Lester Lee Bates, Sr.
(1904-1988)
Papers, 1942-2008

Volume: 4 linear feet
Processed: 2009 by Julie Milo
Provenance: Donated by the Lester L. Bates, Jr. Family
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Biographical Note:

A favorite saying of Mayor Lester Lee Bates, Sr. was: “There are two ways to meet a difficulty. One is to alter the difficulty and the other is to alter yourself to meet the difficulty.” Bates spent his life altering – improving – himself to meet and conquer the challenges of his poverty-stricken childhood; the creation, success, and eventual loss of two insurance companies; and the daily difficulties of leading a southern city through the tumultuous 1960s. Bates served as the mayor of Columbia, S.C. from 1958-1970, and endured through a legendary rags-to-riches life to achieve that status.

Lester L. Bates was born around 1904 in an area of Berkeley County, S.C. known as Hell Hole Swamp. He was the eighth of approximately fifteen children born to Alfred G. and Ella Cumbee Bates. Bates and his siblings lived on a tenant farm and received no more than an informal third grade education from a pair of missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints that were serving in the area.

At the age of twelve, Bates began work as a water boy for a local logging crew. While on the job, he suffered a near-fatal injury when he slipped under the wheel of a moving train. Consequently, he spent about one year recuperating in a Charleston hospital. He returned briefly to Berkeley County, but made his way back to Charleston around the age of fourteen. There, Bates worked various jobs and attended night school at the Salvation Army.

Around 1923, Bates became an agent with Industrial Life and Health Insurance Company. By 1931, he was a district manager with another insurance company, Atlantic Coast Life, and living in Columbia with his wife, Julia Burk Bates, and their two children, Julia [Mrs. John Breland] and Lester, Jr. In 1936, Bates had learned enough about the insurance business to start his own company, the Capital Life and Health Insurance Company. It prospered for almost twenty years until Bates sold it to the United Insurance Company of America in 1954. According to family members, the sale was made following intense political pressure from then-Governor James F. Byrnes.

Meanwhile, Bates served on the Columbia City Council for eight years, 1944 to 1952, during which time, and with Bates as assistant mayor, Columbia won the distinction of All-America City for the first time, in 1951. Bates ran for governor of South Carolina in the Democratic Primary in 1950, but lost to James F. Byrnes. He ran again in 1954, but again lost, this time to George Bell Timmerman, Jr.
In 1955, Bates founded a second company, the New South Life Insurance Company. His son, Lester, Jr., worked closely with him in this company, though he was officially an attorney by profession. Lester, Jr. graduated with a B.A. from Furman University in 1953 and from the University of South Carolina Law School in 1955. He maintained a law office in Columbia even while he served as the president of his father’s insurance company. Throughout his life, Lester, Jr. was also involved with the Columbia Rotary Club, annual South Carolina Prayer Breakfasts, Providence Home [a Christian Community Service Program], and the Richland County Bar Association. Lester, Jr. eventually reached the status of Chief Administrative Judge in the Columbia Municipal Courts. He married Gertrude Lomas, and the couple had three children: Leslee, Lester III, and Thomas.

Bates, Sr. became mayor of Columbia in 1958, and was re-elected twice, in 1962 and 1966. He chose not to run for a fourth term, ending his reign in 1970 to once again vie for the governorship against John C. West. Bates announced his candidacy for the 1970 gubernatorial race, but later dropped out due to health problems.

During Bates’ twelve years as mayor, Columbia once again, in 1964, earned the All-America City distinction. His additional achievements as mayor include opening the Columbia Metropolitan Airport in 1962 [with new facilities in 1965], incorporating the United States Army’s Fort Jackson into the Columbia city limits, building the Carolina Coliseum, and, perhaps most significantly, guiding Columbia through a peaceful integration process during the 1960s. Columbia can be counted among the few significant Southern cities to integrate without any violence. Bates’ family remembers Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson seeking Bates’ advice on the matter. He established the Columbia Community Relations Council, comprised of two committees – one African American and one white – who first met separately and then combined to orchestrate peaceful race relations in Columbia.

In 1972, New South Life Insurance Company ran into financial difficulties when it self-reported a nine million dollar deficiency in the state-required reserve, apparently due to miscalculations by the firm’s actuary. Bates and his son eventually lost the company.

Lester Lee Bates, Sr. suffered a stroke in 1980, and died eight years later on 24 February 1988, at the age of 83.

Scope and Content Note:

The Lester Lee Bates, Sr. Collection consists of four linear feet of documents, arranged into four series: Mayoral, Personal, Clippings, and Audiovisual. The collection as a whole chronicles the almost legendary life and the eventful mayorship of Lester Lee Bates, Sr.
The Mayoral series includes portions of Bates’ correspondence and schedules, in addition to topical files about other cities and mayoral issues like law enforcement, city/county government consolidation, and the South Carolina state constitution’s need for revision. Bates kept orderly files of newspapers clippings and information on these topics and others, showing that he took his responsibility as mayor seriously, even if he sometimes joked about the position. A newspaper article from 1970 quotes Bates telling this tale about his 1948 election as mayor, edging out John T. Campbell [who served as mayor following Bates, from 1970 to 1978]:

“Right after I was elected, wherever I’d go, people would ask: How did one from Hell Hole Swamp get elected mayor of Columbia? I answered: The people who knew me voted for John Campbell and the ones who knew him voted for me — and he knew fourteen more than I did.”

