



## Oral History Interview of James Collins (OH-052)

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### Oral History Interview of James Collins

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**Interviewed by:** Matthew Gordon, Suffolk University student from History 364: Oral History

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#### Interview Summary

Mr. James Collins reflects on his experiences following the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. He discusses his upbringing in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood; his family's educational experiences in Boston; reactions to the Garrity decision in Charlestown; and the impact that the decision has had on education and neighborhood dynamics in Boston.

#### Subject Headings

Busing for school integration

Charlestown (Boston, Mass.)

Collins, James, 1951-

*Morgan v. Hennigan* (379 F. Supp. 410)

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**Interview Transcript**

**MATTHEW GORDON:** —March 30, 2005, my name is Matthew Gordon and I will be interviewing James Collins. Okay, Mr. Collins, can you tell me a little about yourself? Where you grew up, basically, the year, the neighborhood, things like that?

**JAMES COLLINS:** Yes. Jim Collins, I grew up in Charlestown, lived at One Laurel Street which is adjacent to and within several—few feet of Charlestown High School. I was born in 1951, which means I am a little over fifty-four. I am the oldest of nine children. My father was a school teacher, my mother was a homemaker, a graduate of Charlestown High School herself. My father a graduate of Boston College High School in 1938 and Boston College in 1942 and was a Boston schoolteacher until he died in 1976.

**GORDON:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**COLLINS:** I am the oldest of nine. Five sisters and three brothers, ranging in age from fifty-four currently now to thirty-seven.

**GORDON:** What was it like living in Charlestown back—growing up in the fifties and sixties? Explain the kind of community.

**COLLINS:** Charlestown was always considered a blue collar, working class community. The waterfront was pretty active, a lot of people had jobs in the naval shipyard [Charlestown Navy Yard] and waterfront, many longshoremen, as well as people working for the transit authority, the Edison gas company, telephone company, pretty much all workday people. A handful of professional types, a few lawyers, teachers and others, but by-and-large blue collar.

**GORDON:** And your neighborhood, was it a typical neighborhood? Did you play—have a lot of activities playing sports outside with friends and things like that?

**COLLINS:** Yes. Believe it or not, before it was restricted, the Bunker Hill Monument grounds was considered our backyard. We played all kinds of sports on the sides of hills and the tops of the hills. But there were several basketball courts, football fields. In fact, one of the fields—before they built hockey rinks, they used to flood the ball fields and we used to skate on them.

**GORDON:** Did you go to public school in Charlestown? Elementary, middle school, high school?

**COLLINS:** No, all of our family—in the grammar school, the elementary school through eighth grade—went to the parochial school, St. Mary’s. Some of us went on to Catholic high school. Brother and sister, Catholic high school. I had a couple at Boston Latin School and a couple of them went to Charlestown High.

**GORDON:** Now, would you say that the majority of people living in Charlestown were Catholic, and went to Catholic school? Or a lot of people you associated with?

**COLLINS:** A lot of people we associated with were Catholic and went to the Catholic school; it was a pretty good mix though. Those of us whose families could afford to send them and were able to pass the exam, went to the parochial high schools, which there were plenty of at the time. Some of them in Cambridge, some of them in Roxbury at Cathedral High School, St. Mary’s of Cambridge, Matignon, B.C. High [Boston College High School], Malden Catholic, and others. And the balance of our friends went to Charlestown High.

**GORDON:** Now, your high school experience, can you sum it up in maybe a few seconds?

**COLLINS:** B.C. High tended to be a pretty nurturing environment. The Jesuits, who were the priests who ran the school, would be considered a little more liberal in terms of their upbringing and their teachings. Although they were community activist types that encouraged community activities and reaching out, extending oneself to others. In fact, “Men for others” is the motto of B.C. High.

**GORDON:** Were you involved in any after school activities, sports, student government, things of that nature?

**COLLINS:** I played football and was on the swim team. I was active in the sodality<sup>1</sup> and a couple of the English and writing courses.

