

**Oral History of Robert P. Watkins**  
**First Interview**  
**February 5, 2019**

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is James McKeown, and the interviewee is Robert Patterson Watkins III. The interview took place at the law offices of Williams & Connolly on Tuesday, February 5, 2019. This is the first interview.

MR. McKEOWN: Mr. Watkins, good afternoon.

MR. WATKINS: Good afternoon, Mr. McKeown.

MR. McKEOWN: We don't know one another, so I would like you to start by telling me about Robert Watkins before he was a lawyer. I'd like you to take me back to your earliest times and tell me where you were born, where you grew up, and all the things that followed being born and starting to grow up.

MR. WATKINS: I was born on July 6, 1937, in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Boston City Hospital. I went to the Ruggles Street Nursery School. It was run by caring people who were training at Tufts University. I recall that with great affection. I don't remember the names of the teachers, but it was a great experience.

MR. McKEOWN: When did you start nursery school?

MR. WATKINS: I was either four or five. I can't recall exactly when it was, but I do recall the experience. I went there for about a year, and then I started primary school at the Louisa May Alcott School in Boston's South End. I lived in the Lennox Street Housing Project, which was a good place for me to grow up. I never knew that housing projects had such a bad reputation. My parents had many friends there, and there were many children my age.

We lived there during the war from 1940 to 1953 or 1954. It was terrific. My mother was intent on choosing good schools for me. She enrolled me in the Louisa May Alcott School in the South End of Boston, though we lived in Roxbury another, section of Boston. I started kindergarten the Alcott. Boston, although not legally segregated there were certain schools that African Americans went to and other schools for Caucasians. The Alcott was completely integrated. There were African Americans, Greeks, Italians, and others. It was a co-ed school from kindergarten to third grade.

MR. McKEOWN: Was it a public school?

MR. WATKINS: It was a public school. We had great teachers. There were some African American teachers, but most of the teachers were Caucasian. I made some good friends in that school. As a matter of fact, one of the friends I made in kindergarten; his name was Arthur Collias. He was a Greek boy that lived not as close to the school as I did. We just hit it off and we had a great relationship. We stayed in touch. He died last year. I don't know how other schools operated, but the Alcott was a great place for me to begin school. I liked getting up and going to school.

MR. McKEOWN: Was it a school that started in kindergarten and went through the eighth grade?

MR. WATKINS: No. It was kindergarten through third grade. Then, for third grade, I attended the integrated Dwight School (which was closer to my home than the Alcott) in the South End. So the sequence of attendance was Louisa

May Alcott through third grade, the Dwight School for the fourth grade; and the fifth and sixth grades at the Sherwin School where all students were African American. My mother would have preferred that I continue at the Dwight School. However, she received a letter from the Boston School Board, sometime after I left the fourth grade, saying that I would be transferred to Sherwin. My mother tried unsuccessfully to have me finish the fifth and sixth grades at the Dwight School; however, the School Board said that Sherwin is your local school. She was disappointed because it did not have the resources of the integrated schools. Most of the boys that went to the Sherwin School I knew because many of them lived in the same housing project I did; I knew the others because they had gone to nursery school with me. So that was an easy transition for me insofar as the boys were concerned.

MR. McKEOWN: Was Arthur Collias a part of this?

MR. WATKINS: Arthur was not. Arthur went to the Dwight School, where he went through to the end, but there's more to that story. After the sixth grade, I transferred to the Latin School. But let me tell you about the African-American Sherwin School. The school was in a building that was hundred years old (i.e., built in the 1840s). It was in the middle of a black neighborhood, and the teachers were generally white. I didn't have any black teachers at that school. I learned what I was supposed to learn there and did reasonably well.

MR. McKEOWN: What were the class sizes at the Sherwin School?

MR. WATKINS: There were about 30 students per class. So the class size was not a problem. The school was not great, but it was well disciplined. I remember, the fifth grade homeroom teacher left the room sometimes, and when she came back, the boys were raising hell. As punishment, she had the entire class write, "Quiet" for the rest of the day until each class member had written the word 500 times.

MR. McKEOWN: This was all taking place, the Alcott, Dwight and Sherwin Schools; these would be during the World War II years?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, then I left the Sherwin School in 1949.

MR. McKEOWN: Were there any effects that you felt as a child such as rationing, or did your mother sort of filter that out of your life?

MR. WATKINS: No. I didn't know enough to feel I was deprived in any way. The schools provided milk and cookies. World War II did not affect me as far as I can remember.

