BERMAN: Today is October 16, 2007. I am Sandra Berman. I am here with Elizabeth Slaton Wallace. Mrs. Wallace, I would like to thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum.

WALLACE: I’m glad to be of help.

BERMAN: I’m very appreciative. I’d like to begin by asking you to explain how exactly you are related to Governor John Slaton.¹

WALLACE: Governor Slaton was my great uncle. My father, John Marshall Slaton, Jr., was born in 1895. I was always told, in the 1800s that you could name a nephew for an uncle, for a grandfather, or for whoever and have them ‘junior.’ He was the fourth son. He was named for his uncle, John Marshall Slaton, Jr. In 1900, I was always told, they changed that to where you had to be a son to be a ‘junior,’ but he never changed his name. His uncle, being a famous person, even though when Uncle Jack died, he still didn’t change from John Marshall Slaton, Jr. It’s been confusing all these years. So many people think that Governor Slaton was my grandfather, but he was not. My grandfather was William Martin Slaton, who was Governor Slaton's only brother. They had five or

¹ John Marshall Slaton (1866-1955) was Georgia's sixtieth governor, serving two terms in 1911-12 and 1913-15. He was also a state representative and state senator. He was a partner in the law firm Rosser, Brandon, Slaton and Phillips. Slaton's most notable act as governor was commuting the death penalty sentence of Atlanta factory boss Leo Frank, who had been convicted for the murder of a teenage girl employee. Soon after Slaton’s action, Frank was lynched. Because of Slaton's law firm partnership with Frank’s defense counsel, claims were made that Slaton's involvement raised a conflict of interest. Slaton later served as president of the Georgia State Bar Association.
six sisters, but there were only two boys. That's how my father was named John Marshall Slaton, Jr.

BERMAN: Can you describe him? His personality.

WALLACE: He was the smartest person I ever knew. The best way I can explain that is to say when I was in college at Randolph-Macon Woman's College from 1945 to 1949, whenever I was home on vacation I always went to see him. He always was sitting in a big easy chair in his den. I would sit at his feet on an ottoman. He would ask me about what I was studying. He was an attorney, as everybody knows, and I was a math major and a science minor. It just amazed me that I could discuss the math courses I was taking, the science courses I was taking, and he could discuss them intelligently with me. That impressed me terrifically. One very good example is my senior year. I was taking two courses, one mathematical astronomy and one atomic physics, which was the first atomic physics course taught in a woman's college after World War II. We had a professor who had been at Oak Ridge [National Laboratory]. His name was J. Gordon Syke, Jr.[sp] His father had been at Emory. It was just a fascinating class. What was the most fascinating about it to me was that in the study in mathematical astronomy that was about the largest things we knew about in the universe, [and] atomic physics, which was about the smallest things in the universe, we used the same mathematical formulas. I thought that was just amazing, and Uncle Jack could discuss that with me. How would he have known how to discuss that with me? I don't know, but he could, and intelligently. That's my biggest impression of how smart he was because my thing was not the thing that you would think he'd be knowledgeable about like history and English. We talked about those courses some. That was what impressed me. So that's my impression of him.

BERMAN: What about other personality traits? Was he a family man?

WALLACE: Very. Yes. We always went to see him when I was at home. He was very family oriented. Family members always went over there. He was, of course, obviously a man of great integrity, which impressed me, because I grew up hearing about the Leo Frank case.² I'm going to hear about it till I die, I'm sure. Of course, that was