**GORDON:** Upon graduating from Boston College High School, did you go onto college or the military?

**COLLINS:** Well, I did one year at Boston State College,<sup>2</sup> then left and served in the Coast Guard Reserve for a year in 1969, then went back to Boston State College, where I received my undergraduate degree there, and then went on to get a graduate degree at Boston University.

**GORDON:** Boston State College, how would you sum up your years there? Was there a lot of anti-war sentiment, or pro? How would you describe that?

**COLLINS:** The late sixties, early seventies was marked, as many schools in the country were, by a reaction to the war in Vietnam, and there were tensions that began to develop, not only with the war, but racially. Boston State College had a large number of minority students and they actually organized their own student union at the time, so there was some of what I guess at the time was not unusual activity on the campus of the local state school, which was a commuter school, a school where people from all over the city would go as well as probably working at night, so it was not a very suburban style.

**GORDON:** Boston State was primarily a working class type school?

**COLLINS:** It was a commuter school, meaning everyone who went there, obviously got there by the train or car and trolley. As I said most everyone had a job as well as went to school.

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<sup>1</sup> Within the context of the Catholic Church, a sodality is a lay society for religious and charitable purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Boston State College was a public university that merged with the University of Massachusetts at Boston in 1982.

**GORDON:** After graduating from Boston State, you said went to Boston University and you got your master's degree; from there what did you do after receiving your master's degree? Did you go right into the workforce?

**COLLINS:** During that period, I actually was involved—I simultaneously worked at a community school program that was run by the City of Boston, which had me involved in after school programming for the Charlestown community, but I also managed to be involved in a political campaign. I was the campaign manager for Mayor Kevin White in my district, so I was working, going to school and politicking at the same time.

**GORDON:** I think we might jump back into the politics avenue in a second. In 1974 the Garrity ruling came down.<sup>3</sup> I just wanted to ask you, how it affected you personally, living in Charlestown and being a member of that community.

**COLLINS:** Having a father who was a school teacher who wanted to see the school system thrive, I had one influence on me. The other influence on me was obviously my education, the instruction at B.C. High, because I was very active in interacting in the black community through the sodality at B.C. High, so I had generally a tolerance for what was going on, and what the objective was with busing. I disagreed with forced busing as a root for integrating the schools but I realized that there was a lot of foot-dragging in efforts to desegregate, and more than its direct effect on me, I saw its effect on my friends in the neighborhood. Some people had no options but to send their kids to public schools and they felt that forced busing not only drove them out of their community and into some other inferior schools, but it made their school inferior because they were trying to deal with the management of discipline issues as opposed to educational issues.

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<sup>3</sup> The Garrity ruling refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge Arthur W. Garrity in the case of *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee had “intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation” in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See <http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html>)

**GORDON:** Excellent. Now, you were personally involved and your family obviously was very involved, but back to your father, he was a teacher at the time in the Boston Public Schools? What school was he at?

**COLLINS:** At the time during that period, he was at the Ohrenberger, which was an elementary school in West Roxbury. It was a mixed school, and prior to that, he was at the Emily Fifield and the Logue, both of which were in the black community. My father was, as I said, actually the assistant principal and had to deal with a lot of the disciplinary issues in these schools.

**GORDON:** Was it something where one day people came in and told your dad, This is what's going down, this is what is happening, or was it something that he kind of knew was coming?

**COLLINS:** I think he knew at the time. The issue was obviously much debated in the press and at the city council level and the school committee level. There were lawsuits all over the place, but I think inevitably he knew that the time had come for the schools to be integrated, and I think he was somewhat prepared for it, but it wasn't until Judge Garrity issued his order that it became a reality, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**GORDON:** With that being said, how was the news broken to you? Your father was obviously a teacher in the Boston Public Schools system. Did you have prior knowledge of this happening, or was it kind of out of the blue?

