

**Arva Marie Johnson**  
Officer, U.S. Capitol Police Force (1974–2007)

**Oral History Interview**  
**Final Edited Transcript**  
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## Abstract

Arva Marie Johnson joined the Capitol Police Force in 1974, becoming the first African-American female officer, the first uniformed female officer, and one of only four women on the force at the time. Her unprecedented 32-year career as an officer spanned the most comprehensive security changes in the history of the Capitol. In her interview, Johnson recalled her strategies to combat daily gender inequity; documented the reforms to overturn racial discrimination in the force's promotion process; detailed the changes to Capitol security following the Senate bombing in 1983 and the terrorist attacks in 2001; and discussed her warm relationships with colleagues and Members of Congress. More than a history of the Capitol Police Force, Johnson's interview offered candid reflections on both her sense of duty and her steadfast optimism.

## Biography

Arva Marie Johnson was born on February 3, 1950, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Having attended public schools, Johnson graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1968. Six years later, a family member working on the Hill informed her that the Capitol Police Force was hiring women officers. Johnson applied and accepted a position in 1974, becoming the force's first uniformed female officer—three other women worked in the plainclothes detail.

During her 32-year career, Johnson participated in sweeping changes to Capitol security. As a young officer during the late 1970s—before the widespread use of X-ray machines and metal detectors—Johnson and her colleagues hand-searched bags. Following the Senate bombing in 1983, the shooting death of two friends and colleagues at the Capitol in 1998, and the terrorist attacks in 2001, security tightened dramatically and, among other adjustments, Johnson received sophisticated training in chemical and bomb identification. Over the course of Johnson's time on the Hill, the Capitol Police Force developed into a leading anti-terrorism organization.

As the Capitol Police Force grew, Johnson spearheaded efforts to reform many of its internal policies, lobbying for better promotion opportunities and special assignments for women officers. As a founding member of the U.S. Capitol Black Police Association—a group organized on behalf of career advancement for minority officers—she and her colleagues successfully pressed for an overhaul of the force's promotion process during the 1990s.

Johnson's commitment to the force earned her praise from colleagues and Members alike. As one Congressman said, "She's the kind of person that you would want your whole department to be like." Johnson left the Capitol Police Force in 2007 when department policy required that she retire at the age of 57.

## Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at [history@mail.house.gov](mailto:history@mail.house.gov).

## Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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## Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is a senior historical editor for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008).

— ARVA MARIE JOHNSON —

INTERVIEW

**K. JOHNSON:** This is Kathleen Johnson, interviewing Arva Marie Johnson, the first African-American woman on the Capitol Police Force. The date is March 1, 2007. And the interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center conference room, Cannon House Office Building. I was hoping that we could start off with some biographical information today. If you could just tell me where and when you were born.

**A. JOHNSON:** Okay, I was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in 1950, February the third.

**K. JOHNSON:** What schools did you attend when you were in North Carolina?

**A. JOHNSON:** I went to elementary school—I went to N.A.W. Harlem School—that was in North Carolina. In my senior year, I went to Booker T. Washington High School and graduated from there in 1968.

**K. JOHNSON:** What professions were your parents?

**A. JOHNSON:** Homemakers. They were homemakers.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you always have an interest in being a police officer?

**A. JOHNSON:** Well, growing up in North Carolina, I always liked their uniforms, and I have always wanted to help people. So I figured one day I'd grow up, and if not in the military, police officer, something that could help people.

**K. JOHNSON:** How did you specifically—or what specifically attracted you to the Capitol Police Force?

**A. JOHNSON:** I was working at Hecht’s warehouse, and my cousin was working up on the Hill . . . Beverley Beasley was working up on the Hill. And she called me, she said, “[the] Capitol Police is going to hire females for the department.” So she told me to come down and fill out an application, and that’s what I did.

**K. JOHNSON:** This was in 1974?

**A. JOHNSON:** Nineteen seventy-four.

**K. JOHNSON:** Do you remember the application process?

**A. JOHNSON:** Wow. They asked you a lot of different questions, and your background. And then, they had to do your background checks. And you had to have a high-school diploma. And I think that was—and then you had to be able to pass the physical. Definitely had to pass the physical.

**K. JOHNSON:** What do you recall about your first day on the job?

**A. JOHNSON:** Wow, my first day on the job I went to the midnight shift, which—I wasn’t used to staying up all night. And trying to find my way up on the Hill, coming from Maryland . . . from D.C. then, lived in D.C. And everybody’s trying to tell you how to get to work: “If you see the Capitol dome, East Capitol Street will bring you straight in.” So I got here; I was on time.

K. JOHNSON: Did you have someone to show you the ropes in your first few days?

A. JOHNSON: Yes. When I came on, you always work with an officer, an experienced officer. And they would train you and walk around and show you everything you're supposed to be doing security wise.

K. JOHNSON: Can you describe in a little more detail what your first assignment was? What was the midnight shift?

A. JOHNSON: Oh, the midnight shift was once the building closed—we got here at 11, it was already closed—we had to double-check to make sure all the doors were locked, make sure nobody was left in the building, and then just do hourly checks of the building.

