on justice and the other on the voting. When we completed our hearing and we wrote a report and this is required by law, we completed our hearing. And in March of 1965 we, and I think it was March, we issued a report to the President and the Congress with recommendations with respect to voting. Three of our recommendations became a part of the Voting Rights Act signed by President Johnson in 1965. We continued; of course there was quite a bit of publicity; there was quite a bit from the media attention but also there was also a celebration that at least there was a Voting Rights Act in 1965, just as I said, because there were several provisions in the Voting Rights Act. It made a difference in the number of people who had the right to vote and they did vote in Mississippi. There were people having the right to vote who became elected to office. Later on, I think probably maybe a year later, I was invited to speak and Middlemark, I think, checking on the number of black people who lived there who voted. On the basis of information that I had received from people who voted in Mississippi, I could tell them and actually I could really talk to them about what they were not doing, because at that time, because of the Voting Rights Act there were more black people voting in Mississippi than were voting in some of those other states. Even as I worked — not political; not engaging in politics — I still focused on telling people about their individual responsibility and the fact that if you believe in the Constitution, then you have a duty to participate and vote. We held hearings in Montgomery, Alabama; we had hearings there in 1968 and prior to the 1968. In 1965 after the Voting Rights Act, one of the other major issues had been discrimination, racial segregation, in education, which was prevalent in 17 states. The President asked the
Commission, and he had a letter to the Commission, saying he wanted us to make a study, of racial isolation in the public schools. He made that request to us probably in late 1965. But anyway, it was during 1966 when we held hearings in several cities around the country, not just in the southern cities, on racial isolation in the public schools. There was no question about the differences; the schools were racially segregated; the problem also was that not only were they segregated but the resources available to the all-black schools were much, much more inadequate; in fact the only white schools they were not inadequate; there was a big difference of resources available in the schools. In January of 1967 we issued our Report, as I said our Report included systems in the North, we were in Boston. In fact, when we held our hearing in Boston. We always had marshals, but in Boston was the only time - well, the first time really - that a marshal was assigned to me to go everywhere I went. When that first happened, I was there and I met her. She had her weapon. She had been sent from, I think, Pittsburgh to Boston for the purpose of going with me. Apparently there had been some feeling that I would not be . . . I was not safe. Now when we went with her there were always other U.S. marshals with us. But this was the first time and the only time of all of the hearings that a marshal was assigned to go with me wherever I went, and that also meant when I went to the ladies room, and when I left to get up to go to the ladies room during the time that we were at the hearing, she went. And when there were people there in the ladies room who wanted to say hello to me, she talked to them first to be sure that it was friendly before. So actually, as I said, because of my gender or maybe it was the combination, there was several places in which I got what I called (and without going into detail) "special
Ms. Botchway: At that time there was racial tension, there was segregation that you mentioned, and attempts to prevent individuals from voting—do you think at that time there was gender tension? Were there efforts to stop women from voting?

Ms. Freeman: No.

Ms. Botchway: Were there efforts to stop women from participating in different leadership positions during that time?

Ms. Freeman: Not at that time. The suffrage movement had gone on and then there had been at least a change in the rights of white women during the Civil Rights Movement during the ‘50s, late ‘50s, and the ‘60s the intensity of the effort to deny the right to vote was against black people—just black people whether male or female. The Constitutional Amendment changed with respect to the right of women because, actually Delta Sigma Theta, of which I am a past President, the black women in 1913 had participated in the suffrage movement, although they participated, they were segregated even as they participated. So the women had been fighting for the right to vote and they had succeeded in their right to vote as far as gender as long as gender were also white. So the discrimination against women, black women, was the same as the discrimination against black men. However, there were women’s organizations such as Dorothy Height’s, President of the National Council of Negro Women, group who worked with women in the north to help at least get some of them come down south during the Civil Rights Movement when people were participating in Freedom Rides and white people went down to work with those people because, in spite of all the injustices that had been going on in the various cities, in the south, there were still people who were trying to work
and make a difference. They were in the minority during that period but there
were people who would come, even from the north, and that's the people who
were killed, those three who were killed were from the north, white and black.

Ms. Botchway: So as the first female, black or white, on the Commission how did that feel?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, the first woman on the Commission. And I served further on the Civil Rights
Commission. I served for 16 years, from the time of my confirmation until, I
mean through Ford, Nixon, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter. In 1979, President
Carter nominated me to be Inspector General of the Community Services
Administration. I accepted that and I was later confirmed. I submitted, when I
was confirmed Inspector General, I submitted my resignation as a Commissioner.
The President accepted it and upon the confirmation of my successor, I served
from the time of my being confirmed as Inspector General but because under the
law my successor could not vote as a Commissioner until she was confirmed, I
served for nine months under two positions until July of 1980, which is July 9th
when the Senate confirmed her. However, I only got paid for one position.

Ms. Botchway: [Chuckles]

Ms. Freeman: And that's why sometimes because if there is a statement about how many years I
served on the Commission it's to 1979 and they are talking about from the time
that I was confirmed as Inspector General. But for me I served 16 years from the
time that I until I was until my successor was confirmed, which was in 1980. So I
served from 1964 until 1980 as the only female during the entire time. I was the
only female on the Civil Rights Commission.

Ms. Botchway: So during that 16 years did you feel racial discrimination?

Ms. Freeman: I felt no racial discrimination among the Staff or Commissioners. Oh no.
Okay.

Ms. Freeman: No, the fact that there was a column, two columns in the *Mississippi Journal*, about me was not discrimination, no, I mean that’s what I called “the special attention.” I encountered no racial discrimination as a Commissioner. None whatsoever.

Ms. Botchway: What about in the communities when you traveled to . . .

Ms. Freeman: No, I didn’t then. No.

Ms. Botchway: Did you encounter any gender discrimination during that time by anyone?

Ms. Freeman: No. No, no, none, never, not there. I did not encounter any gender discrimination on the basis of being a Commissioner, no.

In fact, that goes back to one of the statements when President Johnson in St. Louis told me that he was going to nominate me as a Commissioner. And I said, “Oh, there are College Presidents (on the Commission), and they weren’t really open. And he said, “Oh, you can handle those Deans.”

Ms. Botchway: [chuckles] Is there any one particular hearing that had a lasting impact on you?