MR. McKEOWN: Were most of the teachers that you had in those days women?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, all teachers were women at the Alcott, Dwight, and Sherwin Schools. My time at the Sherwin School was interesting, but in the sixth grade there, I told my mother that I wanted to go to the Boston Latin School. One had to have honor roll grades or pass an exam to be admitted. Well, when I said I wanted to go, my mother went to the school and talked to my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Strachan. I'll never forget it. My mother said Robert wants to go to Latin School and he wants his report card to register at Latin. The teacher attempted to discourage my mother and me from

going to the Latin School which had a college prep curriculum. Mrs. Strachan said that my family would not have the money for me to go to college after Latin School. My mother was outraged. She told the teacher that was not her business; she demanded and received the report card. I took the report card and registered at Latin. Ronnie McMullen, one of the other fellows in my sixth grade class who lived in the housing project with me, also registered at the Latin School.

MR. McKEOWN: Is this a public school?

MR. WATKINS: Yes. It was very rigorous. Boston Latin School's high academic standards are illustrated by what happened. When I started there, my seventh grade homeroom class had about 25 students; before the end of the year, it was reduced by six or seven boys who went back to their local neighborhood schools because they didn't meet the academic standards of the Latin School.

MR. McKEOWN: You had said that the Alcott School was just over the border, I believe, from where you were living in Roxbury. Where were the Dwight and Sherwin Schools?

MR. WATKINS: I thought that lived in the South End because the South End was where the Alcott School was. I learned that the side of the street I lived on was in Roxbury. Since I lived on the Roxbury side of the street, I could not attend schools in the South End.

MR. McKEOWN: The Dwight and Sherwin Schools, where were those located?

MR. WATKINS: The Dwight and Alcott Schools were in the South End. The Sherwin School was in Roxbury.

MR. McKEOWN: Were you walking to school in those days?

MR. WATKINS: I walked and my parents didn't take me. They said it's time to go to school, so I'd get my lunch and go. All the schools I attended were within walking distance from my house.

MR. McKEOWN: Can you tell me a little bit about your folks? Did your mother refer to you as Robert?

MR. WATKINS: My family called me Bobby. My teachers referred to me as Robert. My dad's name was Robert Patterson Watkins. My grandfather's name was Robert Patterson Watkins. When all of my aunts and uncles would say or talk about Bobby they'd be referring to my father or my grandfather, so I became Baby Bobby. It got to a certain point where I wasn't Baby anymore, so I became Bobby, and that's what my family called me and the people in the neighborhood did the same. At school, I was Robert, and that was fine with me.

MR. McKEOWN: Your mom's name was?

MR. WATKINS: Kate Marian Watkins. Originally she lived in South Carolina and sometime in the 1920s, she came to Boston and was involved with a tennis club, and one of her friends introduced my father to her, and they ultimately got married.

MR. McKEOWN: You mentioned a sister. Do you have other siblings?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, I have two sisters. They were born in 1942, and they're twins. Jane and Janet are their names. One of my sisters, Jane, still lives in Boston. She lives in a place called Dorchester. My other sister, Janet, has lived many places. When she lived in Boston, she met and married a gentleman from the country of Liberia called Marbu Dennis. He went to school in England initially, and then attended Boston University. She moved with him to Liberia and lived there for twenty years until the 1980s.

Liberia was founded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was populated initially by freed African slaves from New York who wanted to go back to the continent of Africa; they began to resettle in Liberia in 1820. The immigration of freed slaves was largely the work of the American Colonization Society; a United States (U.S.) organization was founded in 1816 to return them to Africa. The expedition was partially funded in 1819 by the U.S. Congress; they appropriated \$100,000 to be used to return displaced Africans illegally brought to the U.S., after the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, to Africa.

In April 1980, there was a bloody coup in Liberia, staged by the Liberian military under the leadership of Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe; my sister and her husband was there at that time. It occurred because the society in Liberia had very rigid class distinctions between the indigenous people, and the people who were Americans, Americo-Liberians they were called, who were at the top of the social structure. Janet's husband was an Americo-Liberian who ran his father's rubber plantation. Both had

significant jobs and positions in the Liberian government. One of Marbu's sisters was the equivalent of the Federal Reserve Chairman at that time, in the mid-1980s.

