

TRANSCRIPT – JOHN LAURENS

Interviewee: JOHN LAURENS
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TRANSCRIPT – JOHN LAURENS

Interviewer: . . . John Laurens for the Historical Society, October 13, 1972. Mr. Laurens, can you tell me where you were born and in what year?

John Laurens: I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, August 24, 1888.

I: Can you tell me your father's name?

JL: Father's name was Henry Rutledge Laurens. He had no profession.

I: What about your mother's name?

JL: My mothers name was Charlotte Hume Simons.

I: How long?

JL: Go ahead.

I: That's alright. I was going to ask you how long you lived in Charleston and where you lived.

JL: I've lived in Charleston practically all my life with the exception of after graduating from the Citadel in 1910. I was away for about three years. And then I came back here and then I lived here until I was taken into the army and was sent down to El Paso, Texas with the old Charleston Light Dragoons which was then called South Carolina Cavalry. When I got back from that I was then sent over later on to France during the First World War. That was in—I was sent over to France in 1918 and was there until April 1919. I think that's right, yes.

My parents lived on seven Legare Street and on the south was the Grimke residence and on the north was Judge William H. Brawley. He was a federal judge. He lived on the north side. Diagonally across the street, at six Legare Street, the Jervey's lived and none of them are living now except one. I think. Miss Nan Jervey lives on that street on the east end side of Charleston. That street is Concord Street where my oldest brother, who's named Henry Laurens, he was born

in 1885. He graduated from the Charleston College after first going to the high school, Charleston High School. He graduated from the College of Charleston in 1907. He then went to Harvard University and sorry, I forgot the year he graduated there. And he then went to—he had a year abroad in Germany and after that he came back to America. Then taught at Yale University in Biology and Zoology and maybe some more “ologies.” I don’t remember them all. After being there quite some number of years he went down to Tulane University and taught there. At Tulane he was the head of the Department of Physiology with the School of Medicine. He retired from that I guess about twelve years ago and moved to a home that his wife owned in Flat Rock, North Carolina, and still lives there.

My sister Martha was the next child in my family. She went to private school on Legare Street, Mrs. Sass’s School, until she then was sent to Lasell Seminary in Auburndale, Massachusetts from which she graduated in what year I don’t remember. She studied music mostly, and was a great musician. There was no question about that. She played for awhile, I think, at St. Paul’s Church before it was the cathedral. And she also played at St. Michael’s Church on the corner of Broad and Meeting. She has now retired from all of that, and lives at 12 Bee Street, the Episcopal Church Home for Women.

Next comes yours truly John Laurens. He went to private schools in Charleston for three or four years, don’t remember now. Then he went to the high school, and did not graduate there but left the third class and went to the Citadel from which he graduated in 1910. He then moved away from Charleston and worked with the construction firm the (unintelligible) Building Company of Greenville, South Carolina and traveled all around. He went down into Alabama and into Georgia. When those jobs were through he came back to Greenville and worked a while with the same company. And then went to Greenwood, South Carolina, putting up a building in addition to the Greenwood Cotton Mill. While he was there the company got a job at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia to build an addition to the Cosmos Company, Cotton Company, which was a maker of canvas. And he stayed there practically a year and nearly froze during the winter. (laughter) (unintelligible) Went up there and I forget the year, but it was all except about fifteen days. Is that running?

I: Mhm.

JL: When I left there I came down and had a job building editions to the Lancaster Cotton Mills. That’s one of the Spring’s mills. I came back to Charleston in 1916, and stayed here until I got mixed with the Charleston Light Dragoons which was called out and sent down to the border to take care of Pancho Villa if he made a dash in to this country of ours but which he didn’t do. After being in El Paso for about nine months we came back to Charleston and the troop was discharged from the federal service back into the South Carolina Militia. And we were here until sometime in October, I believe. We were called out again and sent up to Camp Sevier outside of Greenville, South Carolina and were changed then to be called the Headquarters Troop 30th Division. From there we were sent in May 1918 to France to enter the First World War. We were in France and part of Belgium until the next May of 1919 when—there until November 11, 1919 when the armistice was signed and everybody rejoiced very much over that.

I came back to Charleston and was discharged on May 8, 1919. I came back to Charleston and lived quietly here until I decided that we would get married with a girl who was a wonderful person.