Ms. Freeman: I think there was sort of an accumulation. The lasting impact on me I think is the totality of my involvement. There were several hearings in different places; we held hearings not just on voting, we held hearings with respect to immigration, we had hearings with gender, we held hearings with Native Americans in Albuquerque, we went to the tribes and we tried to make a difference but also in all of those hearings there also was a learning experience for me. And there were several hearings at which there were just two Commissioners holding the hearings. In Peoria, Illinois, for instance, that hearing I presided over, I was the Chair of that Hearing. There were a couple of hearings, I think in Albuquerque.
And again, this is quite some time ago but anyway, in which I chaired, you know, the Hearings. When we issued reports and when we found violations, in many instances, we made recommendations with respect to the law, here at least we made a difference. And I think that we made a difference in many respects.

I am not sure at which point I was talking about the request of the President to study to and issue a report on racial isolation in the public schools but this was very important. And that one that I talked about and when I was in Boston that I had a Marshal assigned to me and nobody ever told me why. You see the Staff did all of the investigations and so apparently for some reason they felt it was important and so the person who was with me was a woman, U.S. marshal, a white woman. But anyway, it was not a negative, it was just a shock in the beginning, but I don't know that I ever really got used to it. But at least it was only two or three days and we were still studying racial isolation in the public schools.

In other words, even though in the south there was absolute racial discrimination and segregation, what was found out by Department of Education and the other people in the country was that there was racial separation in many other cities in the north in addition to the south. So the Report that we issued in racial isolation in the public schools I think that was one of the most significant Reports since the Report with respect to Voting that we issued in September. We issued that Report in March of 1967. I had a Supplementary Statement in that Report which for me I think reflects my beliefs next to my findings and is still very important to me because one of the things that I stated was that not only does racial segregation harm that black people, but that it harms white people. We go to school in
separate schools but when we get out of school we go on jobs and we don’t know each other. And it would be of value at least if we could at least get to know the culture of each other. And so through all the years there are several paragraphs in my separate statement that when I use them they have been quoted by the media even recently. Several paragraphs are still relevant even in this area and throughout the United States where you have racial isolation in black people, Hispanic people and white people. Not knowing each other, not going to school together, until they show up on the job and have to work together, they know nothing about other cultures because we need to know and respect all cultures and we could only do that if we learn it from the beginning.

Ms. Botchway: So that was in your Report of March of 1967?
Ms. Freeman: March 19 . . . Racial Isolation in the Public Schools. Yes. In fact in my book I quoted that part of it and very often even now I can quote the sections of that of my statement, my separate statements that are still true today.

Ms. Botchway: Did you have any hearings that dealt with gender discrimination?
Ms. Freeman: Oh yes.

Ms. Botchway: Can we talk about a couple of those?
Ms. Freeman: We held hearings and I do not recall, I would have to check my records to show which cities we held them, but we issued findings that we held with respect to gender discrimination and we issued a report with respect to it and unfortunately we still today have gender discrimination. It is better, but we still have it.

Ms. Botchway: Was there anything in particular regarding the gender cases that stood out to you?
Ms. Freeman: There probably were, but I just have to think back, but I can’t think of them now.

Ms. Botchway: Can we come back to those cases?
Ms. Freeman: Yes.

Ms. Botchway: So you served in that role through 1980.

Ms. Freeman: Yes, there was still the issue with respect to discrimination and employment. The Federal Government had developed an order to eliminate racial discrimination in employment by the Federal Government and contractors had a requirement that before a contract would be issued between the government and a private contractor that there would have to be an equal employment clause contract provision. Because of some claims of discrimination against large companies that the federal government had contracts with, the decision was made by the Civil Rights Commission in 1969 that we would hold a hearing on whether there had been a contract issued without the agreement by the Federal Government. The decision was made to hold that hearing in St. Louis County. The hearings were going to study several big corporations: McDonnell Douglas and two or three other companies with their federal contracts. In the meantime I had arranged the dates which were in January of 1970 and I had of course arranged that I would be at that hearing and I would be on leave from the St. Louis Housing Authority. So that during that time although I was in Missouri I was actually functioning as a Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In the meantime we had subpoenaed witnesses and we had been and we had received testimony that there was a contract for an F-15 plane with McDonnell Douglas that had been issued by the Department of Defense without agreement.

Ms. Botchway: Really?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. We checked with a witness, with an employee of the Air Force who
confirmed that there had been no agreement as required by law prior to that time. McDonnell Douglas submitted an agreement. It had not been approved therefore there was no agreement. When that information came to us, the Commission contacted the federal government in Washington. The Department of Defense contacted the Department of the Air Force representative who was probably out of the country but who came back and so what we did was suspended the contract for $50 million for this plane in the decision. Then, of course, that immediately got media attention. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* had an editorial who wrote against the suspension and said that all of this was no more than a tempest in a teapot. As a Commissioner I wrote a letter to the Editor, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, based upon the information that we had about the employment of African Americans and where and how they were employed by McDonnell Douglas. All of that was *submitted* to the Editor. The following morning, in the *Globe* my letter appeared on February the 6th in the paper. When I got to my office that morning, I received a letter signed by all Commissioners of the St. Louis Housing Authority notifying me that my employment with the St. Louis Housing Authority was terminated as of 5:30 that day. I called my husband and told him that I had been fired and that I would be getting my things ready to go home. So I got myself together and I left the apartment and he came and picked me up with all of the things that I had with me. I had a purse and I was out of there at 2:30 p.m. In the meantime, of course, you see it was all over the newspapers knew about it; people called and they were asking me who you were going to file your complaint with. I said I am not going to file any complaint. I was determined — I was the General Counsel — at that point, about 8 or 9
months before that time I had been promoted to General Counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority. I said I am not going to file — to whom or what agency am I going to file a complaint with? I really knew that I was not going to file a complaint. And so anyway I went home and my brother who was also a lawyer, Andy, told me and he said, "I agree with you. Don’t file any complaint. You’ve been there long enough anyway." So I said I’m going back into private practice. But that was it, you know, the Commission of Civil Rights gave the President, the Chairman of the Commission immediately issued a protest but anyway when they spoke to me I said I am not filing any complaint. I am just going to return to private practice. I did, there were friends in the NAACP and they were all of the people who wanted to do something, but they did do some things, but there was nothing more that I was going to do. I did but I didn’t. I went to a friend’s home in Florida for a few days to just sort of unwind. Then I also, one of the things that I’d said: “I’m going to do something for me.”

Ms. Botchway: What was that?