K. JOHNSON: Did you go into Member's offices? Was that part of your assignment?

A. JOHNSON: Oh, we were checking doors to make sure they were locked and nobody was in them [the offices].

K. JOHNSON: Okay. How long did you stay on the midnight shift?

A. JOHNSON: I stayed on the midnight shift for about six months, about six months.

K. JOHNSON: What did you do after that?

A. JOHNSON: I went on day shift—H2. I meant Capitol 1, C1.

K. JOHNSON: What did that entail?

A. JOHNSON: That entailed working outside, in the cold, and I used to work on the Southwest Drive. Back then, we were checking cars; they were able to park on Southwest Drive, and they had to have stickers on their cars, so I had to make sure everybody had stickers. If not, they had to keep moving; nobody could park until after 10:00 in the morning. And they opened that up to the public then.

K. JOHNSON: Did you like that assignment better than the midnight shift?

A. JOHNSON: Yes. {laughter} Yes, I liked that better.

K. JOHNSON: You mentioned that you had to pass a physical.

A. JOHNSON: Yes.

K. JOHNSON: As time went on, as you were an officer, were there other training requirements that you had to do like yearly physicals, or . . .

A. JOHNSON: Oh, no, we didn't have yearly physicals.

K. JOHNSON: Was there any kind of training that you had to complete in order to move on to the next year as a police officer?

A. JOHNSON: We had, like I said, we had to go through—they sent us to rookie school anyway, and we had to pass written tests, and we had to pass the driving test. We had to pass the exercise—you know, like I said, exercising—we had to

pass the driving test, and then we had to pass qualification; you had to be able to shoot.

**K. JOHNSON:** Had you fired a weapon before?

**A. JOHNSON:** No.

**K. JOHNSON:** What was that like?

**A. JOHNSON:** Hard. {laughter} But getting used to it was hard because I guess the feel of a weapon in your hand was something completely different, but I passed it, so it was good.

**K. JOHNSON:** Now, you were one of the first women on the [Capitol] Police Force. There were four women in 1974.

**A. JOHNSON:** There were four, yes.

**K. JOHNSON:** Can you describe what it was like being one of the few women on the force?

**A. JOHNSON:** It was strange because, for one thing, the men weren't used to females, and that was a big change for them. And they felt that we as women couldn't do the job as well as they could. Some didn't want to really work with you because they didn't think you were qualified enough to back them up. So we had to prove ourselves that way—that we were there to help when they needed us to.

**K. JOHNSON:** What were the accommodations like? Were there locker rooms for women at that time?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, they didn't have locker rooms for women. What they ended up doing was putting up a partition to divide the men's room from the women's room, and then they brought us a few lockers in. They had put up a partition.

**K. JOHNSON:** About what time did that change?

**A. JOHNSON:** I think then I was on day shift, so I guess about three or four months later.

**K. JOHNSON:** Okay. And I know that we had discussed earlier about the uniforms. Can you describe the uniforms for women?

**A. JOHNSON:** They didn't have female uniforms for one thing. So, trying to fit into the men's uniform—high-water pants—because being as tall as I am, then. . . . High-water pants, and trying to get them to fit around your waist, it was kind of uncomfortable. But I made it work.

**K. JOHNSON:** Can you describe the other women that you worked with? Did you get to know them well because there were so few of you?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah. Well, I didn't get to really work with too many of them because the two females that came on in September, they were on the plainclothes detail—what we call plainclothes detail. So I didn't really see them. And then the other female, she was 3 to 11 shift. So I didn't really get to interact with them that much.

**K. JOHNSON:** If you had to describe the force during your first few years, or during the 1970s, how would you do that?

**A. JOHNSON:** Wow. It was strange and different to be working around a lot of men knowing that you are the only female that's on the day shift, and knowing that they really didn't want to work with you, and then trying to hold a conversation—sometimes we didn't talk at all. And then sometimes you might get somebody that wanted to talk about their job.

**K. JOHNSON:** Can you provide an example of some of the resistance that you might have met?

**A. JOHNSON:** Well, some of them would say, "Why would you want to be here? Wouldn't you rather be at home with your child, cooking?" I said, "No." "I don't think you'd be able to handle this job." I said, "I think I can." So I had to really prove myself. And then as time went on, they saw that I wanted to do the job, and I could do the job, and I was willing to stand by them and do it. So it all changed. It was good, and they started to accept me.

**K. JOHNSON:** So you won them over?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah, I won them over.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, you were also the first African-American woman on the force. Were you aware that you were breaking new ground of being one of the first women and being the first black female officer?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, I didn't realize that. I think when I realized that was when they asked all of us to get together to take our picture, so they could have a picture of their first females on the Capitol Police Department, and that was when I first realized that I was the first African-American female, which didn't faze me at all because as time went by I didn't really think about it. And then as time would pass, and they started to hire more females, and then they said, "You were the first African-American female." And I said, "Yeah, I was, I guess." They said, "Do you know what that means?" I said, "No, what does it mean? I have a job." {laughter} Which I thought was good; I have a job, and I like doing it, you know, so it didn't faze me at all. Even at the retirement party, it didn't faze me until everybody started talking. I told my kids, I said, "I didn't know." [My son] said, "Yeah, Mom, you didn't realize that?" I said no, because to me, I'm just an ordinary person that, okay, I don't make a big deal out of anything. I try to always do my job and accept people for what they are and go with that. So when they say you would be embarrassed because they were talking about, you know, well we're going to do this [retirement party]. And I said, "But why?" They said, "Do you realize what you've done?" I said, "No." And then, I just, I didn't pay attention to it. I just wanted to do a good job and make my family proud. That was all—and the department, too, because I love my family in the department.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, the way that you've talked about the force, it does sound like it was a family kind of atmosphere—that you were very close. Was this something that stayed the same throughout your career, or did that change as the force grew in size?