My mother was very concerned about my sister. The indigenous people decided to take over the government. They took a number of Americo-Liberians onto the beach and just shot them. She sent telegrams trying to get Janet to come back to the United States (U.S.). She stayed in Liberia for about two more years; Marbu was arrested and imprisoned. Janet said people didn't normally ever come out of prison. She returned to the U.S. and collected the money that she needed from Americo-Liberians living here to get her husband out of prison. She returned to Liberia with to secure his release.

Marbu didn't want to stay in Liberia, but, if he'd left, those in power would have confiscated his family property. He stayed for a while to run the family rubber plantation and left for England, while Janet returned to the U.S. They would meet periodically, but their marriage couldn't withstand the distance between them. In the end, Janet stayed in the States; Marbu resided between Liberia and England. He came to the U.S. for a while. Marbu is my second son, Matthew's, godfather. During those visits, Matthew was just beginning to learn how to play baseball; he wanted to see his godson play. He was a cricketer. He went to as many of Matthew's games as he could while he visited with us. I don't know

what's become of him. He was a good guy, and I'm sorry the marriage to my sister didn't work out.

MR. McKEOWN: It seems from your lineage, from what you've just described, that your family goes back a way. You go back to a grandfather named Robert Patterson Watkins. Have you traced your family history all the way back?

MR. WATKINS: No. I haven't done it. My sister Jane was more interested in that than I was; I've never really been interested in tracing our family history. I think that now that I'm older, and I have some time, I'd like to do that. One of my cousins, who is my age, is undertaking this project.

MR. McKEOWN: With your Harvard connection, this fellow up there who does a television show may be able to help.

MR. WATKINS: I don't know. It's possible.

MR. McKEOWN: Was your dad off doing work stuff during World War II?

MR. WATKINS: He was a dental technician. That means he made false teeth for dentists; he was part of a group that made false teeth.

MR. McKEOWN: In the Army?

MR. WATKINS: No. He was not in the military. He was diabetic, a serious diabetic. He had to take insulin every day. I never knew when he might have a diabetic attack. I remember that he had them a couple of times. He was exempt from the Army. Then, when the Army needed dental technicians, they offered him a position as a warrant officer. After some consideration, he decided he wasn't going into the Army and did not accept the warrant officer position, so he remained a civilian.

MR. McKEOWN: Where did he get his dental technician training?

MR. WATKINS: I don't know. I believe that there was a German man, Hans Tashner, who had come to this country before the war and had set up a business of providing dentists with false teeth for their patients. The Germans were much more advanced in this area than the Americans were; my father started working for him and learned the trade. He left Tashner and began working for a man called Bill Bowser. He worked with him for a while, and then subsequently became a dental technician for other Boston dental labs.

MR. McKEOWN: You started off living in a housing project, which, these days, does not always connote something positive. You mentioned, I think, one of your friends, Ronnie McMullen, was from there. I take it he was from an Irish descendant family?

MR. WATKINS: He was not. He is African American whose mother was from Delaware; she was a friend of my mother's. We were the first people who moved into this housing project in Roxbury.

MR. McKEOWN: Where were you before this?

MR. WATKINS: We lived in an apartment building called the Arena Chambers. I have very little recollection of Arena Chambers. The recollection of my childhood really begins with the Lennox Street Housing Project.

MR. McKEOWN: How big of a complex was it?

MR. WATKINS: It was probably four blocks or five blocks, but all of the buildings were only three stories tall. It had a wading pool. There were grassy plots of

land between the buildings. There were wing sets, jungle gyms, and lots of things for kids to do. I remember that the lawns were regularly mowed. During the war, mothers and fathers went out in the complex and were allowed to dig the lawns up, plant vegetables, and create gardens.

MR. McKEOWN: They called them victory gardens, didn't they?

MR. WATKINS: I don't know what they called them, but I can remember my mother going out and pulling up all kinds of vegetables from these gardens. It was a great place for us to grow up.

MR. McKEOWN: But it wasn't just an African American housing project?

MR. WATKINS: Yes it was. Only African Americans lived there.

MR. McKEOWN: How long did your family live there?

MR. WATKINS: I would have to say it was from about 1941, because my sisters were born in 1942. I can remember them coming home from the hospital, and it was to the housing project. So we lived there from 1941 until about 1953 or 1954. Then we moved to a house in Roxbury.

MR. McKEOWN: Is the project still there?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, it is still there.

MR. McKEOWN: Now does it have all the problems that we associate with the projects these days?