Ms. Freeman: And so, I went to Stix Baer & Fuller and I said I want a mink coat and I want the best you’ve got.”

Ms. Botchway: [Chuckles]

Ms. Freeman: And they asked me about how I was going to pay for it. I said “Put it on my credit card,” which was in Shelby’s name. When I got home and I told Shelby. He said, “WHAT?” But anyway there was no problem. Because he said, “Okay, you.” And I said “I am going back to private practice . . . I’m going to pay for it. Don’t worry about it.” Anyway, as I said, I did two things for myself: I took a few days and went to Florida and relaxed. Then I went back into private practice. In the
Ms. Botchway: Meantime, of course, I am not sure but I don't think that anybody from the federal government responded to the Chairman. However, McDonnell Douglas got their contract in order and they got their agreement in order and complied and they were only without the contract for 10 days and they were back. But as a result of it there were African Americans who received higher positions at McDonnell Douglas. In the meantime, however, there had been other protests against discrimination employment that was during the period even prior to that with you know had been arrested traveling up the arch, because a fight against racial discrimination and employment was still continuing. But at least that changed. The termination of that contract required them at least to do something much more effective in terms of employment of African Americans.

Ms. Freeman: So at that time when you were terminated from the St. Louis Housing Authority you were still serving on the Civil Rights Commission?

Ms. Freeman: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I still served and I went back into private practice by myself for about 2 years. Then I became a part of the firm of Montgomery Hollie and Sousi. I started with them in early 70's and stayed with them after other people joined as partners ed. until I retired in 2009. I still think that the Supplementary Statement that I issued in 1967 was the one that I think was the best contribution.

That would be the next one.

Ms. Botchway: And how did position as Inspector General of the Community Services Commission in 1980 come about?

Ms. Freeman: 1979. Office of Inspector General — that law calling for an Inspector General had been enacted in 1976 and that was to have a lawyer, a separate provision in
each 12 or 15 federal agencies to at least oversee them to be sure to sort out the issues of whether the agencies themselves were doing the things that they needed to do. The Community Services Administration was what it was called and at that time it was the federal agency working against the war against poverty. There were nonprofits, the Human Development Corporations and many agencies who had auditors to at least do their investigation and they had people who checked contracts and all. However, once the Inspector General law was enacted then they all became part of that Division, and so I, then when I became the Inspector General and I had my only lawyer because you were the monitoring agency within the agency and you have auditors staffed to work with all of the agencies. So the Community Service Division covered all of the agencies around the country and I had and the people who were already part of it so they also became a part of my staff.

Ms. Botchway: Did you have a very large staff?
Ms. Freeman: Yes, I had a general counsel, another person whom I hired when I was confirmed and prior to my confirmation checked in because I knew that I would have to have a private staff and private secretary and I found out that they said they had no money so I contacted my Senator and because I thought that he had recommended me and he didn’t recommend me. He said he would have except that he had not known about it. He did not know who recommended me. But anyway, he was able to get money from the Congress that was for me to be able to hire the staff that I needed and I needed a private secretary, I needed a general secretary I needed a lawyer. I mean I needed a counsel for me. And so when I had a staff they found an office for me and a staff. The people who were already
auditors just became a part of my staff, so they were already there.

Ms. Botchway:
Ms. Freeman: Okay.

Ms. Botchway: And then of course I had to be sworn in. I was, and then I had Lucy and some of the people who were friends of mine, one of the persons became my private secretary, I had her in addition to a regular secretary, and that was actually from 1979 that's when we were required by the law to issue Reports to the President and the Congress every six months so my first Report was due in December of '79.

Ms. Botchway: Did you enjoy that work?.

Ms. Freeman: Yes, we issued our first Report. In the meantime, we were working and actually Human Development Corporation was one of them. We reviewed the auditors who would go around the country and then I would travel to the regions if necessary and at least I visited each one of the regions. I was working as an Inspector General in 1980 when President Reagan was elected. In the meantime all of the Inspector Generals had met with President Carter and we asked whether we needed to resign because we knew that it was a non-partisan appointment so we wanted to know because technically through the years when there is a new President you submit your resignation. The President told all of us, “No. You are auditors, you know, your position is one that will not require or expect a resignation. You keep doing your work and you will just report to the next President.” And so this was prior to the Inauguration, which was in January of 1980, and then on the Inauguration Day in Washington, the offices were closed, this was on January the 20th, you know, the inauguration. So anyway we all were wearing black and at least I didn't leave
town; some of them had gone to at least visit a city where there was work going on. But I didn’t leave town but then I got back I came back to my office and I was working in my office until about I think about 3 o’clock or something. I got a call from the Head of the Agency that he wanted to see me, and when I got there he handed me a letter which was from President Reagan addressed to each of the Inspector Generals notifying us that we had been terminated — our position as Inspector General had been terminated as of January 20th, 1980.

Ms. Botchway: How did you handle that adversity?

Ms. Freeman: I left his office and went to my office and by the time I got to my office everybody knew what had happened. Then I said that I’ve been fired before, but it is the first time I’ve been fired retroactively.

Ms. Botchway: So you stayed positive?

Ms. Freeman: I went to my office and I called my secretary right away and asked, “What did I sign today?” What I wanted to know is whether I had signed any Reports. I met with personnel. And they said, you know, at least it was agreed, my position was terminated. However, they said we want you to stay on for at least a couple of weeks to close out, you know. So, I am not sure whether I stayed two weeks or three weeks or whatever it was, which meant that there were questions and concerns that all of my staff had because they were Civil Service employees regarding how were they affected and, of course, they were. My lawyer was affected along with my private secret and, well you know some of them who also had other had come to work. The auditors were already on the payroll, so they were not affected. So the majority of the staff there were only I think three my
private, the lawyer, the people that I had personally hired, were affected by it. The media asked the President why and he said we could reapply. Oh, he just wanted to be sure we were tough enough and you know and he said you want somebody like "meaner than junk yard dogs." So the reporter called me and he said that and I said, "I don’t fit those qualifications." I am going back to St. Louis and go back to my law firm.