**A. JOHNSON:** As the force grew in size, a lot of different things started to come into play. I think when you're on the department, you have to be here three years before

you can take the sergeant's test. So I was here for three years; I decided to take the sergeant's test. And just as we were getting ready to take the sergeant's test, they said, "Well, we're going to"—how did they put it—"we're going to rate your work before you take the test." I said, "Okay. I thought you always take the test, and then they give your oral board?" When you go, they ask you how would you do different jobs if you were official. But they decided to rate us first, and of course, they gave me a low rating. And so I asked my official, I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, we have more females now that's eligible for the test, so we want to grade you as a group." I said, "Grade us as a group?" So, of course, I got a low mark, and I was upset about it, and my official said, "Well, most women got low grades on this." So I talked to some of my male counterparts, and they said, "No, we've always taken the test first, and then you go before the board where they grade you with your ratings on how well you do your job." So I was a little disappointed with that, so I didn't take the test anymore past that.

**K. JOHNSON:** This was during the 1970s.

**A. JOHNSON:** Seventies, right—back in the '70s.

**K. JOHNSON:** And the first few years afterwards.

**A. JOHNSON:** Right.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you talk to any of the other women officers to compare similar circumstances?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, yes. Some got low grades, and some got higher grades. So most of us, back then, just kind of backed off from taking the test after that because they were changing. And then as the years went on, the department was stereotyping—the test wasn't really made for you to get passed it. And if you passed the test, then you went before the oral board. Then you got a low rating. So a person that had a low test score, when they went before the oral board, they got a higher rating. So they became number one and number two up in there. So if you did pass the test, then you went before the oral board, so you got a lower one. And it was racially divided then.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, you were, I read, one of the founders of an organization, the United States Capitol Black Police Association.

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes.

**K. JOHNSON:** Can you describe the purpose of this group and some of its history?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes. The purpose of that group was to try to get a fairer testing of grades with the test because we thought the test was biased. Before the oral board—have it evenly divided—you know it was going to be equally divided with that. And just trying to get organized so everybody can come together, and make it fair without it being too racially motivated in the department.

**K. JOHNSON:** When did the group first form?

**A. JOHNSON:** I think that was about in the late '70s. That's when they started to hire more females then, and they started coming in.

**K. JOHNSON:** Do you remember approximately how many people were in the organization?

**A. JOHNSON:** I think it might have been about 50 or 60. It was a small group.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you have any mentors, or someone when you first joined the force, that helped you to—besides the veteran officer that you were assigned with, especially because you were a woman, to just—if you ran into any sort of problems, that that person would be there to help you.

**A. JOHNSON:** No, I was on my own. So I always just went home and just cried about it, talked to my husband about it, and got over it. There were no mentors then—nobody that you could really talk to because even officials were a little leery of females. No. There were no mentors.

**K. JOHNSON:** How did your job and your responsibilities change over the years? You talked about going from the midnight shift to the day shift, and you were working on outside detail. What other assignments did you have?

**A. JOHNSON:** At one point, once they got used to females, I was able to come inside and work, and I worked what we used to call the “Fearless Five.” It was a group that would come in whenever the Senate would come in—we would come in an hour before they would come in—and we would stand around their chambers, and make sure that nobody can go past us other than the Members. And then from the “Fearless Five,” we went to . . .

**K. JOHNSON:** Who else was in the “Fearless Five”?

A. JOHNSON: Oh my God. There was Officer Willis, Officer Patterson, Officer Ron Knapp—there was a whole group of us. Henry Turner. What’s his name? Arlee Anderson. Trying to remember all my little friends from back in the day.

K. JOHNSON: That’s a good memory.

A. JOHNSON: There was a group of us.

K. JOHNSON: Were you the only woman in the group?

A. JOHNSON: When we first started out, yes. I started as the first female with them when they started the “Fearless Five.” And that was really the only way you could get weekends [off]. So of course, because I had a child, I wanted the weekends off. So that was one of the good perks with that. You could get the weekends off, if you worked those hours, different hours. And you got to meet the Senators, too. So, all that worked out good. And they said, “Oh, a female.” I said, “Yeah, I’m here. Come and see it.” What was it you asked me?

K. JOHNSON: Oh, just about how your assignments changed over time.

A. JOHNSON: I think I spent 11 years at the Capitol. And then I changed over and went over to the House detail.

K. JOHNSON: What did you do when you were over at the House side?

**A. JOHNSON:** When I moved over to the House detail, I got to work the doors, the different doors that let people and tourists and staffers in. And I think I spent a few years doing that, and then they opened the daycare center, which was 501 First Street. That was when they had the daycare center. So, I transferred down there, and I worked there for eight years, which was really good then.

**K. JOHNSON:** Were your main duties checking identification?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, checking people coming in because it was a daycare center for the Members and staffers coming in. So we sat at the front desk and made sure everybody that came in had IDs.

**K. JOHNSON:** You talked a little bit about the promotion process.

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes.

**K. JOHNSON:** And you answered this to some extent about it being more difficult for women and minorities, but was it also difficult for women and minorities to get specialty assignments, such as plainclothes, or K9 units, or electronic security?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, it was hard for females to get into those positions—and the K9. It was hard for them to get into the patrol division, because like I said, when I came it was all male then. So it didn't matter about your race, they didn't really want females in those positions. So it was hard training just to try to get in. And the motorcycles—same way. It was hard for females to get on those different positions.