Next in the Laurens family was my sister, Eleanor Ramsay Laurens. She was born in 1890 and she too went to private school here, Mrs. Sass's School on Legare Street until she also was taken to Lasell Seminary in Auburndale, Massachusetts from which she graduated in due course. I don't remember the year.

Next in the family was Fredrick Laurens. He went to school, graded school in Charleston, and never did graduate from there. But he decided with a friend of his he wanted to go to Germany at one time. And they boarded a tramp ship, and went to Germany and stayed in Bremen for about six months and then returned here and lived here for quite a while. After living here for quite some years, Fred went out and stayed in Colorado for quite a while and then later on went to San Francisco and stayed there for a while and then settled in Los Angeles, California where he now lives.

The next member of the family was Andrew Laurens. He went to graded school in Charleston and then I think he went to the high school. He went to Clemson for a very short while and didn't like it and quit. He also went with that troop that I was in to France and stayed there until the end of the war. Then we came back together. Too, I forgot to mention that my brother Rutledge, who was just above him, he was in the same outfit too.

Next young member of the family was Samuel Lord Laurens. He lived in Charleston most of his life until finally he went up and stayed on Long Island, New York State. He lived there for quite awhile and he never returned to Charleston except for visits.

Coming back to John Laurens, he married a Greenville girl named Mary Holmes Rose in 1920, April the fourteenth. We came back to Charleston and have lived here ever since. I was born August 24, 1888, and my wife was born August 21, 1896. She's not young any more. Neither am I. Mary, my wife, had no profession what so ever, but I must say she's an excellent cook. Unfortunately, we have no children. My wife and I attend St. Phillip's Church, Episcopal Church, and I never went to Sunday school in my life but she did. She lived opposite the preacher. There were some grammar schools in Charleston just like there were graded schools but I never attended any of that at all. When my family was young the whole crew went to the mountains of North Carolina for the summer holidays and at first we went always on the train. The Southern Railroad was operating then and the station was on the north side of Line Street between King and Meeting. When we went to the railroad station, which was Southern Railway, to board the train to go to the mountains, father would have a bus come to the house, drawn by horses, and with one opening in the back. And he would herd us in there and we'd sit down with the bags we were taking, some of the bags we were taking to the mountains. And father sat on the back one side and mother on the other so we couldn't get out. We spent parts of two summers at a little place- Fletcher, North Carolina, which is about half way between Hendersonville and Asheville. Very nice place so we stayed there usually a full three months, nearly three months.

When I was a boy, Ashley Avenue only came down as far as Tradd Street because the south side of Tradd Street where they had a breakwater there, and the shrimp fleet, what we'll call the mosquito fleet, went out shrimping every morning. And they either rode at early morning because there was no wind but it was a beautiful sight to see them come back in the afternoon under sail.

I used to go down to the number one Ashley Avenue, which building is still in existence, and who it's occupied by know I don't know. But Mr. John Grimbball and his wife and four sons

lived there when I was a boy. And that number one Ashley Avenue was called that, although where my mother before she was married on the same street, nearby Wentworth Street, it was called Lynch Street. And why in heavens they ever changed the name from Lynch, named after Governor Lynch, to Ashley I don't know when they the Ashley River called after Lord Ashley Cooper.

There's another street here in Charleston that they changed the name of and it's a little narrow street. It runs from Meeting to King. Across King it's a wider street and it's called Lamboll. But that little narrow part was not called Lamboll Street when I was a boy. It was called that little street was called Smith Lane. Why they changed the name, I'm sure I don't know. At one time, at the northeast corner of Smith Lane and King Street there was a little store operated by a person by the name of Dugan. I used to go in there every so often and get a small ball of cord to rap around a small rubber ball to make a baseball. When I was a boy Lamboll Street and Smith Lane were dirt streets. Legare Street, on which I lived, was Belgium Block and the street just a little to the north of that was Gibbes Street. It only extended from Legare to a little to the east of what is now Lenwood Street and it was cobblestone. At that time there was breakwater at the end. And in the summertime I had a rowboat which I was very proud of, which was twelve feet long and I used to row a great deal with my younger brothers, s have a wonderful time down there.