As Inspector General I was required to live in Washington. I had an apartment and I had you know my car was there and all which meant that Shelby knew that he would have to come and you know and he did of course no question about it. The kind of support that I got from him in that time was great. I had to of course turn in my contract on the apartment and I actually I left Washington and returned to St. Louis in March of 1980, which meant that that’s about the time that it took me to get everything straightened and everything. In the meantime, however, at Personnel they gave me the information, you know in other words they helped me because in terms of my age they said you are eligible you will be eligible for Social Security. And they also knew that with respect to the amount of income that I had because whenever we worked for the Civil Rights Commission we got paid by the day. They checked and found out the total that I would be eligible to receive as a retirement, as a retired federal employee, and so I was still listed as a retired federal employee and they added all of what I had received to find out what I would be eligible to receive from Social Security from each month. And that I think since 1916, I was I think I was about I was 65. They assisted me at least and at least even though I had been terminated I would be a retired federal employee of Community Services Administration. And that, of course is
something I received from then on. So that ended my employment with the federal government, I was employed as an Inspector General for about 15 months.

Ms. Botchway: Okay. I think we could end there and in our next session take up, because after that you relocated back to St. Louis again ....

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I came back to St. Louis.

Ms. Freeman: I filed civil rights cases in 1976.

Ms. Botchway: Which one was that?

Ms. Freeman: That was the one against SIUE and the School of Dentistry. I didn’t . . . oh gosh, I didn’t talk about that.

Ms. Botchway: No. Let’s talk about that a little bit.

Ms. Freeman: I was in private practice from 1970 until 1979. Yeah. Then I was handling general cases, civil rights cases then. I didn’t have that many, but I did some against the Department of Education, and Southern Illinois University the School of Dentistry. Edward Haney contacted me, he had been terminated as a student from the School of Dentistry of Southern Illinois University and he was the first black student. The problem is that when they are students in the School of Dentistry, you learn your dentistry by working on each other and his problem was that nobody wanted, you know, him to work on their teeth or you know, back and forth. And so what I don’t remember exactly what happened or how it happened or which of the details we were split but anyway because he did not have all of those opportunities he failed his class. So he contacted me and I took that case. It meant that I would have to file suit and I was going to file a federal case against the school because there was obviously discrimination and so I filed suit in
Illinois, in Federal Court. In the meantime, of course, he didn’t have money, so which meant that I contacted the national NAACP about what I was going to; what I wanted to do and I asked them to join me because I knew that what I would have to do would be take depositions and all of this required money and I would need the support of the NAACP. They, of course, agreed to accept that case and which meant that they would be responsible for whatever expenses I would have in connection with what I had to do. And so we filed a suit against them, charging racial discrimination and we took the depositions of the doctors, of the professors of the school, and then got the information that they gave. It was enough, was sufficient for me to know that it was a good case and there was no way that they could get out of that. What happened, however though was when the date with Federal Court, when the case was set for trial, they agreed to accept that they would re-admit Haney and we worked out an agreement so that they would accept black students and be sure that they got the same treatment that others did. Since that time there are a couple of dentists that I have met who graduated from there since then, you know. But anyway for Edward Haney, even though he won the case and was told he could go back, by that time he for some reason decided that he was just going and get his PhD and so he got his PhD in Florida. He did not return to the school, however he has written an analysis of what happened because he says that at least the case I filed for him was responsible for the black students being successful there, because there are more black dentists who have graduated as a result of his case.

Ms. Botchway: That must be an awesome feeling?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, and as I said I mentioned it to the person who is now my dentist the first
time I think I went to him and, he knew about the.

Ms. Botchway: Okay. That was a very significant one. So, do you have any other comments to make before we end this session?

Ms. Freeman: I just thank you. I have tried, at least in terms of the civil rights to make a difference. One of the interesting things you see in some cases is what people have said they encountered because of race or gender? I have fought to eliminate race, gender and age discrimination and I cases involving gender too. I had filed three suits against the Board of Education on different issues on gender and so forth, one of them said to me that the next time I had an issue, don't file suit — call him. He was a lawyer for that Department of Education. He said: “We’ll see what we can work out.” I thought he was joking, but anyway he was not. I got more cases. In civil rights cases there was no money, but I got publicity and so probably from the publicity I got personal injury and other cases. Now that is different now I think that more lawyers who are handling civil rights cases.

Ms. Botchway: Do you remember your gender case against the Board of Education?

Ms. Freeman: Oh yes. I do remember that.

Ms. Botchway: Can you talk a little about it?

Ms. Freeman: I filed that in Federal Court. There was a woman who was a principal who had been the principal for quite a few years of an elementary school and was doing a good job. And there was a vacancy in one of the high schools for a principal and so she applied for that and she was denied and even told that she was being denied because we don’t have any women. She came to me; I filed suit in Federal Court. Against the Board of Education. That was settled right away. [laugh]
That’s what I mean — it’s after one of those cases.

Ms. Botchway: Was that your most egregious case?
Ms. Freeman: There was another case that was filed. It was separate but equal issues. You see, in 1896 the Supreme Court made separate but equal the law. The difference between this case and the first case I was involved with in 1949, was gender. But this one was filed in federal court probably in the 60’s, they started a course in real estate, real estate agent, broker and all, and that was in the white schools and Washington Technical wanted to do the same thing and they couldn’t do it. Again I filed that suit in federal court and again that changed right away. What happened was they issued a course and had a course and both schools.

Ms. Botchway: Great work Ms. Freeman! Thank you for all you have done to lessen discrimination and thank you so much for meeting with me again for our third interview for your Oral History taken on behalf of the Women Trailblazers in the Law, a Project of the American Bar Association, Seniors Division. We concluded on Sunday, August the 10th, at 6:39 p.m. and will resume with another session in September and we just thank you for your contribution to this Oral History.

Ms. Freeman: Thank you.
Ms. Botchway: Today is Sunday, October 12, 2014. This is the fourth interview for the oral history of Attorney Frankie Muse Freeman, being taken on behalf of the Women Trailblazers in the Law, a Project of the American Bar Association Senior Lawyers Division. This interview is being conducted by attorney Nicole Colbert Botchway. I am again with Ms. Freeman in her wonderful home in the Central West End of St. Louis, Missouri. Our last meeting took place also on a Sunday, August the 10th, here, and we left off with the end of her service as a Civil Rights Commissioner, where she served from 1964 until July the 9th of 1980, after serving under several Presidents.

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I served under four Presidents.

Ms. Botchway: Ms. Freeman, in addition to serving as a Commissioner presiding over hearings, were you also very involved in the community, in women’s organizations and handling some civil rights cases?