MR. WATKINS: I don't know. I have not been in or through the housing project since we moved away. My life just wasn't involved in that.

MR. McKEOWN: What does your sister Jane who still lives in the Boston area do?

MR. WATKINS: She lives in Dorchester, one of the sections of Boston. She bought a house and had two children. She worked in the Navy Yard during her entire career in government; Jane retired when she reached 62; she had been working there from the day she graduated from high school.

MR. McKEOWN: As a child growing up, how did you spend your weekends?

MR. WATKINS: I played in the projects and was in the Boy Scouts. After I was about ten, I spent some time learning to play tennis. My parents separated when I was about ten years old. My father lived somewhere else in Boston, and I continued to live in the housing project with my mother and sisters. My dad was a tennis player, and I liked to go out with him when he was playing. As a result, I learned to play tennis, and when I was in high school, I was reasonably good, and I was able to go to some tennis tournaments. I went to tennis tournaments in Bridgeport, New York and in New Jersey. Before the United States Tennis Association (USTA) allowed blacks in, there was its African American counterpart, the American Tennis Association (ATA). I played in tournaments in Durham, North Carolina and in Daytona Beach, Florida at Bethune Cookman College, where they held the ATA tournament -- a national black tennis tournament. That's one of the things I did after I got to 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

One of my father's brothers, John Watkins, played every sport there was. In fact, he organized the Five Star Club. It was basically the Watkins family men [many of whom were stevedores] and their friends. They [uncles, cousins, and friends] competed in Settlement House leagues

around Boston, and they would take me along with them when they competed, and I would sit and watch. They taught me how to play basketball and put me on their team when I was about 12 years old. They played in South Boston, Dorchester, and wherever. They also formed a football and softball team, but I wasn't involved in that. I had many uncles who thought I was special because I was the only Watkins boy of my generation; there were no boys after my father's siblings. My paternal grandfather, Grandpa Watkins, had five girls and then started having boys – five of them. My father was the eldest of the Watkins boys. When my aunts got married and had children, some were girls, but, most were boys. They said I needed something to do, so they taught me how to score basketball games; they didn't have an official scorer, so, I became the scorer. They generally played on Saturday. That was a lot of fun. So that's where I spent my weekends.

MR. McKEOWN: Was Sunday church-going day?

MR. WATKINS: It was for me. My parents were not big church-goers, but I liked the church that was up the street from our house. It's the Church of St. Augustine and St. Martin. It was within walking distance from my house. When I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, some of my friends and other people from the neighborhood went to that church and I started going with them; it became my church and I was quite active in it. I became an acolyte at age 15.

MR. McKEOWN: What does an acolyte do?

MR. WATKINS: He serves the priests during Masses. In the Catholic Church, they're called altar boys, but acolyte is the proper term. The Episcopalian church is quite like an Anglo-Catholic church in Britain.

MR. McKEOWN: I take it that you must have been a very serious student.

MR. WATKINS: I wouldn't say very serious.

MR. McKEOWN: A very good student.

MR. WATKINS: Yes I was. When I was at the Alcott, Dwight and Sherwin Schools, I didn't want to fail anything, so I did the work. When I went to the Latin School, I knew I had to do the work, and I did it. I was in the top 15% of my class at the Latin School from the 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I was elected secretary of my class. Because of that, it was easier for me to get into college than for a lot of people.

My father and mother had a friend, Bill Harrison, who had been to Latin School and who had gone to Harvard and apparently did very well because he also spent a couple years at Cambridge University in England. He was someone that everybody in the black community knew; he was a real intellectual. There was really no place for him to operate in the black community in the 1940s and 1950s as an intellectual. He couldn't teach. They just didn't hire people with his kind of credentials. He was a good guy, and I always knew when he visited our community, my mother and father would be very interested to hear what he was going to say about what was going on in the community and in the world. When I went to Latin School, he came by the house to congratulate me for being admitted

to the school; he said that the Latin School was a very good school and the fact that I was attending classes there was great. It was a big deal. So I learned about the Latin School from Bill. I knew about Harvard because I played tennis with my dad; you could go to the Harvard courts in the summer time and rent a court and play.

Latin School admitted almost a third of the class to Harvard. That's sixty or so boys from one class going to Harvard. The school was founded in 1635, and Harvard was founded in 1636. In 1955, I was admitted to Harvard; we had 60 admits from the Latin School to Harvard that year. My classmates and I who went to Harvard, say Harvard was founded for the boys in the Latin School to have somewhere to go. Of those 60, I think 52 or 53 matriculated to Harvard. Those who didn't go to Harvard went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). We had more Latin School people at Harvard in my class than any other public school. If you went to Latin School and you graduated you usually did reasonably well.