**K. JOHNSON:** Was there any sort of group that formed among the women to try to break down some of these barriers in an informal, or more formal, organization?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, we didn't form anything for the females. Everybody just did individual things to try to prove themselves and get into it. So we did have a few females that did break the barriers and get in those different K9 and patrol divisions.

**K. JOHNSON:** Besides the force growing in number, in great number over time, what were some of the other major changes that you can remember?

**A. JOHNSON:** As they began to get more females, they decided to put us in female skirts, to dress us like ladies; we got the little WAVE hats. And then they started promoting more females to sergeants and giving them assignments that would travel with the Members, where before it was only men that really traveled with the Members, were on their special teams, for protection.

**K. JOHNSON:** Was that something that you ever did?

**A. JOHNSON:** No.

**K. JOHNSON:** Was that something that you wanted to do?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, I didn't want to do that part. I definitely didn't want to do that part.

**K. JOHNSON:** You served under several Capitol Police chiefs. Do any of them stand out in your mind as being particularly memorable?

**A. JOHNSON:** When I first came on, I would say that Chief [James M.] Powell was the main one for me.<sup>1</sup> Because, like I said, I was on the midnight shift, and I had a four-year-old son. And he was a family-type person. So when I did my hardship letter, he sent it back and said, “Put her on day shift, we have to keep her family together.” Because my husband and I were going to split about then anyway, because he was working about 3 to 11 at Giant Warehouse. And so we had, in between those times—he would get off at 11, and I had to be at work at 11—we had to get a babysitter in between that time, so my son was not getting sleep at all. It was bad for us. So he did the transfer for me to go on day shift right away.

**K. JOHNSON:** What was the hardship letter?

**A. JOHNSON:** The hardship letter was just explaining that I had a four-year-old son at home, and my husband was working 3 to 11 at Giant, and to try to keep a babysitter for a couple of hours, who was a school student, and she had to go home and get in bed and get ready for school herself. So the hardship was that we couldn’t have a babysitter for that time of night, and if he could in any way possible, and as soon as possible, have me transferred to the day shift, it didn’t matter.

**K. JOHNSON:** Do you know if this was something that was in place before women came on the force, or was this something new to help working women?

**A. JOHNSON:** They had a few hardships for men that had families, also. But being the first female for hardship . . . and, of course, the guys felt that was favoritism. I didn’t. So Chief Powell was good for that. And [James J.] Carvino, he was good because he helped us get a pay raise. {laughter} And then Chief

[Terrance W.] Gainer was gone—but he’s been gone now about two years I think. But he was good because he was more of a hands-on chief. If he saw you doing something, he would do the same thing. He would work beside you. He always said, “You have to be—no matter how high you get up—you have to be able to do the same thing that you expect somebody else to do.” And I thought that was great. So then we’re back to our new chief now [Phillip Morse], which I left as soon as he made chief. And he’s good, oh, he gave a nice speech.

**K. JOHNSON:** This was for your retirement party?

**A. JOHNSON:** My retirement party. And I was telling my kids, I was sitting there, and he was starting from ’74, everything I had been through. I said, “I did all that and didn’t realize.” My life changed throughout those stages. And my daughter and son they said, “You did.” And it was, “Okay, I did.”

**K. JOHNSON:** What were some of the things that he highlighted in your career?

**A. JOHNSON:** He was talking about when I came on with the men’s uniform. And then he was talking about all the things I had to endure, just to stand in the cold. And then he went into the 9/11—he went into when our two officers got killed, the anthrax, the long hours when Congress would stay around the clock, and standing outside for State of the Union—and he was naming all these things.<sup>2</sup> And he said, “She was still standing.” He said, “Not that many of us are still standing after 32 years.” And he said, “She endured all this because she cared about herself, and she cared about the department.” And like they put it, “She was more of a family person, who believed not only in her family, but in her co-workers, too.” I really did. And I still, like I always

tell them, when I did my little speech, I said, “It’s because I love people, and I believe if you’re treated fairly, it comes back to you.” And I just love people, and even after all the things that I went through, I was still standing because of the grace of God with that. And I just love people, everybody. And who is it? Congressman Greg [Gregory H.] Laughlin, at the retirement, they said he said it all. He said, “She’s the kind of person that you would want your whole department to be like.” And I looked around like “Me?” {laughter} He said, “You just don’t realize the impact that you have on people.” I said, “I’m just being me.” And I told my children it’s the way that you’re brought up and the way that you treat people, they will treat you the same, they will be good to you. And I really believe that.

**K. JOHNSON:** It sounds as though you had a major impact on a lot of people.

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, and I didn’t realize it. And like I told him—“just being me”—and I didn’t realize it. Because my minister from church, he would say, “Did you realize you’d be at all that?” I said, “No.” He said, “Wow, okay.” But it’s history, and it’s over. And I’m happy. And as long as I know those people felt that way and I made some impact in their lives—and they did in mine, too, for 32 years. So they said, “Now enjoy yourself and relax.” I said, “Okay.” But they said, “If you ever need anything, call us, because we are there for you.” I said, “Oh, wow. Okay.”

**K. JOHNSON:** One of the topics that you brought up was 9/11 and the Capitol Police officers. Going back even further—the bombing in the Senate in 1983. What do you remember about that event?

**A. JOHNSON:** Oh, man, I was just coming back to work after having my daughter. And we were working late. I think that we had just gone out of session when that bomb went off. It was scary. And I had a little second thought about that—coming back—because I'd just had a baby. My second child, rather. But I prayed about it, and I came back to work. But it was a scary place to come back to at that point. My family thought—they said, "You sure you want to?" I said, "I can handle it."