Ms. Freeman: Oh yes. Well to do this, the Commission’s responsibility were what we called a part-time job. All of the six Commissioners (at that time that was the number of Commissioners) had other positions. What I did was just arrange my schedule according to my law practice and the work that needed to be done under
the Civil Rights Commission. We held and presided over several hearings.

Ms. Botchway: During that time were you president of a women's organization as well?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. I was elected National President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in August of 1967. I was confirmed by the Senate as a Commissioner on September 15, 1964, and that's the resolution that was adopted by the Senate this last month honoring the fiftieth anniversary (pointing to a Senate Resolution).

Ms. Botchway: I see you received, from Senator Claire McCaskill, a Senate Resolution that is in the Congressional Record.

Ms. Freeman: Yes. That will be there forever.

Ms. Botchway: That is wonderful.

Ms. Freeman: The Bar Association of St. Louis also had a program on September the 15th because they were honoring me with the Trailblazer Award as well as at least recognizing the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by President Johnson.

Ms. Botchway: Yes.

Ms. Freeman: And that was also signed by President Johnson. The Civil Rights Act was signed prior to — I think the month before — my confirmation. Even though I had not been confirmed, the Commissioners from the time of the announcement of my nomination informed me I was welcome to come attend the meetings and I did; however, I did not have the right to vote. I could participate. I could talk. But I did not have a vote until after the confirmation.

Ms. Botchway: Right.

Ms. Freeman: So my confirmation was actually immediate as of September 15, 1964. And, when President Carter nominated me to be the Inspector General and I
submitted my resignation, he accepted that. But the effective date of my actual separation from the Commission did not happen pending the confirmation by the Senate of my successor, and that did not happen until July 9th of 1980. So for nine months I had two — I was carrying two — Presidential titles.

Ms. Botchway: During your service on the Commission, how did you manage to successfully balance your work, your home life, all the additional community service and your work with the sorority?

Ms. Freeman: Actually sometimes I wondered myself. But, the reason that I was able to do it ... first of all, I had a passion that I was going to at least do all I could to work to eliminate racial discrimination and preserve women's rights. That was my passion. And so with God's help, with my prayer each day to "help me to be of service — help me to make a difference," I was blessed with the support of my family, my husband, my parents and his parents. I could not have done it without their help. Because during the entire time that I was on the Commission, you see, I still had a daughter and a husband to take care of, and I had personal responsibilities, and I was practicing law.

Ms. Botchway: Was that practice was with Montgomery?

Ms. Freeman: Montgomery Hollie and Associates. That was because in the beginning I was on my own — I had my own little office. But after we won the Davis case that ended segregation in public housing, I worked for the Housing Authority, you see, for fourteen years.

Ms. Botchway: So, for women who are taking on serious endeavors as you have over the years that impact the community at large, what kind of advice would you give them?
Ms. Freeman: Well, I would just say, recognize that there still is an attitude, that there is a difference in terms of women, at least, being promoted. So that’s still a struggle. What I am saying is that, you do your job and the fact that somebody says that women don’t do this, is their problem. If you want to do it and you can do it and you have the opportunity to do it, that’s what you should do, because actually there’s been a lot of progress even though there still are differences in employment, difference in pay. Even when I was with Montgomery Hollie & Associates, I was not a partner. I was independently working with them, but we had an arrangement but at least the fees that I charged were the fees that would come to me. I did not handle personal injury cases and I did not handle clients’ money. But I focused on probate, wills, trusts and powers of attorney.

As I got older, I recognized issues of discrimination based on race, gender and age. I was active in the National Council on Aging and was able from the federal government to obtain a grant for Howard University to at least to help them establish a program to benefit the aging.

Ms. Botchway: You were the Chair?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I was the Chair of the Board from ’89 to ’92. That’s when I met Maya Angelou. She was one of the speakers at one of our programs.

Ms. Botchway: Since this project is on behalf of the ABA’s Senior Lawyers’ Division, is there anything that you experienced as a senior lawyer that you made you feel there should be some changes or more support for senior lawyers?

Ms. Freeman: Yes. I practiced through 2009. I was engaged in practice in St. Louis city and St. Louis county. Because of the fact that I had served under presidents and because of the fact that I was still engaged in the practice of law, and won those
cases, I still got all kinds of calls from people for help, even though I was no longer engaged in some of the issues that they were complaining about.

But I am older than people thought. I am older now. There are people now who tell me when they ask me when I was born or something they are still surprised that I am as old. But I am blessed because there was a period in which I was older than some people who thought that they were my age. I have always tried to take care of my health. I think that you can’t be effective if you don’t take care of your body.

But as I get older I think now I am feeling my age. I know I am. I will be active as long as I can.

Ms. Botchway: Since your retirement in 2009, have you remained active in the community.

Ms. Freeman: Yes and in my church.

Ms. Botchway: Which church do you attend?

Ms. Freeman: Washington Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. I am Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees. Now that is something that I do think that I am going to give up because I don’t have the energy. Now I am able to do some of the things. I have cut back. I am no longer active in many of the organizations that I had been active in. Now I’m still Co-Chair of a couple of committees in Delta Sigma Theta.

Ms. Botchway: You’re still involved with the African-American-Jewish Task Force?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I am. I attend those meetings. That is one area in which I have focused on: try to improve diversity. But my focus is still to recognize the value and the importance of education. Billy (Danforth) and I have been co-chair of the Task Force since 1999, until two years ago.
Ms. Botchway: What do you do as co-chair?

Ms. Freeman: We’re monitoring the case that was filed that was finally decided in 1998/1999 and in it there were several agreements, one with respect to additional support for the schools and also required, it would provide for monitoring. Dr. Danforth, who had participated in the settlement of the case, was a co-chair and we remained close.

We visited schools, we issued reports to the community, and we had regular meetings for the Superintendent. Also the Commissioner of Education from Missouri appointed a committee with respect to the public schools. On two occasions we were appointed. As a result of that appointment, I made recommendations, because of some issues with the Board of Education.

Ms. Botchway: What was a challenging time in your life?

Ms. Freeman: In 1991, my husband died.

Ms. Botchway: And I know you still miss him. He was a great man, a great support system for you and I know that your daughter was named after him, is that right?

Ms. Freeman: Oh yes. My daughter’s name is Shelbe, she was named after him and he was named for his father. They lived not far from us and to avoid confusion her name is Shelbe Patricia, and so during the entire time that she was in school in elementary and high school, she was Pat and so she is still Pat to me. And when she was in high school she wanted people to know her real name, not Pat, and so she is Shelbe.