**COLLINS:** To be honest, I don't recall how it came about, except that all I knew was here was a ground swell of anti-busing sentiment being built up, and being involved in the after-school program at the Kent Community School, where a lot of these folks sent their kids after school, we knew that there were major efforts, anti-busing efforts, underway. It was more from the anti-busing side that I realized—and the organizing of the opposition that I really became aware of it. It wasn't because of the school committee or school department had any tip off that we could deal with. We just all knew that this was going to be a really volatile time.

**GORDON:** After the decision came down, obviously the dynamics of Charlestown changed, with the, I don't want to say violence, but there was an opposition to this happening. Can you elaborate a little bit more on the reaction of Charlestown?

**COLLINS:** They formed a couple of organizations. One was called ROAR, and it was a citywide organization called—which stood for Restore Our [Alienated] Rights. R-O-A-R. They had a citywide organization. Then they had another organization more locally called Powder Keg, which you can read into that any way you want. It was manned by, or it was staffed by—its volunteers were, I would say, thirty-something and forty-something parents, blue collar. Mostly women, for a matter of fact. A few rather unsavory type characters, but mostly people who felt as though their neighborhood was being dumped on and that they were powerless to do anything about it except for this organization. As I say, most of them were women, mothers, some single mothers, but mothers who really felt that they didn't want their kids on the bus, they wanted to be able to walk down the street and pick up their son or daughter at school and bring them back home and keep an eye on them.

So there was an intimidation factor because if you weren't with them, then you had to be one of those God-awful liberals, and to the extent that I had some liberal kind of leaning, it was nowhere near—it was liberal in the sense that I was tolerant of other people. In this case I sided with the anti-busing crowd because I realized it wasn't about the fact that they hated blacks, it was about they wanted some control over their school system and they were not going to just roll over and let someone dictate to them what to do.

**GORDON:** Right. Excellent. With you being the oldest of nine, did you have any siblings that were bused?

**COLLINS:** Yes, one of my younger sisters, in particular. One of my brothers was in grammar school up until the sixth grade, but he was lucky enough to get into Boston Latin School. So he went to Boston Latin School. But [my] younger sister was at the Blackstone [Elementary School], which was over in the South End. She was bused, and she was intimidated by some black kids at school on more than one occasion, and despite the fact that my father wanted to see



this through and to see whether or not it could work, he finally had to lift my sister from the city schools and eventually she went to a parochial school out of the city.

**GORDON:** That must have been an extremely difficult position for yourself, your father, your family, your dad being a teacher, being caught in the middle of this whole anti-busing thing, but obviously seeing that there needed to be a change, some change, in the way people were taught and bused around the city of Boston. Do you, offhand, remember the first day students were bused to Charlestown, in and out of Charlestown, and any reactions to that?

**COLLINS:** It's funny, I happened to have not been in—this is an interesting side note, because I recall being in Grand Junction, Colorado, in September of 1974 because I was on a trip sponsored by Outward Bound, which is the survival school program. I was in Colorado with another friend of mine, in Grand Junction, Colorado, waiting to be picked up by a bus to go to the river where we were going to be spending time on. The front page of the newspaper in Grand Junction had a picture just outside my house; it was at the Bunker Hill Monument adjacent—the Bunker Hill Monument and the high school, taken from my street with people with their mouths wide open, their fists clenched and the title, “Fear and Terror in Charlestown,” in Boston, and there it was. So the first day of busing in Charlestown I happened to be in Grand Junction, Colorado, soon to call home and find out what was going on and to find out that the FBI and other police were sitting—just literally lined up in front of my doorway as all this was going on. So I was a long distance at that time, but certainly by the time I got back it was still going on.