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² Leo Frank (1884-1915) was a Jewish factory superintendent in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1913, he was accused of raping and murdering one of his employees, a 13-year-old girl named Mary Phagan, whose body was
common knowledge. I always knew about the Leo Frank case and his bravery and the fact that his wife [Sally Frances Grant Slaton] said . . . when all of the danger came up about it, they sent the National Guard out to the house and told him not to go to the inauguration the next day, which he did anyway. [They] told them not to commute the sentence, which he did. His wife said, “I would rather be the widow of a brave man than the wife of a coward.” She was very brave too. I remember her very pleasantly also. She died in 1946, whereas he lived until 1955. I really knew him better. She was a very regal looking person. Ultimate aristocratic lady. Of course, he was the ultimate Southern gentleman. He never dressed informally. Never. My aunt, Lamar Hitt [sp], said the one bad thing about the movie that they did about the Leo Frank case was they had him in the court . . . was it in the court room? Wherever they showed him . . . I think he was in the court room . . . in his shirtsleeves. She said, “He never was in his shirtsleeves!” And he wasn't. Even when he was sitting in his den, he was in a coat and tie. I don't think he had any informal clothes. He was always formally dressed. In the summer, as was the custom back then, he often wore a white suit, but it was a suit. It was not casual white pants. He was a very formal person. He worked up until about three weeks before he died in 1955. He was in his law office. He was productive to the very end.

BERMAN: That's amazing.

WALLACE: It is amazing.

BERMAN: By some, Governor Slaton is remembered as one of the most honorable men to have ever held public office in Georgia, but there are others in the south, especially in the aftermath of the Frank case, who thought of him as a villain because of the commutation. How did he see himself in regards to the Frank case?

WALLACE: He saw himself as doing the right thing. I always heard that he knew that Frank was innocent. Knowing that, there's no way that he could not commute the case. I also always heard that he knew that [Jim] Conley was the one who was guilty even found on the premises of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia. The trial was the catalyst for a great outburst of antisemitism led by the populist Tom Watson and the center of powerful class and political interests. Frank was sent to Milledgeville State Penitentiary to await his execution. Governor John M. Slaton, believing there had been a miscarriage of justice, commuted Frank’s sentence to life in prison. This enraged a group of men who styled themselves the “Knights of Mary Phagan.” They drove to the prison, kidnapped Frank from his cell and drove him to Marietta, Georgia where they lynched him. Many years later, the murderer was revealed to be Jim Conley, who had lied in the trial, pinning it on Frank instead. Frank was pardoned on March 11, 1986, although they stopped short of exonerating him.
though they did not prove it in the trial. From all of his connections and the people he talked to, I always heard that he was convinced that Conley was the guilty one and not Leo Frank. Therefore, it was his duty to commute the sentence because he could not send an innocent man to his death when he knew he was innocent. He was all into doing what was the right thing to do. I was always brought up with that concept that when you say you're going to do something, you do it, and you do what's the right thing. I've always tried to do that too.

**BERMAN:** Did he ever discuss the commutation? His memories of it?

**WALLACE:** Not with me. No. I guess he discussed them with somebody, but I never heard him discuss them, personally. No. I just heard it from family members, forever.

**BERMAN:** What did you hear about the mob and the fear that permeated . . . ?

**WALLACE:** That it was very, very dangerous. That they came to his house at Wingfield[^3] at Buckhead to kill him. They called out the National Guard to stop them or they would have probably broken into the house and killed him. That's what I always heard.

**BERMAN:** Did he ever talk about it? That night?

**WALLACE:** Not to me.

**BERMAN:** It's often been said that Governor Slaton left the next day, the day after the lynching, for a trip out West.

**WALLACE:** He left the day after the inauguration.

**BERMAN:** After the inauguration.

**WALLACE:** To go to California. They went on a train. It had been planned for months before. He was not fleeing anything. It was a vacation. He was going out of office. He and Aunt Sally had decided they would take a prolonged vacation to California. Went by train. What a dreadful thought. Anyway. That's what he did. It had nothing to do with the Leo Frank case. Nothing. That's been misconstrued. He did not flee. He just did what he had planned to do.