**K. JOHNSON:** How did it impact the police officers?

**A. JOHNSON:** Oh, the security tightened up even more. And everybody did—well, we always did good security, I always thought—but we stepped it up even higher. Because we knew we wanted to go home, and the Members and staff and everybody wanted to go home, so you've got to make sure that you're vigilant and double-checking everything, and somebody double-check behind you, because we didn't want something like that to happen again.

**K. JOHNSON:** Can you provide an example of some of the increased security checks that you did?

**A. JOHNSON:** When we locked the doors, we made sure somebody else checked behind us and double-check. We made sure we checked extra carefully in the bathrooms and different places that people could hide if they wanted to do that. And as people came through, they started adding the metal detectors and X-ray machines so that we could double-check.

**K. JOHNSON:** So from what you remember, this was after the '83 bombing that the metal detectors were in the office buildings?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah, that's what I remember. No, it was before—no, it was before then that we had metal detectors. Yeah, it was before then because my son was in school. It was before '83. Because I was working the galleries then, and people had—when they come up to the galleries, they had to be checked in. So the metal detectors were there. But the X-ray machines, you're right, the X-ray machines came later at the doors. Because I remember we had to hand-search purses, wow.

**K. JOHNSON:** So that was during the '70s and '80s—early '80s—that you had to do the hand searches?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, had to do the hand searches then with the purses.

**K. JOHNSON:** Of course it has to be one of the more tragic events in Capitol history, is when the two police officers were shot and killed.

**A. JOHNSON:** It was.

**K. JOHNSON:** How did this affect you personally?

**A. JOHNSON:** Oh, I broke down. I was working overtime that day in the Rayburn subway. For some reason, the police officers always get the late stuff, and people and press were coming through saying “two of your police officers got shot over at the Capitol.” So then we had to go stick our heads in the credit union window, so we could see the television. I said, “Oh, my God.” And then they started coming over, yelled two officers were down, and they didn't know if they had the shooter or not. So they shut everything down at that point. And

then later on, throughout the evening, that's when they came over and told us who the officers were that had been shot. And I broke down. So some of my coworkers, they took over because they didn't quite know them the way that I knew them, because I'd worked with these two officers all the way through.

**K. JOHNSON:** This was Officers Chestnut and Gibson. So you had worked with them before?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, personally, side by side, joking with them. So that was a heartbreaker there. I was totally out of it at that point.

**K. JOHNSON:** How did that affect the police force? Because this is the first time that officers had been killed in the line of duty.

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes. Everybody was heartbroken. And we even tightened up security even more. They started doubling up on the doors. And because the way they had security check—security back then—one person at a door wasn't going to get it because you were doing so much, and trying to get the tourists through, that you couldn't see the next person coming in. And that's what happened to Chestnut on that door. Because you had to try to check people, then people want a wheelchair for somebody that can't walk, then you're trying to do all these things, so anybody could really get past. So after that, security got even tighter. They put even more officers there, and cameras.

**K. JOHNSON:** So it was common before that for just one officer to be at each of the doors?

A. JOHNSON: Yes. And most of the time, if they were doing anything, it would be like early in the morning, when they knew it was real busy. Then you put more officers, but as everybody came in around 9:00, 10:00, then they'd break it down.

K. JOHNSON: Okay.

A. JOHNSON: Yes. Find somewhere else for me to go.

K. JOHNSON: Did you attend the ceremony of the officers laying in honor in the Capitol Rotunda?

A. JOHNSON: I sure did; I sure did. It was heartbreaking. They gave all of us a tape of it. And, yes, I attended that.

K. JOHNSON: Now, another major event, of course, was September 11, 2001. What do you recall about that day?

A. JOHNSON: That was another heartbreaker there, to know that at first thought, maybe a plane just went into the towers. And then as we were watching the news, and we were working in the subway, then they said another plane had hit. And then my partner and I, we said, "No, that's not an accident. Something else is going on." And then that was when they came over the radio and told us to start evacuating the building because a plane had gone into the Pentagon. So my partner and I, we said, "We got to be next, then." But we had to make sure that we got everybody out and cleared everything, and they said everything—everybody—was out of the building. So we stayed and waited until our officials told us what we could do. And we just stayed to protect the

building; we made sure the Members and everybody had gotten out. That was one of those things that they call a code red—that I had never heard since I had been on the department. And a code red means that whatever it is, it's going to take everybody out at that point. But I think . . . was that the one? I think that was the plane in Pennsylvania that kept the one from coming to the Capitol. And I prayed for all of those people, bless their hearts. They helped us a lot. And they are heroes.

**K. JOHNSON:** So once you helped the people evacuate, the public and the Members, you stayed in the Capitol, the police officers stayed in the Capitol?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah, we stayed there, until our officials told us. More officers came in to see if they could help. But we just stayed; we didn't leave.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you have any sort of training for emergency events like what happened and for the bombings?

**A. JOHNSON:** Oh, at that point, we know that we'd have to get everybody out of the building, and we're supposed to have a certain meeting place, where all the officers meet up, to be accounted for. So they did train us then. Once we get everybody out, we have to meet—they tell us a little code and we go, and everybody meets. Everybody's accounted for. We had our officials.

**K. JOHNSON:** But your duty is to evacuate the public and the Members first?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah.

