

**Interviewee: Johnnie Jones, Sr.**  
**Interviewer: Mary Hebert**  
**Indexer: Erin Hess**

**4700.0321 Tape 606**  
**Continuation of Session VI**  
**February 12, 1994**

**[Begin Tape 606, Side A. Continue Session VI.]**

**00:04** [Discussion continues from end of Tape 605] Jones was asked to be the first president of FOCUS[?] but he turned it down because he was about to start law school. The goal of FOCUS was to unite the black community.

**00:34** Dr. Jewel Prestage, a political science teacher at Southern University, had a lot to do with FOCUS. However, her name did not appear in the newspapers as being a part of the organization.

**1:03** One product of FOCUS was the Voter's Right League which they received national funding for. Jones ran it one year and [Asa Dalton?] ran it another year.

**1:35** Voting schools were organized by Jones and Robert Harris before the Voter's Rights League came about. This wasn't the same as what they did later when they had national funds. Jones had funding outside of FOCUS, about \$250,000 as part of the Voting Rights Act.

**2:20** He can't recall the name of the voting rights foundation [probably the Voter Education Project] and he doesn't know where the money came from. FOCUS had \$250,000 in funding and he had his own funding at one point from the voting rights foundation. The foundation sent a "white boy" to help him manage the organization.

**3:11** They got a lot of people registered to vote but he doesn't think a lot of black people know that. He handled the money the way he was told to handle it and "didn't steal a penny."

**3:40** People were afraid to register to vote. They used the \$250,000 to put people to work encouraging others to vote.

**4:18** He thinks Wiley Branton was the president of the voting rights foundation based in Atlanta, Georgia. He and Branton had tried civil rights cases together and were good friends. Branton looked like a white man. He later became president of Howard University [Branton was Dean of the Howard University School of Law from 1978-1983]. Jones had a lot of national connections in his work with the Civil Rights Movement.

**5:11** Jones spoke out a lot. This was probably one of the reasons why the white community in Baton Rouge reacted so badly towards him. His office was bombed. Records would show he had the money, also might tell where the "white boy" came from that they sent to help him. All this happened in the 1960s.

**6:00** He also worked on [Hubert] Humphrey's presidential campaign. He was the state campaign manager; he and the coroner, Dr. Williams, were co-chairmen.

**6:33** He decided to run for state legislature while he was working in the [East Baton Rouge] Parish Attorney's Office. He could have stayed there because people had begun to accept him and like him. He handled a lot of cases for the city and was fair. Even whites were impressed with him. People who came to see him expected him to be harsh. He would tell them what he wanted to tell them, he would explain and they would listen.

**7:22** Whites respect authority whether the authority figure is white, black or other. He was respected once he was in a position of authority. He was no longer "Johnnie, black, out in the community" or the civil rights person that they hated. Whites would listen to him, respect him and walk away changed people.

**8:20** [Gordon King?] said he didn't know Jones was knowledgeable about city or municipal law because he had done so many civil rights cases. King quit the Parish Attorney's Office because he thought Jones didn't know any municipal law. He had learned municipal law in school. He had his mind made up, knew what he was doing and set out to do that from the time he was a child. He should have become a judge because that's where he was headed, but now he's too old.

**9:40** There was "crookedness" in the city government, not the mayor but some of the city councilmen. Even some of the good guys started messing up and taking kickbacks. Jones saw this and didn't want any part of it.

**10:41** Advice his dad gave him about avoiding getting caught up in wrongdoing: "try to get out of it before you have to fight." Options were taking kickbacks or squealing on those who did. Possibility of damaging your reputation if you accused someone wrongly. Things were always being covered up.

**11:43** Jones wants Hebert to talk to Rosemary [he can't think of her last name]. She also recognized wrongdoing but it wasn't [Kew? Kale?] or the Parish Attorney's office doing it. That might be the reason why [?] quit, too. After that, [?] ran for judge.

**12:34** He knew the "hammer was going to fall," on him because he was black and he would take the blame first. He hadn't done anything wrong and he didn't want to be associated with it. He ran because he knew he could get elected, especially because of the district. He could have been elected to the legislature repeatedly if it wasn't for all the wrongdoing. Joe Delpit beat him. Some people said he wasn't a friend to blacks any longer, but all the people who said that ended up getting convicted.