[^3]: The Slaton family built Wingfield, their Tudor-style house on a wooded acreage on the west side of Peachtree Road. They operated a farm and a riding rink for harness racing. The house became the Governor’s Mansion when he became governor in 1913. Following the governor’s death in 1955, a fire severely damaged the house. The property was sold, and Slaton Manor apartments were built there in 1958.
BERMAN: He went to visit William Randolph Hearst at San Simeon [State Park, California]. Did he ever talk about his relationship with him?

WALLACE: No. I never heard him talk about that.

BERMAN: It was interesting to me to see letters written from the Hearst property. Did he ever discuss, or did family members ever discuss Leo Frank in general? What he was like?

WALLACE: Just that he was innocent. No.

BERMAN: Did Governor Slaton ever mention his secretary, Aaron Hardy Ulm, the one we received all these letters from?

WALLACE: Not to me. I did not know anything about it.

BERMAN: Do you feel that he ever felt vindicated for what he did? He was so concerned in so many of these letters about his reputation and what had happened to his reputation. Do you think he ever felt vindicated for what he did by the people of Georgia?

WALLACE: I really don't know. I do know that he always knew that he did the right thing and that was what was important to him, not what anybody else thought. As I know, he was planning on running for the Senate, which that was killed, because his political life was totally . . . that was it after that. I don't know that he cared because he knew that he did the right thing, and that's what was important to him. That was the impression I always got was whether other people vindicated him or not was not what was important. The important thing was that he did the right thing.

BERMAN: In The Jeffersonian, Tom Watson vilified him.

WALLACE: Right.

BERMAN: Did he ever speak about Watson?

WALLACE: Not to me.

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4 William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) was a newspaper publisher of Atlanta Georgian. His journalism emphasized sensationalism and human interest stories.

5 The Hearst castle and landmark mansion is located within San Simeon State Park on the Central Coast of California. The residence was designed by architect Julia Morgan between 1919 and 1947 for William Randolph Hearst.

6 Aaron Hardy Ulm was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1879. He was secretary to Governor Joseph Brown in 1905 and later to Governor John M. Slaton, 1913-1915. Following the lynching of Leo Frank, Ulm moved his family to Washington, D.C.

7 Thomas E. Watson (1856-1922) was a lawyer, publisher, and the national Populist leader. He published an analysis of the Leo Frank trial, which caused a surge in demand for The Jeffersonian newspaper.
BERMAN: Did the family ever talk about the role Tom Watson played in all of this?
WALLACE: Not really. Not that I recall.
BERMAN: Because didn’t he virtually destroy his career? Tom Watson.
WALLACE: Yes. He did. I never did get any feeling from any family members of . . .
I don't know the right word to use . . . revenge or anything about it. No. The whole
picture I got my entire growing up was he did the right thing, and that's what was
important. Not, what other people did. I never felt like the family was out to get
anybody who was wrong in it, but pleased that my relative did what was the right thing to
do. He was an honest man and had integrity, which I have always felt like was an
inheritance of mine, that I should do the right thing too.
BERMAN: We realized from some of the letters that he maintained a friendship, a
correspondence, with William Smith,8 who was Jim Conley's attorney, who then tried to
show that Conley was in actuality the murderer.
WALLACE: Right.
BERMAN: Did he ever talk about his relationship with William Smith?
WALLACE: I never heard him mention it. But you realize that I was young. He died
in 1955. I was born in 1928. I was just 27 when he died. Of course, I remember him all
through growing up and intimate conversations with him in his den. No. I can't help you
on that.
BERMAN: Did he or did the family ever discuss how long he was gone on that
extended trip?
WALLACE: I am not positive about that. It might have been several months, but I
really am not sure. It was to be an extended trip. I don't know the exact length of time.
It was not in any way fleeing from anything. It was a preplanned vacation.
BERMAN: When he came back with his wife, were there concerns? Were they
afraid? Because we have the death threats in our collection at the museum. Letters that
were written to him, threatening him on a fairly regular basis. Do you know if the family
sought protection?