Ms. Botchway: During that time, even though you had to deal with that great loss of your
husband, how did you find the strength to continue to move forward and never give up on your passion of preserving the rights of others?

Ms. Freeman: One of the things that was very important to me was to stay involved. I had to be involved to get over the loss because we had been married for 52 years. My book is dedicated to him, and my parents and his parents, because for all of the things that I was able to accomplish, it was with the support of my family. When we would hold hearings, there were things that happened because they happened because of my race, but I was determined that I was not going to let anything that happened or what anybody was trying to do or say interfere with the purpose of the Commission or the hearings. But we did the work. We held the hearings. My family’s support was very important.

I also began working on, “A Song of Faith and Hope: The Life of Frankie Muse Freeman.” I had started working on it, probably about 9 or 10 years before then and I was writing through the last year before it was published. I retained an editor. He helped me reduce. The book was actually published by the Missouri History Museum 2003. And it’s still available.

Ms. Botchway: Do you still do book tours, book signings?

Ms. Freeman: Not as much now. The last time I did a major, a large number of book signings, was when I visited the National Convention of Delta in 2013, but the other times I had not. When people have asked me to do a specific number of books, I have done that. When my daughter comes to visit me, she comes with one or two checks somebody said they want to buy my book.

And the book, of course, was published in 2003. So there are things that have happened since then and so folks have said to me why don’t you write another
book. I don't have the energy for it. I recognize that I have less energy. And, of course, less memory. Actually, the number of years that I practiced law was between 60-62 years.

I've given all of my basic print books, files, intimations and my papers are at Howard University. All of the reports of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have been given to the state university here in St. Louis. And some of the major documents from Howard and the Supreme Court, the Missouri History Museum, which published the books, they have that and they will get some of the other documents that I have.

Ms. Botchway: On August 28 of this year, you received a letter from the White House from President Obama, which reads: “I send my warmest congratulations as you mark the 50th of your appointment to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Throughout your extraordinary career, you have always dared to imagine something better, helping your country that is more equal and more just, a respected voice in the legal community; you have devoted yourself to ensuring the rights and opportunities of our nation, to all Americans. Your vision for a fair society has never wavered and I am among the many who are grateful for the important role you have played in making ours a more perfect union. As you reflect on all that you have accomplished I trust you take pride in the ways your work has challenged our nation to live up to its founding principles. I wish you the very best. Sincerely, Barack Obama.” How did that make you feel?

Ms. Freeman: That letter, when that came in the mail and I saw that brown envelope with White House, I wondered what is this. And when I received and opened it, it was a shock. I was just overwhelmed and actually I think I may have called you. I think I
may have called my daughter. That was quite a surprise. And then I realized later that I hadn’t said thank you to him. But then I didn’t know what, there was nothing much that I could say, but I did write a thank you. Do you want to read it?

Ms. Botchway: Oh yes.

Ms. Freeman: I have it. Will you read it?

Ms. Botchway: Okay. So you wrote back to the President on September 10, 2014: “Dear President Obama, I am writing to express many, many thanks to you for honoring me with your letter expressing congratulations as I mark the 50th anniversary of my appointment as a Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, on which I served for 16 years. Your outstanding service as President of the United States and world leaders reflects God’s blessing on all of us. I pledge to you my continuing support to you and my desire to be of service to you and for our nation as we deal with challenges of equality and justice for all.”

This is wonderful.

So you are forever committed to those principles?

Ms. Freeman: Absolutely. Absolutely. And when that came in August, that knocked me out because, not only that, they have things about my background that I have not used, they’re all true, I mean I did serve as a municipal judge, but that was only temporary for about four years during the summer when the regular judge was not there. But they have things in there, specifics, like especially the municipal judge, that I never used in my, there’s not a single reference, you know. When the people ask for a bio, I never used it before. So somebody on the staff of somebody had done some homework on going back, I said, you never know who knows what you been doing.
Ms. Botchway: In addition, to serving as a municipal judge for many years were you instrumental in the formation of the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, which seeks to ensure federal government’s diligence, vigilance and enforcement?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, we made recommendations to the President and the Congress on laws that were inaccurate.

Ms. Botchway: And it notes that countless residents in Missouri count you as their hero.

Ms. Freeman: They tell me that. There are quite a number of them saying that what they saw me doing was helping them. They decided they could do something, too. And I still get that.

Ms. Botchway: How does that make you feel?

Ms. Freeman: It makes me feel very pleased, very pleased. And especially all of the Bar Associations of which I am a member have honored me, but it was a great honor when I received from the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis the Trailblazer Award named in my name. One of the things in terms of the history to note is that when I was admitted as a member of the Bar, black people, black lawyers were not admitted to the Bar Association of St. Louis. I was a member of the National Bar Association. Two years later, after that, they did open to blacks. I had not been as active in the Bar Association, but through the years I have continued membership and it was a special honor for me for them to establish the Trailblazer because I’m called a trailblazer. That’s an honor for which I’ve been grateful.

When I received the notice from the U.S. Senate, I sent to the President a copy of the resolution adopted by the U.S. Senate.

Ms. Botchway: Wonderful.

Ms. Freeman: I am honored and have been blessed. I have the Spingarn from The
NAACP, the highest honor from the NAACP. During the latter years of my life, I have received many, many awards and I have been blessed because at each time we won the housing cases back in '54. All of that was before my service on the Civil Rights Commission. There are individuals, groups who have honored me and I am blessed and thankful.

Ms. Botchway: You were inducted into the International Civil Rights Hall of Fame in 2007?

Ms. Freeman: Yes.

Ms. Botchway: And you received the highest award from the NAACP, the Spingarn 2011?

Ms. Freeman: Yes and the Citizen of the Year award from the City of St. Louis in 2012, I think.

Ms. Botchway: You've also received the Honorary Lifetime Membership from the Women Lawyers' Association of Greater St. Louis right?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, I am blessed and I am proud and honored that all of the Bar Associations and the Lawyers' Associations appreciate my work and if there's anything that I can do I do. I just think that we all have a duty to do the best we can and to serve others and help others, and that's what I've tried to do.

Ms. Botchway: In an article for the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis a couple of years back you discussed the new civil rights fights, what are they?