Tradd Street in Charleston was also a Belgium Block Street in the middle- about the width a little bit wider than the width of a carriage or buggy, and the two sides were made of cobblestones, its full length. I might mention down at the end of Tradd Street, just about opposite where the Coast Guard now has its depot, there used to be a bath house. Tremendous space. One side of it, the west side, was for men to swim and the east side was for women to swim, females if you wish. When I first went down there they tried to teach me to swim by putting a life preserver around me - that was a cork life preserver. There was a gallery around the swimming area and a man had a rope, a good fair size rope, from this life preserver up to the gallery. The man would drag me around from three sides where the gallery was and I could paddle along to try to swim. And that took place I should guess about a couple of weeks for such a matter as that. My father got tired of it and said, "Give me that child,"—I was the child—took the bathing suit off me, carried me down to the steps where you could go into the water gently if you wished rather than dive in, and threw me, it felt like ten feet away, from him and as he did he said, "You swim back to me or you'll drown son." And, of course, I thought I'd went down it felt like ten, fifteen feet, which is possibly no more than a couple of feet if that. And when I came out my father says, "Well, here I am, son, swim to me." I struck out manfully, paddling like a dog and reached him. It was the proudest moment of my life. From then on I was swimming.

When I was a young boy South Battery was first smoothed and was finished, smooth finished with asphalt. And my father gave us all skates and they were different from the way they are now. There were not any ball bearing skates. It was just asphalt wheel on an axel which was simply a bar. And we'd go down there and skate and wait and hope some wagon would come along down there, a delivery wagon, and we could latch on to the back of it and be pulled around. East Battery was also a smooth roadway of asphalt. On the South Battery, the west end of it, was just approximately where Lenwood Street is now. And the upper end of East Battery ended just about where the Shrine has a piece of property there and from then on East Bay was paved with Belgium Block.

I remember very little bit about the Charleston Exposition in 1902 except I went there on every occasion that I could and walked around. I imagine walked miles during that and it was a

wonderful thing. That was up where Hampton Park is now. The present Sunken Gardens was built for that Charleston Exposition. For those days, they had some wonderful shows in the Charleston Exposition. They had some camels over here from Egypt and I remember very well when you would pay so much money, probably 10 or 15 cents, to ride a camel. The man who was camel driver would, before you went to get on, would put the camel down on its knees and then when you got aboard of its back he would tell you to lean way back and then the camel would ride. And if you didn't lean way back you would probably fall off the front of it. By the way, one of them had a camel that he called Yankee Deedoo. I suppose that was meant for Yankee Doodle because he would say every now and then in advertising his camel rides, "(unintelligible) on Yankee Deedoo."

The earthquake was before my day. I remember some hurricanes we had here. Particularly one when I was a boy and underneath the house where we were staying at seven Legare Street, the water came up underneath that house for three feet. And I know it distinctly because I measured it and my father made a mark on the wall. I only remember a tornado, one tornado here. And that was pretty rugged. At the house where I was living part of the roof was taken off and part of the piazza was taken off. The steeple of St. Philips Church at the very top, the copper part of it, was torn off entirely. A part of St. Michael's Church roof was taken off and also the two little dorms that are on top of the Scotts Presbyterian Church was taken off. As for fires, I don't remember much about that at all. Another fire I remember very well was when I was a young boy. Anderson Lumber Company, at that time, was at the foot of Broad Street and they practically burned the whole thing down. And it burned I'd hate to say how long at night but I was afraid to stay at the Grimball house where I was looking at the fire at one Ashley Avenue too long because my father would have given me a strapping when I got home. And the days before that fire when the Anderson Lumber Company was going along fine and after they overhauled themselves and got into business again, a great quantity of lumber was shipped out of Charleston on three and four masted schooners that would tie up along the edge and they would float the lumber out to the wharf, out to the ship, and those ships had no engines in them either. Every bit of it was sailing. They would load the ship in there under decks and then on top of the decks. And then when they were ready to go to sea a tug boat came out, tied on, and towed them out to the outer harbor and out to the ocean.

I must mention that my parents, I never knew any of them—my grandparents, I never knew either of them. My grandfather on my mother's side died before I was born and my grandmother on her side died very shortly after I was born. So, of course, I would know nothing about what they said. My father's parents died when he was right young, so, I didn't know them at all.

In listing my brothers, I left out for some unknown reason, Rutledge Laurens, who was born on August 16, 1894. He married Ms. Ruth Giles of Atlanta, Georgia. My brother Rutledge now lives in Atlanta and has been retired and that's that.