MR. McKEOWN: What did you find to be the most difficult or challenging part at the Boston Latin School, whether it was academically or socially or whatever it might be?

MR. WATKINS: My parents were not academics. They didn't have jobs that required you sitting down and write papers and things like that. The most challenging aspect for me was doing all of the homework at the Latin School. I just didn't understand how important it was not just to get through, but how

important it was to be in the top 10% of the class, to be the best you could be. So, I look back now and say I did well, but I could have done a lot better.

MR. McKEOWN: You were still living in the projects at that time?

MR. WATKINS: I was living in the projects when I went to the Latin School, and that was 1949. I was there until the early 1953 or 1954.

MR. McKEOWN: What about the physical problems of apartment living?

MR. WATKINS: The first apartment that my family lived in had two bedrooms, so there was one for me, and one for my parents, and a kitchen, a bathroom, etc. When my sisters came along, we moved to a three-bedroom apartment; there was a room for me, one for my two sisters, and one for my parents. I never thought I was deprived or felt any less because I lived in a project.

MR. McKEOWN: At some point, did you become sensitive that there was a separation of the races?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, I always knew there was separation. In Boston, it didn't affect me in the same way it affected people in the South. I could go to the hospitals, I could go to the schools, and I could use the library. I could also ride the streetcar anywhere I wanted to go. I didn't think about segregation until I went to play tennis in the South. I went by myself. My father told me, "Now son, when you get on the train, everything will be fine until you get to Baltimore. The conductor will come through the train and tell you that you have to move to another car." Black folks had to go to a separate car back then. He said to me, "There's been an Interstate Commerce

Commission (FCC) court decision that says railroads in the interstate commerce can't segregate trains anymore, so, when the conductor comes through and tells you to move to another care, you must not move."

MR. McKEOWN: You were how old then?

MR. WATKINS: I was 15 or 16. He talked to me in a way that I knew this was serious. When he said he didn't want me to make that move, I knew that I should not when the conductor came through and told me to move to a car for blacks. When to conductor approached me and told me to move, I said I was not moving. He looked at me and said "You're a wise guy." I said, "I just don't have to move, and I'm not going to move." I knew my father was going to ask me what happened in Baltimore when I returned to Boston. I couldn't lie to him. I was proud that I could say to him, "No Dad, I didn't move." I stayed in the car. He asked how I felt, and I said, well, I was concerned to some extent, but I knew I had my seat and I was going to stay in it. I got off in the Carolinas to get something to eat, and found a segregated eating facility, so I bought some food and something to drink. I couldn't eat in the restaurant so I ate on the platform. I got back on the train and I was concerned because I left the seat; I thought the conductor might take my seat and then I'd have to go to the black car. I found my seat was still available. I kept the seat until I arrived in Daytona Beach, Florida. That was the first time I experienced racial segregation.

My mother was very militant. She was as militant as you can be in Boston. I can remember after the Second World War, her going to Dudley

Street, the downtown of our neighborhood where the stores hired no black clerks and she was down there in a demonstration. She was carrying a sign down advocating “Don’t Eat Where You Can’t Shop,” or “Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Work.” My father was from Boston, and that was not something that he did. He felt that we did not have to do that in the city. That was his approach. But my mother said if we’re going to spend our money in those stores, there ought to be some black clerks in them.

That was when I first became aware of racial division in Boston. If you lived in our neighborhood all the time and didn’t go to school in other places, you could live your life without really being aware that you were being segregated. For instance, there was a housing project in South Boston which was very Irish where no black families lived so you didn’t ever have to have any contact with them unless you played basketball. I played basketball and we’d go to South Boston and play ball there; the Irish boys would call you derogatory names during or after the games. I knew then that I might have to fight to get out of the neighborhood after those games.

MR. McKEOWN: Were these racially charged fights?

MR. WATKINS: Oh yes. When I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Latin School, in my class named McAlister called me a nigger, so I climbed over two desks to get to him. I hit him twice -- in the mouth and nose.