Ms. Freeman: We still have problems with voting rights. We have still problems with the denial of voting rights, efforts to deny voting rights and voter ID. Because black people and other minorities have exercised their right to vote, they have become a threat to those people who would want to deny the right to vote and there are still efforts in some states, there are still some states where you have voter ID laws.
Some of these protective laws and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, resulted from the Hearings of the Civil Rights Commission. One of the basic provisions of that was actually diminished by the Supreme Court this year so the struggle continues. The struggle continues.

And as long as I live and as long as I am able, I will do what I can to make it better, to continue the struggle to achieve equality of opportunity, on the basis of race, gender, age — on all of the areas in which basic Constitutional rights are being denied.

Ms. Botchway: Was that the *Shelby County vs. Holder* decision, June 25, 2013, that you were just discussing?

Ms. Freeman: Right. And I'm hoping that the Congress will do more. But one of the things that we do have a lot of work to do is to having the citizens accept a greater individual responsibility.

Ms. Botchway: Since we are in Missouri and the nation has had their eye on Missouri again this year with issues stemming from perceptions of inequality, disparate, differential treatment —

Ms. Freeman: and the law enforcement agencies, police departments —

Ms. Botchway: what can be done?

Ms. Freeman: There needs to be more sensitivity training of all persons who engage in law enforcement because in this country, when we say all men and women are created equal in this country, all men and women are not created equal and there are so many issues. But even though there's been a lot of progress, we still have issues with respect to treatment of people by law enforcement officials because of color.
Ms. Botchway: We have many issues that need to be addressed. They need to be addressed. And we have also in terms of people who are being charged, they have problems of perception that should not have been made so we still have work to do.

But I am blessed and I think we still, I still love this country, I still love St. Louis, I will still do my best, but we still have work to do.

Ms. Botchway: Do you agree you have laid a great foundation and a great example for others to follow on how they can make a difference in the fight for guaranteeing civil rights for people, that cannot include turning your back against any segment of society?

Ms. Freeman: Yes, but there’s nothing that I have done by myself. In all of the things that I have done I have had support.

Ms. Botchway: What advice or recommendation would you give individuals today who are in their own way struggling to protect people’s civil rights?

Ms. Freeman: Become involved, do your homework and know your community. Where you live in your community there’s a city council so attend some of the meetings. Spend the time doing some things that really are not helping you. Recognize that you are a citizen and all citizens have responsibilities. Recognize your individual responsibility to treat people right, to treat each and every person right, as you want to be treated and no matter what job you have, what employment you have. We have not recognized that there must be a massive effort to improve education and to get paid for jobs to eliminate poverty because one of the problems that continues in this community is poverty. We still have people who do not have food, do not have shelter, do not have clothes, do not have work. And so we need to have more organizations try to find out what you can do for your neighbor. You don’t know
your neighbor, but you may be able to help your neighbor. And by helping your neighbor you help yourself.

Ms. Botchway: I want to turn now to a few gender-specific issues. I note that you mentioned when you were licensed to practice law, you could not join the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis and some of the other Bar Associations because—

Ms. Freeman: I did join the American Bar Association.

Ms. Botchway: You could join the American Bar Association, that’s wonderful, but not the local St. Louis or State of Missouri Bar Association?

Ms. Freeman: No but also I joined the — Mound City Bar and National Bar Association. During all of that time there were efforts, individuals working to change it. And we are blessed for the individuals that worked to improve.

Ms. Botchway: Were minority men allowed to join those organizations before women?

Ms. Freeman: No, not as far as I know.

Right now we still have some issues, large corporations in terms of the role of women. They call me a female and black and so, forth, which I said, I just work to eliminate discrimination.

Ms. Botchway: So you have been told that if you were a man, you would have—

Ms. Freeman: Oh yes.

Ms. Botchway: —had other opportunities that you have not had.

Ms. Freeman: Yes. Particularly with respect to corporations. I would have been told if I had been a man, I would have been at least asked to serve on a Corporate Board. Of course, that’s never happened.

Ms. Botchway: Do you think it’s important for women to serve on corporate boards?
Ms. Freeman: Absolutely. Oh absolutely. To do everything they want to, that they are competent to do. And if they are not competent, to get trained to do.

Ms. Botchway: And how would a woman with those aspirations, what do you think the first steps for them would be, would it be to find a mentor?

Ms. Freeman: First of all, I think, we all have to be sure that we’re prepared to do what we want to do, which means that we have to get the education that is required. Education is very, very important. So we also have to do what we can, especially to improve our schools, to improve absolutely, and I mean, that’s why I’m saying you have to be involved. Carry out your individual responsibility. Put your money where your mouth is.

Ms. Botchway: I note that one year prior to the signing of the Civil Rights Act, Congress passed an Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibited wage differentials based on sex.

Ms. Freeman: That’s what I’m saying. One of the issues that we have is that even when we have the law, we have the problem of enforcement of the law. There still is a difference in income in comparable jobs in the same position between that of a male and that of a female. It’s less, I mean, it’s not as, but it depends on the areas. But as I said, we’re making progress.

Ms. Botchway: Do you still serve as a mentor for younger women and a role model?

Ms. Freeman: I am supportive of any woman if there’s anything I can do to help them, I will and I do. And very often if they call me and, yes, there are people who introduce me, they say she’s my mentor. Sometimes I have, you know, they talk to me, they’ll call me, they’ll say do I do this or do that. I never think of it as mentor; I just, you know, if we’re on the phone or they come by here or, oh yes.
Ms. Botchway: I appreciate you being a mentor for me. And I see that you are a mentor for a lot of people and just ask that you share any comments that you have on the importance of continuing to serve this way—

Ms. Freeman: I think one of the things that is important for people to recognize that there are times when people have said, as a woman you ought to stay at home and take care of your children. I just think that at least you have the right to, if you want to, have employment, you have the right to do it. And hopefully you will have a family that will be supportive, but when there were things that I had to do that, research that I had to do, I realized that it was my decision to be a mother, a wife and I was going to work too. If I had to do some homework. I’d do it, and I’d get up at 3:00 am, that was me, because I grew up in a family that cooks so that’s why I always cooked my breakfast for my family too as long as they wanted it. I’m a Southerner, see, so therefore, you would have pork and beans and when I say pork and beans, I didn’t mean you got them out of a can, then you cooked them.

When you have a problem, you pray and then you may do something different and you think about what you need to do.

Ms. Botchway: Would you also encourage others to be limitless?

