

James Johnson
Page, U.S. House of Representatives

The Long Struggle for Representation: Oral Histories of African Americans in Congress

Ethel Payne

James Johnson describes his influential aunt.
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My aunt is a very special aunt. I have a lot of special mentors and leaders in my family. But my aunt was a pioneering journalist. She was one of the first African-American journalists—particularly female—that was part of the White House Press Corps. And so she was not only a journalist, she was a damn good journalist and a pioneering one. When Nixon went to his, Vice President Nixon went to Africa, I think it was around 1956 or thereabouts, she was part of the press corps that, that went there. And when they got back, she invited the Nixons to her apartment for a reception and a party. And they came. In fact, I have the thank-you letter that Richard Nixon wrote to my aunt, and Pat Nixon wrote to my aunt about how much they enjoyed being in her apartment and meeting folks and whatnot. So, my aunt was, you know, a heavy hitter politically. She was also, at times, worked for the ALF-CIO. And so she was very connected. She never married, was very connected, and so she knew about the Page program. She knew about the school. And she proposed the idea, which my dad went along with because of the school. Had it not been for the school that was attached to the Page program, that my being a Page would have never happened. And he also went along with it because in my coming year I was going to live with my aunt who lived out in town as opposed to the normal circumstances that Pages lived under. Because to go to a city or go to another place without having family to look after you—not, not, that's not what—that wasn't happening. So if my aunt had not lived in Washington and had that opportunity, I wouldn't have been a Page because my dad wouldn't have, wouldn't have gone along with that—or my mother for that matter.