One of the rules at the Latin School was, “No fighting.” If a student was caught fighting he was expelled immediately without a

hearing. Even if my actions were justified I would have been expelled. Well, my homeroom teacher, T.A. Donnelly, heard about what I had done and why I did it. He said to me, “You know the rules and I will not report this to the headmaster, but, this is your last chance. If you fight again, you will be expelled. You will have to go back to your local neighborhood school.” So I became aware of the racial tension at the Latin School and how my actions had almost caused me to be thrown out of school.

MR. McKEOWN: Were you being bused to Boston Latin School at that time?

MR. WATKINS: No, there was no busing at that time. I walked every day to Latin School. When I got to the upper grades, I sometimes took public transportation. All students could buy car checks for five cents apiece, which, you gave to the conductor on the train or the subway; that gave you a ride. So, if I had a car check, I could ride to Latin School. But it took more time for me to take public transportation because you had to change several times to get a train that ultimately took you to Latin School. If the weather was good, which it was most of the time, I could walk, and I did.

MR. McKEOWN: Were you always with the same homeroom?

MR. WATKINS: No. I met a whole new set of students every year.

MR. McKEOWN: Do you still have any lasting friends or acquaintances that you keep in contact with from those days?

MR. WATKINS: Yes. I am still in contact with my Latin School classmates. Latin School friendships are stronger than my college friendships. I went to my 60<sup>th</sup> class reunion at the Latin School for the Class of 1955 and reconnected

with old classmates. I saw people I hadn't seen in years. The draw for the reunion was that we all had positive experiences at the Latin School; I think matriculation from the Latin School ultimately helped us into good colleges.

There are some people that I still see. When we graduated from Latin School, everybody went off to college. We had a chance to go, and everybody that I knew went. There were a couple guys who went to college, then went into the military or the military academy. If you're in the military professionally, you had to circulate through Washington, DC at some stage in your career. I learned after I had been living in DC for three or four years that there were guys from Latin School that were also in town. One of them called and said, "I heard you're living in Washington, DC; so, do I." We get together about once a year with four or five people that were from Latin School. We go someplace -- a ballgame or somebody will have a party at his house or what have you. Latin school ties are stronger than my ties to college.

Another classmate at the reunion came up to me and said I'm so and so. He said, "You don't remember me. I was a nerd." I said, "What do you mean? I remember everybody. I was the class secretary." I knew his name, but I had never had any interaction with him. I asked him what he did after Latin School. He said he went to MIT and decided he didn't like chemistry, and didn't know what he was going to do next. He went to California. This was the inception of the computer. My classmate said,

“I founded a computer company.” I said, “That’s great. What do you do now?” He said, “I sold the company.” I asked, “To whom?” He said it was to Apple or Microsoft for a lot of money. After he sold it, he said, “Well, I’d never been out of Boston until I went to California, so I think it’s time for me to go to Europe. I learned back then that if I went to Europe, I could buy a Mercedes through this particular company and you could drive the car around Europe and they’d ship it back to the States for you, so that’s what I did.” He wasn’t married and didn’t have a girlfriend. He drove a car around Europe for six months, and I guess decided he needed to go back. He thought that the company was a pretty good business so he bought it. I asked, “What’s happened to the company now?” He said, “I still own it, but I don’t run it. Someone else does that for me.”

MR. McKEOWN: When you made the decision that it was the Latin School that you wanted to go to, putting yourself back then, were you saying to yourself that you knew you wanted to go to college as well?

MR. WATKINS: I didn’t think about that. I really wasn’t thinking about going to college. I knew the Latin School was the best place in town. It was a place that boys I knew went to and liked. They were smart and interesting people. So I wanted to go there. I think my mother had been surreptitiously telling me how wonderful Latin School was, and I said to her one time, “Oh, mother, it was great that you sent me to Latin School.” She said, “Wait, son, I didn’t send you to Latin School.” I can remember you came up to me and

said, "I want to go to the Latin School." "I went out and got your report card and sent you over to the there to register, and that's how it started."

MR. McKEOWN: You had no ambitions beyond that, like I want to be a fighter pilot or whatever?

MR. WATKINS: I just didn't know what I wanted to be. I thought I might like to be a dental technician like my father.

MR. McKEOWN: Not a professional tennis player?

MR. WATKINS: No, but I liked to play tennis.

MR. McKEOWN: Tell me about the socializing during those years. Did the school arrange socials with area girls' schools?