**13:52** Eventually, they all got caught in wrongdoing. These people would say, "He's not a friend of the blacks. He's not interested in you all. He won't accept this. He won't do this." He didn't care what they said. His wife would tell him what was said about him and he would get angry. He told her he wasn't going to jail over a little bit of money.

**15:10** The people who took kickbacks were headed for the penitentiary. "I'm not going to be tainted with that." He refused to be a part of the legislature if it meant he had to deal in criminality. "You can have it. You can take it and stick it!"

**15:39** After hearing these things many times, his wife got "stone-minded" and believed that he really wasn't doing right, so he divorced her. She loves him to death and now she admires him more than ever because she sees he stood up for what he thought was right and legal.

**16:11** He only served one term with the state legislature but he should have served more. Anyone who served with him would confirm that he was one of the most effective legislators they had. He suggests that Hebert talk with [Risley C.] Pappy Triche or [E.L.] "Bubba" Henry who was the speaker of the house at that time. He was for "good government" during the first term they served.

**17:05** He served during [Edwin] Edwards' first term [1972-1976]. He helped get him elected, traveled the state for him. Jones didn't have a run-off so he was free to campaign for whoever he wanted during the run-off. [J.] Bennett Johnston [Jr.] ran against Edwards and spent many hours talking with Jones, trying to get his support. Johnston only needed 2,000-some votes to beat Edwards. This might not have been the right number; it was probably more like 5,000 votes between Edwards and Johnston.

**18:22** Johnston told Jones that he could bring Johnston the votes he needed because, "the blacks going to follow you." Johnston told Jones he had a strong influence on blacks even outside of East Baton Rouge Parish. Johnston thought Jones could encourage enough votes for Johnston to win just in East Baton Rouge Parish. He wanted Jones to split with Joe Delpit but they had worked together in the Parish Attorney's office. Delpit ran for senator against Senator [W?] and he lost.

**19:27** Delpit made a commitment to support Edwards and Jones didn't want to break with Delpit. Richard Turnley was in the run-off so he couldn't campaign for Edwards. Jones was already elected and just had to wait to be sworn in.

**20:25** He was not the only black legislator at that time. There was also Richard Turnley, Alphonse Jackson [Jr.], Johnnie Jackson [Jr.], [Theodore] "Teddy" Marchand, and [Louis] Charbonnet [III], and Dorothy [Mae] Taylor. They all served at the same time. Sidney Barthelemy [later mayor of New Orleans] was in the state senate.

**21:20** He had a great working relationship with the other legislators because he had done business with many of them in the past. Jones says he didn't withhold himself, "When I got up on the floor, I talked." He didn't acquiesce when he saw things that were wrong.

**22:12** Jones discusses legislation he worked on and a bill he wrote with [Wilbert J.] "Billy" Tauzin [II] being the lead author. The record will show that he wrote the original bill for reducing the voting age to eighteen. He could have gotten the bill passed alone, but he wasn't

looking for glory. He was in the spirit of working with others, so he consolidated his bill with Tauzin's because Tauzin's bill would have a hard time being passed by itself. Tauzin's bill was several things consolidated, but he left out the voter age part. Tauzin asked Jones to consolidate his voter age bill with Tauzin's.

**24:07** Jones believed in what Tauzin was sponsoring. Their bills could be consolidated because they dealt with the same thing. That's the rule, but the Louisiana Legislature doesn't really follow these rules about what can and can't be amended. When things get to the judicial review or legislative bureau, they move parts of the bill to where they're supposed to be. Jones thinks that's wrong because ignorance of the law is not an excuse.

**25:20** In Louisiana, ignorance of the law is an excuse. The proper hearings don't happen for things that are amended under various bills. There are supposed to be public hearings on every bill that is passed and this often didn't happen. He thinks this is terribly wrong. This was the case with Tauzin's bill – consolidating it with Jones' voting age bill gave it a chance to pass.

**26:30** To the black community, it looked like Tauzin had written the bill, but the record shows differently. People are ignorant of how the state legislature works but Jones says they need to do research to find out what it's about. Researching the records will show that the bill originated with Jones.

**27:15** Another idea that Jones presented – after a bill was introduced, time off for legislators to go home and hear from their constituents. Pre-registration of bills before the legislature was in session gave people advance notice so they could go right to work. If legislators went to work on a bill on day one of the session, they would be unfamiliar with it. He requested that all such bills would be introduced several days before the session began. This is still the law today. The records will show that this was his idea and these records speak for themselves.