**K. JOHNSON:** What kind of changes took place after this event?

**A. JOHNSON:** After that, anybody that came through the subway that Members had and said “They’re with me,” we said, “Could we please just send them through here, for our security and for your security?” And even more so on the doors as they came in because most people come in through the doors—the Independence [Avenue] doors, different doors—that we were just checking. “Oh, we just came to go over to the galleries . . .” —and we told them they still had to be double-checked just in case they missed something on the door. We wanted to make sure we had it cleared here. At the Rayburn subway that I ended up working at before I retired the public could come through as long as they had passes. So once all this with the shooting, with the 9/11, they stopped the public from coming through the Rayburn subway, and they directed everybody through the Cannon subway where you can’t take water, anything like that, if you’re not a staff member. And different things they [visitors] would just have to throw out. That they did, they cut it out because they just wanted everybody confined to one thing, where they could be accounted for. So they tightened it up even more.

**K. JOHNSON:** As police officers, did you have to undergo more training because of these events?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, they didn’t send us through any more training. They just told us to be vigilant, and they—oh, yes, we did. I’m sorry; yes, we did. We had to go to the bombing school. They sent us to a bombing school where we had to go and be able to identify different types of weapons, different types of packages that we would be able to recognize right away. Because they were starting to have things like a—they would have things in their shoes, and what else was there? Yeah, they sent us to a school where we could recognize—and if we

didn't pass, we didn't go past that point. You had to stay there until you could recognize these things. But if you got it wrong on the test, a bell would go off. And believe me, you didn't move from out that screen until you got it right there.

**K. JOHNSON:** What time period was this? Was this after the '83 bombing?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, that was after 9/11 and the shooting of our officers. It was around that time.

**K. JOHNSON:** So, very recent then. The '90s, and into the 21st century.

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, 21st century.

**K. JOHNSON:** Do you remember when identification badges started for staff?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, I don't remember when they started. I don't remember that at all.

**K. JOHNSON:** I asked you about metal detectors earlier, which you talked about already. Do you remember any other upgrades in security that we haven't already talked about?

**A. JOHNSON:** In security, no. I think that was it.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you ever receive any assignments, any special assignments to details like inaugurations or Joint Sessions?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, because each detail—House, Senate, and Capitol—they had assignments where you would have to work. For each detail, they'd assign your people. I would be out on southeast corner, by the Supreme Court; we formed a line around to keep anybody from coming past. We did things like that for that. But specialties, no. If you're on a different side, like the House side, you knew you were going to work outside. So, then as—when my partner retired, then I was able to stay inside and work the Rayburn subway, where Members and staff and dignitaries could come through, and we checked their IDs. They would give us a book we would look through so we could know what passes would let people through and cut off traffic with security. But no specialty assignments.

**K. JOHNSON:** Do you have any memorable assignments or memorable days on the job that you haven't already brought up?

**A. JOHNSON:** No, I can't think of anything offhand.

**K. JOHNSON:** As a Capitol Police Officer, you had the opportunity to interact on a daily basis with staff, Members, and the general public. Was this an aspect of the job that you enjoyed?

**A. JOHNSON:** I enjoyed it a lot because of the different personalities and talking to people, Members, and staffers—good people, too. And that's what I always told my partner. I said, "It's the way you talk to people." He said, "They heard me the first time." Maybe they didn't; you don't know what was on their mind when they came in. So I always said, "Could you step back please?" You know, I said, "Be courteous." And so he said, "All right."

K. JOHNSON: Do you remember some of the women Members of the 1970s? Because you were one of the few female police officers, and there weren't a lot of women Members at this time.

A. JOHNSON: I know it. I remember Congresswoman Bella [Savitzky] Abzug with her hats. Shirley [Anita] Chisholm. Who else was there—I'm trying to think—back in those days. God, my memory doesn't work that way anymore.

K. JOHNSON: Barbara [Charline] Jordan?

A. JOHNSON: Yes, I remember.

K. JOHNSON: And Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder was there in the 1970s.

A. JOHNSON: Thank you. And she's a sweetheart too because she comes through, [and] she says, "You're still here?" "Yes, ma'am, I'm getting ready to retire." {laughter} Yeah, there were some good women back in those days, but my memory's not good—thank you for giving me those names. I always tell my children, "I can't remember from yesterday to today. How am I going to remember now?" But, yeah, those were good women coming through there, been through a lot.

K. JOHNSON: Did you have any role models when you first started on the job? Maybe women Members, or women staffers, since there really weren't that many during the period?

A. JOHNSON: There weren't that many. I think I connected more so—I think, when I started back in the '70s, I worked in the bottom of the Capitol, and I used to

work with the female elevator operators, and we formed a little bond there because I was standing on the top. . . . Have you been to Rayburn? On the Capitol side there's an escalator that goes up (and the elevators) when they are voting, and I was standing there, and as the Members come out, I would tell them "Hold the elevator," so the Members can get on. And we formed a bond there. And Jean, she's my sweetheart, and we just bonded from there. And even now that I'm retired, well, I've already retired, we still try to stay in touch.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did she start around the same period as you?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes. She started maybe about five years later. I think she said it was five years later because she's getting ready to retire. Who else was there . . . train drivers, and there was just so many people that impacted my life, and that was good for me, and I was good for them. Working together—that was the only way.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, now that you've retired, do you view yourself as a role model?