MR. WATKINS: No. In my class, there were ten African American boys; we generally came from the same neighborhood. We might not have gone to the same elementary school, but we knew each other or we knew of each other. Since I played sports and they played sports, I would know them socially. There was a lunchroom at the Latin School when I was a sophomore where I could go to ask what was happening over the weekend. It was usually one of the boys from our school or one of the girls from Girls Latin School who was having the party. The schools did nothing to set them up. We also knew the African American girls from our neighborhood because we would ride the subway with them, and they'd know who were having parties and we would go with them.

MR. McKEOWN: We're more sensitive today to the concept of diversity. Did you feel that you were integrated into the school as part of the school fabric?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, I was just another boy at the Latin School. I did what the boys at the Latin School did. I did not feel that I was treated differently.

MR. McKEOWN: Did you feel like you were part of the whole student body? When you sat down to eat lunch, were you eating with other African Americans?

MR. WATKINS: No, all African Americans did not eat together. There just weren't that many of us boys; we ate at different times. But you just never thought of that. I just ate with the boys who you knew from playing sports or from my class.

MR. McKEOWN: What were the most challenging courses for you that you took at the Latin School, where you had to put in some extra effort?

MR. WATKINS: In my sophomore year, I took Latin, English, and German. So from my sophomore through my senior years, I was taking three languages and math. It was hard because you had to put in the time on every subject. You couldn't go to class and absorb things. I had to do the work at home. Teachers, called Masters, would call on members of the class every day. He would say, "Mr. Watkins, I want you to get up and translate the next forty lines of Cicero." I would get up and do the best that I could. I just didn't want to be looked on as one of the dummies in the class. It was as important for me to make sure that my colleagues in the class think I was as smart as they were. I also did the work because it was interesting. At that stage in my life, it was important that I not look like a fool in front of my classmates.

MR. McKEOWN: Were there class clowns that just knew that they weren't going to make it?

MR. WATKINS: No. After the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, many boys were weeded out. If you had good grades you had the option to go to a normal high school or stay at the Latin School; most stayed. The attrition rate got lower as you went from grade to grade.

MR. McKEOWN: At what point in the process did you suddenly say to yourself now I have to think about whether I want to go to college. When did that start to occur to you?

MR. WATKINS: I was sure after Class IV (9<sup>th</sup> grade) that I was I going to go to college. The question was which college I would attend. It was quite stupid for me because my parents didn't have any money to finance college. In my junior year, I took the SATs I applied to the colleges that I thought I had a chance of being admitted. I knew people at various colleges that I thought were interesting, and I applied to those colleges.

MR. McKEOWN: Do you recall which ones?

MR. WATKINS: I applied to Yale, to Williams, and to Harvard. My guidance counselor called me in one day and said, "I think you can get into all of them, but you don't want to go to Williams." I asked what he meant. He said there are a lot of New York boys at Williams, it's very New York-oriented, and I don't think that would be a good place for you." I was upset because he was telling me what he thought I should do. I applied and wanted to go to Yale because I knew a great guy there from Lynn, Massachusetts. He was a track star, a basketball player, and a very good student; I thought he was an admirable person, so I applied to Yale. I went to New Haven and spent

the weekend with him and learned so much about Yale. At some point, the guidance counselor asked me why Yale as opposed to Harvard. I told him that I did not want to live at home when I was in college. That was my main reason. He said, "You'll get a scholarship at Harvard if you commit to go there, and I'll tell Yale you're not coming. I went home and said to my mother, "He tells me that he can get me a scholarship at Harvard, and he doesn't think Williams is the place for me. My mother said, "Well, how can you not go to Harvard? You'll be there with men who will become world leaders." She didn't say I had to go to Harvard, but for her, it was an easy choice. So that's where I went.

MR. McKEOWN: Would your family have been able to afford Yale?

MR. WATKINS: Not unless Yale gave me a scholarship.

MR. McKEOWN: So you said the magic words, "I'm going to Harvard."

MR. WATKINS: That's right.

MR. McKEOWN: When you graduated from Boston Latin School were you accorded any special honors?

MR. WATKINS: Yes, I was elected as secretary of the class, to the National Society, and also received the Allen Hiram Whitman Award which was an award for keeping the class together.

MR. McKEOWN: Has the school moved its physical location?

MR. WATKINS: No. Its physical location is the same, but the school acquired the Simmons College athletic field next door and added school buildings there.

MR. McKEOWN: Interesting. Why don't we call it a day, and we'll pick up next time with Harvard and start to get into some of your professional areas. I want to thank you very much for today, Mr. Watkins.