8 William Manning Smith ( -1949) was counsel for Jim Conley.
WALLACE: Not that I ever heard of. As far as I know, as soon as he got back, he went back to work as an attorney and worked as an attorney until three weeks before he died. No. I never heard anything about that.

BERMAN: Tom Watson made much of the fact that he was partners with Luther Rosser⁹ in the law firm.

WALLACE: Yes.

BERMAN: Did he discuss that relationship at all in connection with the commutation in the Frank case?

WALLACE: Not with me, so I can't help you on that. He really, Uncle Jack really never discussed the Leo Frank case with me. He may have with my father but not with me. I can't help you on that.

BERMAN: Do you remember any of these other individuals? Did they ever come around, like Luther Rosser or Ruben Arnold?¹⁰

WALLACE: Not when I was there. I was always there in a family setting, not in a business or any other form. To me, he was just my great uncle. You know, went there to dinner and went there to talk to him. It was purely family, and we were very close. We went often.

BERMAN: How do you think he would feel about all the continuing publicity and movies and books and plays and articles and now this exhibition? How do you think he would feel about all of this?

WALLACE: I can't answer for him, but I think he would feel like I said before, that he did the right thing. I'm, frankly, tired of it. I feel like they're never going to drop it. It's getting close to a hundred years. You would think they would let it go.

BERMAN: Why do you think that it's not? We are trying to understand that ourselves. Why do you think?

<End Tape 1, Side 1>

<Begin Tape 1, Side 2>

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⁹ Luther Zeigler Rosser (1857-1923) of the law firm Rosser, Brandon, Slaton and Phillips was chief counsel for Leo Frank.

¹⁰ Reuben R. Arnold (1868-1960) was a prominent Atlanta attorney who was part of Leo Frank’s defense team.
WALLACE: Perhaps because at that time, I always heard, at that time in the South, people were against the Jews. I don't understand why, but I heard that. The popular thing, obviously, to do would have been to let him die. The fact that he refused to do that, because that was the wrong thing to do and he was determined to do the right thing, was not the popular thing to do. That didn't matter to him. I always knew that he did what was right and it did not bother him that that was not the popular thing to do. I don't know how to answer it any better than that. I don't understand it either. Why would there have been? I don't know why.

BERMAN: What did he do when he came back? He went back to his . . .

WALLACE: Went back to work at his law firm.

BERMAN: Did his law firm suffer at first for . . . ?

WALLACE: How would I know? I don't know.

BERMAN: Right.

WALLACE: I know he made money practicing law until three weeks before he died. Evidently, it didn't hurt him too much.

BERMAN: Did he stay within that law firm? I mean, I know that the other participants passed away, but was it still his own private law firm?

WALLACE: It was his own law firm and what the exact name of it was, I do not know. I always thought it was his law firm. He came back and practiced law from then on. I know . . . this might or might not be interesting. I know he was one who wrote the bar exam.

BERMAN: Really.

WALLACE: I always heard that. I mean at some period of time. I don't mean forever. I don't know at what years he did. But I know, I always heard that he was one of the writers of the bar exam at some time.

BERMAN: It's amazing. It's an amazing story and an amazing man. I really want to thank you for participating in this interview.

WALLACE: I hope I've been able to help you a little.

BERMAN: You've been very helpful. Is there anything that you want to say before we conclude?

WALLACE: Not that I know of.
BERMAN: Do you feel that he's offered a legacy to your family?

WALLACE: Absolutely. Because as I have told you, I always felt that I should live up to his legacy and do what was the right thing. I haven't had any big deal things like he did. I've always tried to do what I think is the right thing even if it's controversial, which again, hadn't been anything that was a big deal. I definitely feel that as a legacy. Yes.

BERMAN: Thank you very much. We appreciate it.

WALLACE: I've enjoyed meeting you and pleased to have you here.

BERMAN: Thank you.

<End Tape 1, Side 2>

INTERVIEW ENDS