**A. JOHNSON:** Not really. I'm just thinking that I was doing what I was put on Earth to do and make people's lives hopefully easier and better, the same way they have made mine. And I don't consider myself as a role model, just doing what God put me out here to do. And I loved it. And if I had to do it over again, I would do the same thing over again. That's how much I enjoyed my job and the people around me.

**K. JOHNSON:** Several times you talked about the collegial atmosphere, once the men got used to women sort of being on the force, sort of a family kind of

arrangement. Did you ever socialize with the officers away from the job? Did you ever have any kind of picnics or events where the officers could get to know each other better?

A. JOHNSON: Yeah, we used to have our little parties, like Christmas parties, that we got to know each other and drink. And things like King's Dominion—they'd give us the tickets; we would go as a group. And like I said, the picnic things worked out well where we all got together with families and mingled that way.

K. JOHNSON: A lot of different staff groups in the House and the Senate had baseball games or some sort of athletic events. Did you have anything like that?

A. JOHNSON: No, we didn't do that. I think the guys might have done that, but the females didn't do it. We didn't do it.

K. JOHNSON: So, if they did, you probably weren't included.

A. JOHNSON: No. {laughter} Probably weren't included. I probably wasn't.

K. JOHNSON: We're just going to take a short break, if that's okay with you.

A. JOHNSON: Okay.

**END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO**

**K. JOHNSON:** Okay, I am back talking to Marie Johnson, and I was hoping that you could talk a little bit more about some of the gender barriers that you had to break with the male officers and just some of the bonding that may have occurred.

**A. JOHNSON:** Okay. Some of the bonding that I really remember is working the House steps with some of my cohorts. And we would be out there—they would be telling jokes and things, and we would be laughing. They said, “Are you okay?” And I said, “I’m doing fine.” As long as they didn’t get out of hand, and we used to laugh and joke, and then they would treat me to breakfast, and then I would treat them sometimes. We would just go in and sit down and talk on our breaks, just talk about different things that’s going on around the Capitol. And they were good guys to work with. And I miss them—most of them are retired, of course. But those were some good days.

And then I remember working in the Rotunda. And the thing about liking people and dealing with tourists coming in before they really tightened up on security—as they would come into the Rotunda, the first thing they would do, they would walk into the extensions that were there because they were looking up—and oh God, that Rotunda, everybody should have to see the Rotunda. It is so pretty, and when you look up and just catch your breath. And then as people walk through and they hit the barriers, and you bust out laughing. “I’m not laughing at you, it’s just that. . . .” They say, “It’s so pretty.” I say, “Isn’t it gorgeous?” Just memories like that—it makes it all worth it. Because before I had started working, I had never been to the Capitol, so I was one of those tourists at one point. So, when you came up to me [and said], “Oh my God, look what I’ve been missing.” So I would recommend that to anybody. Bring your family up here. And just the memories—it was so nice and so good, and it’s just a beautiful place.

**K. JOHNSON:** You talked about some of the changes that took place on the Capitol Police Force. What changes do you remember of Congress from the 1970s through to when you just retired? How do you think that the institution has changed?

**A. JOHNSON:** It's a lot bigger. There's more security; there's more work. Because, now, you're talking about—the '70s weren't as bad security wise than it is now—because as time changed, the things around the world changed, so you have to go with the changes that went through, that we've gone through, to make it better and safer for everybody. So, as they used to tease us back in the '70s, "What, you have one bullet in your shirt pocket?" "Sure, we do. One bullet." But like I said—and we went through one, two . . . as I can recall, we went through three different types of weapons to improve for the department. So that was where changes came in. Because I know when I came in, we had the little revolvers, and then went into the nine millimeters at the end. We think they were better, but thank God we haven't had to use our weapons up here.

**K. JOHNSON:** Did you have training on a yearly basis with weapons?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes.

**K. JOHNSON:** And tests that you had to pass?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yes, we had to qualify twice a year. Twice a year. They have open range, where you can practice to make sure, because you never know what might happen.

**K. JOHNSON:** And that's on the campus?

- A. JOHNSON: Yes.
- K. JOHNSON: Is that in Rayburn?
- A. JOHNSON: It's in Rayburn. And then they have one out at FLETC [Federal Law Enforcement Training Center]. Not FLETC—I'm sorry—Cheltenham now. That's where our other facility is.
- K. JOHNSON: One of the topics I wanted to ask you about is I read that in 1980, the Capitol Police Force was officially separated from the District of Columbia [Metropolitan] Police Force. Did this impact the force at all? Do you remember any changes that took place in the early 1980s because of this?
- A. JOHNSON: I don't remember that much of a change once we had separated from the Metropolitan. There wasn't that much of a change. [The break] just gave us more work to do on our own, because we protect Capitol Hill ourselves.
- K. JOHNSON: Earlier I asked you about some of the Capitol Police Chiefs, what you remembered. What do you recollect about the various Sergeants at Arms that served for Congress, or on the House side? Did you have any daily interaction with the Sergeant at Arms?
- A. JOHNSON: Not too much interaction with the Sergeant at Arms at all, none at all, because they were always at the Capitol. But I know they were friendly, and they always tried to make sure the police had everything that they needed to have. You could always go to them if you needed something. Because I think I remember, wow, I remember Jack Russ. I'm trying to think, who else? I

remember—and, of course, [Bill] Livingood is here now, still.<sup>3</sup> I'm trying to remember if there was another one.