Bates worked diligently to develop the city of Columbia while he served as mayor, encouraging new buildings and programs. In a 14 June 1970 news article in The State, Bates shares the approach he applied while making decisions as mayor: “I believe strongly that the only reason for Columbia to be here is to serve South Carolina.” Indeed, Bates was known as a mayor who got things done; in 1967 when he fought to build a new medical school in Columbia, one contemporary quipped, “Rome was not built in a day, but Lester was not the foreman of that job.”

Perhaps the most significant portion of the Mayoral series are the papers regarding the Columbia Community Relations Council, a biracial committee of city and business leaders established to facilitate the process of desegregation in Columbia. Bates created this council in 1964, and it existed through the 1990s as a vehicle “to enhance the quality of life and make the Columbia community a better place to live and work for all residents” [Greater Columbia Community Relations Council, 1993-1994 Annual Report]. A popular anecdote about the council’s formation claims that Bates refused to accept volunteers, and instead insisted on appointing each member, both African-American and white. He maintained that a volunteer would have ulterior and self-serving motives that an appointed member would not. Backing up this story, a handwritten note by Bates included in the collection [found in the Speeches, Materials section], reads: “I never asked a citizen to help that refused; I never had a volunteer that was worth a damn.”

The files within the collection on the Columbia Community Relations Council contain information on its formation, organization [including bylaws], and programs like the Employment Guidance Center. Largely because of the influence of the Columbia Community
Relations Council and its programs, desegregation occurred quickly and relatively peacefully in Columbia in the 1960s. A particularly interesting document within this series is a twenty page report by “The Negro Students of the University of South Carolina” detailing their thoughts on “the causes of racial unrest in Columbia,” submitted to Mayor Bates in 1968.

The Personal series includes information about Bates’ business interests: the Capital Life and Health Insurance Company (1936 to 1954), the Laurel Hill Highway Hotel and Theatre Restaurant (circa 1960s), and the New South Life Insurance Company (1955 to 1978). The papers consist of extensive coverage of New South Life’s financial and legal difficulties in the 1970s, as well as the company’s published annual reports from 1958 to 1970.

The Personal series also offers considerable material on the life and achievements of Bates’ son, Lester, Jr., including the research, notes, and drafts from the biography the younger Bates planned to write and publish about his father. Lester, Jr. died in early 2009 without having completed the project. Interesting aspects of this section are the programs from the 1960 and 1961 Miss Columbia pageants, sponsored by the Columbia Junior Chamber of Commerce, in which Lester, Jr. was heavily involved.

The Clippings series includes contemporary newspaper clippings chronicling the New South Life Insurance Company, Bates’ mayoral achievements, and his 1988 obituaries. One particularly noteworthy piece of this series is the posthumous tribute to Bates in the 15 March 1988 Congressional Record.

The Audiovisual series contains an audiotape interview in which Lester Bates, Jr. discusses his father’s life and legacy, principally his role in the 1960s integration of Columbia. Also present are numerous photographs of Mayor Bates and his family. The 1969 opening of a lavish home office for the New South Life Insurance Company is well documented, from photographs of the construction process to room by room shots of the interior of the building.
Timeline

c.1904  Lester Lee Bates is born, 7 September, in Berkeley County (Hell Hole Swamp), S.C. to Alfred G. and Ella Cumbee Bates

c.1916  sustains a serious injury while working for a logging crew; sent to Charleston for surgery and recuperation

c.1918  returns to Charleston after a brief move back to Berkeley County; attends night school at the Salvation Army

c.1923  becomes an agent with Industrial Life and Health Insurance Company

1927  marries Julia Burk of Charleston

c.1929  daughter, Julia Bates born

1931  becomes the district manager for Atlantic Coast Life; son, Lester Bates, Jr. born; moves to Columbia, S.C.

1936  founds the Capital Life and Health Insurance Company, 10 February

1942  runs for Columbia city council, but loses

1944  elected to the Columbia city council

1946  runs for mayor of Columbia, but loses

1948  re-elected to the Columbia city council as assistant mayor

1950  loses in the Democratic primary for governor of South Carolina to James F. Byrnes

1951  Columbia awarded its first All-America City distinction

1953  Lester Bates, Jr. graduates from Furman University

1954  sells Capital Life and Health Insurance Company; loses in the Democratic primary for governor of South Carolina to George Bell Timmerman, Jr.

1955  founds the New South Life Insurance Company; Lester, Jr. graduates from the University of South Carolina law school

1958  elected mayor of Columbia by 14 votes over John T. Campbell
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>re-elected mayor of Columbia with no opposition; the Columbia Metropolitan Airport begins operation; Lester, Jr. elected president of the Columbia chapter of the South Carolina Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>establishes the Columbia Community Relations Council; Columbia awarded its second All-America City distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>re-elected mayor of Columbia with no opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>instrumental in incorporating the U.S. Army’s Fort Jackson into Columbia city limits; the Carolina Coliseum is completed; Lester, Jr. becomes president of New South Life Insurance Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>opens a new office building for New South Life Insurance Company; decides against running for a fourth term as mayor of Columbia in anticipation of running for the South Carolina governorship against John C. West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>February, decides against running for governor due to health problems; 4 June, becomes chairman of the Capital City Development Foundation, Inc., appointed to the South Carolina Insurance Commission; awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree by the University of South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>New South Life Insurance encounters financial difficulties; Bates and Lester, Jr. acquitted of “filing false statements” in their management of New South Life Insurance Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Citadel Life Insurance Company assumes control of New South Life Insurance Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>suffers a stroke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>24 February, Lester Lee Bates, Sr. dies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Collection Series:**

- **Mayoral**
- **Personal**
- **Clippings**
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