Ms. Freeman: To reach out, yes. But one of the things that you also have to recognize as you work is that you have to be careful about who you talk to and what you say and what you do and what you let people know you’re going to do. I think that over the years something I keep an eye on is we call a credit-taking committee. But let them do that, as long as you’re aware of it.

Ms. Botchway: What is that?
Ms. Freeman: You have to recognize the credit-taking committee and don’t tell them all your business about the things that you’re planning to do. You know what you know.

Ms. Botchway: I get it now.

Ms. Freeman: So I have some personal things that I also watch for. And in other words, I absolutely have to be careful and anything that may be inappropriate or illegal and recognize your oath as a lawyer and do your best, always. But always under-riding all of it, be of service to make a difference. This is what I live by. Thank you, Lord. I believe in the power of prayer.

Ms. Botchway: What would you consider your proudest accomplishment, and I know you have many, but if you had to pick one?

Ms. Freeman: I’ve been proud of the Spingarn NAACP award. I’ve been proud of the Citizen of the Year award, but of course I think the thing that I am most proud of is that this is the 50th year anniversary of my appointment to the Civil Rights Commission. So it would be the last two things that have happened within the last month, the President’s letter and the Senator’s resolution and the fact I am here to receive that recognition 50 years later. Did you see the letter from the President and what resolution?

Ms. Botchway: Yes. It says: “In honor of Ms. Frankie Muse Freeman, who was the first woman to be confirmed by the Senate for appointment to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 50 years ago today, on September 15, 1964.”

Ms. Freeman: Right now, that’s what I’m proud of. I might even get some more copies and give some friends.

Ms. Botchway: Do you want me to continue reading it into the record?
Senator McCaskill states, "Mr. President, I rise today to recognize a noble Missourian, the spirited and courageous Ms. Frankie Muse Freeman. Fifty years ago today this body confirmed Ms. Freeman as President Lyndon B. Johnson’s choice to be the first female Commissioner to serve on the United States Commission on Civil Rights. She served honorably in this capacity for 16 years, having been reappointed by Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. By the time President Johnson first nominated Ms. Freeman to the Civil Rights Commission, she had worked tirelessly to end racial discrimination and secure equality, justice and fairness for every citizen.

Born Marie Frankie Muse on November 24, 1916, in Danville, Virginia, to parents who experienced the benefits of formal education and who in turn supported their daughter’s emotional pursuits, Frankie was educated in Virginia and attended college at the distinguished and well-known historically black college, Hampton University. Almost ten years after she started college, Frankie began her law school career at Howard University School of Law where she graduated second in her class. Soon afterward, Frankie settled in St. Louis, Missouri, and began her successful career as a civil rights attorney.

She worked on a variety of important civil rights issues, ranging from education to hiring practices. Most notably, in 1954, Frankie argued and won the fight against racial discrimination in public housing in the Landmark NAACP case Davis et al vs. St. Louis Housing Authority. The following year, Frankie became the first associate general counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority.

Three years later, in 1958, she joined the Missouri Advisory Committee to
the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. The quality and breadth of her work, combined with her passion for advocacy eventually led to her selection as a United States Civil Rights Commissioner. In the five decades since her historic appointment, Frankie's energy and devotion to justice has not diminished.

She has received appointments from former Presidents to serve on other service-related commissions. In addition, she worked as a municipal court judge for many years and was instrumental in the formation of the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, an organization that seeks to ensure the Federal government's diligence in its enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. In addition to this public service, Frankie wrote a book about her story, life and career, just six years ago at the age of 90. She retired after spending the latter part of her career in private career.

Not surprisingly, even retirement has not slowed Frankie down. She remains active on a number of urban and community-based, social welfare boards. Through countless residents of my state and across the country, Frankie Muse Freeman is a hero. She is a woman who grew up in the Jim Crow era south when racial segregation was legal. Growing up, if Frankie wanted to go somewhere her options were to either walk or to take the segregated streetcar.

She witnessed, first-hand, the harsh consequences of racial inequality and she chose to devote her entire career to ending that injustice. Frankie is an inspiration to so many Americans across all racial lines and to me personally. She is a public servant who my children and grandchildren can look up to. Because of leaders like her, who fought and sacrificed but ultimately believed in our country's ability to empathize and change, we are all better off and our lives more enriched.
Therefore, I ask my colleagues which will be the entire Congress, to join me in honoring Ms. Frankie Muse Freeman on the 50th anniversary of her Senate confirmation to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

In addition, I ask my colleagues to recognize Frankie’s distinguished service to the people of this country.”

That is wonderful. I would agree that this is a proud accomplishment. The beginning, the appointment, your distinguished service and career over the past 50 years since then, not to mention, everything you did before you even got that appointment. And the fact that you are here, healthy, blessed to receive it and to continue on, is wonderful.

So, it’s overwhelming. It is really a blessing.

Ms. Freeman: Thank you.

Ms. Botchway: As you said, everyone has to do their part and I’m just learning so much and I’m just so grateful to be here to be able to assist in this Oral History for the American Bar Association, and continue to preserve your legacy and the legacy of women in the legal profession because, as Senator McCaskill states in the resolution: You are an inspiration to so many Americans across racial lines, to all women.

So before we conclude our fourth and last interview for this portion of the oral history for the American Bar Association, are there any other remarks or comments that you want to include.

Ms. Freeman: I was surprised to get a call, to even give an oral history. I was surprised. I didn’t enter it with enthusiasm. You were the one that I thought of to conduct it for me and I was hoping that you would say yes. It has been interesting, you know,
I've been interviewed many, many times, but to try to remember — and of course, at my age, I don't have the best memory, and right now I don't even see as well as I used to see. But this has been an interesting experience, and I hope that whatever, however it is evaluated, that at least. I'm glad to be included. I'm honored to be included. There is so much more information.

Ms. Botchway: Yes, there's a lot of historical information and timelines online and in the libraries and of course, your book is timeless and people can supplement this document by reviewing you book, "A Song of Faith and Hope: The Life of Frankie Muse Freeman."

So I thank you and this will conclude our fourth interview and I hope I can continue to come over on Sundays with you and talk and benefit from additional tutelage and mentorship, although it will not be part of this oral history, it will be a blessing for me to continue along with you.

Ms. Freeman: Yes, my pleasure.

Ms. Botchway: Thank you. So this concludes our fourth session, October 12, 2014.