K. JOHNSON: Is it [Werner] Brandt?

A. JOHNSON: I don't know; I don't remember [Werner] Brandt. I can't think of the other ones.

K. JOHNSON: And Guthrie? Ben Guthrie?<sup>4</sup>

A. JOHNSON: I think so. See, I'm not familiar with them.

K. JOHNSON: So you on a daily basis had much more of a relationship with the police chief, rather than the Sergeant at Arms?

A. JOHNSON: Exactly, right. Yeah.

K. JOHNSON: Another topic that I came across was that the Capitol Police Force was unionized in the late 1990s. What do you remember about that?

A. JOHNSON: We tried. It started out pretty good, but then as . . . the union seemed to become, to me, more for management, than for their officers. That was another thing as I was leaving, a lot of people started to feel that way. And they started to pull out of the union because it would seem like our representatives would look out for us after a certain point, but now, most of them ended up becoming officials, which meant they didn't really have our best interests at heart. So like I said, quite a few people started pulling out of the union. So it didn't really work, because when you think about—to me,

when you think about a union, and you're up on Capitol Hill, it's hard to try to get things done through the police department. And to me, it didn't work. It might have worked for some other people, but it didn't work for me.

**K. JOHNSON:** Towards the end of your career, there were many more women on the police force. Did you have the opportunity to offer any advice to these new recruits?

**A. JOHNSON:** To me, I tried to tell them just do your job—what you're supposed to do. They're not asking you for any more than what they asked us for when I started. They don't want to hear that—from me, anyway. And it's almost as if you should be gone by now. So trying to tell them—because you're talking about the officers that are coming on now; coming on, they were my age when I started 32 years ago. So trying to tell them—but no, some would take the advice, and I said, "Just do what you're supposed to do, and do your best, and everything else will go fine." But they're not used to anybody telling them what to do. So when an official tells them something to do, where I would do it, they say, "Why should I do it?" Or they would tell me, "You're not an official, so why tell us?" But I'm trying to keep everything in line because I know how things run to make things better for the Members, staff, and everybody and tourists that's coming through. It makes your life a lot easier. So, some of them learned the hard way. I'm just hoping that everything will work out because the newer generation is completely different from what we were back in the—as everybody says—in the day. But I think, in all, I think they're going to be okay.

**K. JOHNSON:** When you first started on the force, did you and the other officers view your position as a career? Or do you think some of your colleagues viewed it more

as a stepping stone to something different, maybe with the Secret Service, for instance?

**A. JOHNSON:** Most of them viewed it as a stepping stone. I viewed it as a career. Coming from North Carolina, this was a good job for me, and it was a good career. But I think most people that came on in the '70s with me, they stuck it out. And then we always say, if you've been here past six years, most of the time you're here, you're not going anywhere. But the newer people now, they stay here, but then they look for something else, and it's a stepping stone for them. Because with the training . . . like I didn't go down to Georgia.<sup>5</sup> They said there's really good training down there. I went down on L Street. They said, "Training is really good." But then when they get here, they do all the . . . you're going to be doing all this work—you're going to have PD; you're going to be kicking in doors; you're going to be doing all this. And then they get here. The young people now, they get here, and they say, "We're checking purses; we're telling people to step back and do this," so it's not the training that they're doing. They're doing good training. Like I told them, this is in case something really happens. You're ready for it. I mean, right now you have to do just a small stepping stone, but I would say I would be happy. That is, I'd rather have this steppingstone than to have something worse happen, like we've had back with the 9/11 and the officers being shot. At least you know your training is there. They want to do more. So that's why they're using this as a stepping stone at this point now.

**K. JOHNSON:** So you think that this is something that is still the case—that a lot of officers view this still as a steppingstone to other professions?

**A. JOHNSON:** Yeah, the younger ones that are coming in now.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, if you had the opportunity at this point, if there were some young women that were thinking about joining the Capitol Police Force, what advice would you offer them?

**A. JOHNSON:** Oh, wow. {laughter} I would recommend it . . . I think it's a good job, and it's improving a lot. The changes have improved a lot. If I was young again and could do it, I would come here and work. Yes, it's a good opportunity, and knowing what I know, I would come back. Young? Yeah, I would recommend it. As a matter of fact, I've got a niece that wants to come. I said, "Okay, I would recommend it to her because it's good."

**K. JOHNSON:** Why would you recommend it?

**A. JOHNSON:** The experience—to get to know the Members of Congress, get to know the laws, get to know the people, and the experience. And it's a good place to work; it really is. And the experience, it's just worth it, to me.

**K. JOHNSON:** Was there anything else you wanted to add today?

**A. JOHNSON:** No—nothing that I can think of.

**K. JOHNSON:** Well, thank you very much. This was enjoyable.

**A. JOHNSON:** Thank you, Kathleen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James M. Powell became the first chief of the newly autonomous Capitol Police Force on February 1, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Reference is to multiple episodes. In 1998, Russell E. Weston, Jr., shot and killed Capitol Police Officers Jacob J. Chestnut, Jr., and Detective John M. Gibson in the line of duty. In a separate incident following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the offices of then Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle received a letter containing trace amounts of anthrax bacteria.

<sup>3</sup> William "Bill" Livingood served as the House Sergeant at Arms from January 4, 1995 to January 17, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Werner W. Brandt was the House Sergeant at Arms from March 12, 1992, to January 4, 1995. Benjamin J. Guthrie was the House Sergeant at Arms from March 1, 1980, to January 3, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> The main campus of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center is located in Glynco, Georgia. All federal law enforcement officers, from the Secret Service to the Border Patrol to the Capitol Police, train first at the Glynco campus before moving on to specific training.

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