**29:07** Jones introduced the consumer protection bill to the floor and took arguments for it. He passed this bill but was not responsible for writing it. All of the speeches any anything done in the legislature are recorded. Some legislators used their own tape recorders. There are a lot of other things he helped to pass but he's forgotten now.

**30:21** Some were done as amendments to the system because that was the best way to get them through. You had to know how to utilize people in the legislature. No matter how smart you are, the legislature is not a "one man deal," you have to get other legislators to work with you. You have to let other people get some glory. Jones wasn't concerned about glory, he just wanted effective legislation. He knows the record, and history, will show what he did.

**31:19** He was already nationally known because of his civil rights involvement. He was making a living from his law practice. He lost a lot of clients when he started with the Parish Attorney's Office. He slowly built his client base back up and it grew even more when some of

his fellow black legislators started to go to jail. He was asked to do certain things but refused because he believed they were wrong.

**32:17** He thinks the legislation he backed was supportive of blacks but “when you’ve got a syndicate going” their point of view can come across. He was there at a time when four or five other black legislators were dealing in criminality. They people aren’t just legislators in name, they are in that position because they have supporters. With all the legislators and their supports believing the same thing, Jones was left standing alone. He was odd where they were concerned, but not odd as society would think because he was doing right. “It’s the wrong that’s the oddball.”

**33:40** After his time in the legislature, he stayed active in the black community. He just got a phone call about speaking at a black history event at St. Paul Catholic Church [in Baton Rouge?]. He can’t make it because he’ll be trying a case in New Orleans.

**34:11** Hebert asks about an oral history interview Jones did with the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations that was done in the 1970s. He can’t remember all the interviews he’s done. He is part of the Council and has been with them for a long time. He’s served on their board several times. Hebert says the interviews were donated. He remembers the interview now that he sees it. Jones looks at the list of interviewees. His name is misspelled on the list.

**35:34** Hebert wants to ask about some of the other people on the list. She’s familiar with Murphy Bell and J.K Haynes, but doesn’t know about Vanue Lacour. Jones says he was a law professor at Southern University. Most law professors were involved in the Civil Rights Movement like Jones. It is surprising how many people now claim that they were involved but “their name never came up back there then, they was afraid to let their name be used.”

**36:24** When he ran for district attorney in 1962, they said they were going to have public hearings on TV with all the candidates. They planned to have the audience ask questions they would pulled out of a barrel. However, people could ask whatever they wanted because the candidates didn’t know what questions people had pulled. Some audience members had been coached to ask specific questions of candidates. He didn’t find out until two weeks later that people were coached to ask him the most difficult questions.

**38:25** Before this happened, they were publicizing it a lot on TV. Six candidates were going to take part. All the people he was graduating from law school with told him not let them down and that he had to shine. “I wasn’t worried about no shining! I was going to shine anyway!”

**39:15** [Southern University Law Center] Dean [A.A.] Lenoir told him that they never emphasized juvenile law while Jones was in law school. Lenoir said he was going to teach him some juvenile law before his TV appearance. Sure enough, he was questioned about it in the televised public hearing. He thinks that people knew that juvenile law was a weak point for him because he hadn’t tried any juvenile cases. When he was asked the question, he smiled because he knew the people asking the questions had prepared just as much as he did. He got a cram

session on juvenile law from Lenoir and Lacour staying up late nights at the Southern University Law School.

**41:27** Dean Lenoir didn't ever lose his job at Southern, he retired and went to teach at Howard University. Jones says he was easy to teach because he was a practicing lawyer at the time he was getting crammed with juvenile law. "I could learn the whole course in a night almost."

**[End of Tape 606, Side A. Begin Tape 606, Side B.]**

**42:22** Annie Smart was part of FOCUS. She wanted him to be the president of FOCUS but he didn't have the time because of law school. Before that he had been traveling the state for the NAACP and he couldn't continue that either once he started law school. He also was married and had kids and his wife was cantankerous and didn't want him to go to law school. His wife sued him several times to try and keep him from going to law school or get him kicked out of law school. Conclusion of interview.

**[43:00]**

**[End Tape 606, Side B. End of Session VI.]**