**GORDON:** As the first few days and first weeks or months kind of evolved, do you think anyone was really learning at school? Do you think students were just basically surviving? Do you think anything was really being—

**COLLINS:** No, I think that entire year was a wash. For anyone—anyone who was promoted that year, they were promoted under hazardous duty promotions because I don't believe any learning took place other than about politics, about protesting, a lot about hate, a lot about what

people can do or not do when their lives are threatened. It was more of a social education and cultural education than there was any real learning going on.

**GORDON:** I was wondering if you had any information about—maybe your father might have known whether a lot of teachers left or students were pulled midyear because there wasn't—

**COLLINS:** Yes, my information is—at this point (inaudible) I know I have some files that I was privy to because a year ago one of my own children wrote an essay for school on the busing crisis, so we pulled up some old files and I venture to say that attendance dropped dramatically, as much as 40 percent citywide as a result of that. That number sticks in my head. The number of teachers—a number of teachers—I don't think it was vast, though—a number of teachers retired or took a lot of sick days that year, but I think by and large the teachers hung in there and stayed as long as they possibly could through the crisis.

**GORDON:** It must have been an extremely difficult position for a teacher to be in, especially if you maybe were one of the people—you lived in one of the communities and maybe you had a son or daughter being bused and you were completely opposed to the whole situation but you were—you had to be professional enough to be teaching. I'm sure that situation kind of came up.

**COLLINS:** Absolutely. It was a very tough position for a teacher to be in. Their personal—they had to put their personal feelings aside, A, to protect their job and B, to keep the system from collapsing, and I think that was very difficult. And I know people ended up moving out. There was white flight—a considerable amount of white flight that year and the years ensuing.

**GORDON:** Now getting a little more serious, did you ever witness any violence towards parents, students, teachers, etcetera, during this time?

**COLLINS:** Yes, I remember marching with the anti-busing families up Bunker Hill Street in Charlestown in protest, and I recall—at the time it was the police mobile units, the motorcycle units—a couple of motorcycle cops who, strangely, were antagonistic toward the crowd,

insulting them, rustling them up, and had a lot of derogatory things to say about—to the people protesting, much to my surprise. So I did witness some of that. The protests that I witnessed were all pretty much inside the community so there wasn't a lot of external antagonism. But that was during—that was probably in 1975. I remember because I was working at the Kent Community School, and this was one of those protest rallies that were designed to focus on the neighborhood school issue—bring back the neighborhood schools. That was one particular incident—I remember a couple of arrests that were out of the ordinary. I think it was a message that we thought the city was trying to send, and unfortunately the police that they sent out didn't have the best demeanor and didn't handle it very well, from what I recall.

**GORDON:** Now, I'm just curious to find out, what is your opinion of the media and how their role was in—not only in making communities like Charlestown look, but also like South Boston? I know people in South Boston are still angry at the *Boston Globe* for the way they handled the whole situation.

**COLLINS:** I do have an opinion on that. I think the media saw a way to sell newspapers. They wanted this protest to prop up—to be propped up on a daily basis to sell newspapers. The suburban communities who encouraged and castigated the city of Boston communities, South Boston and Charlestown in particular, none of them were at all interested in integrating their own communities; the finger-pointing went to Boston. “It's your mess, you guys go deal with it.” So they thought that folks—that the people of Charlestown and South Boston were Neanderthals and were bigots for not integrating when in their very own backyard they engaged in snob zoning.

More importantly, I thought—I thought that the *Globe* and the [*Boston*] *Herald* saw this, and this saga continuing, as humorous reading for people outside. They thought it was great to tell these stories so that people would buy the papers and find out what else was going on in those “redneck” communities. I think the *Globe* took advantage of the communities, and I will say one more time, in the back end of it, that the very people and the very institutions that castigated the South Boston and Charlestown community for trying to maintain and preserve its neighborhood are the same institutions and individuals who are now purchasing homes in those neighborhoods

that have been preserved. So they are reaping the rewards of not the anti—not the minority bias but just the willingness, the desire and the attention of the community of Charlestown and South Boston to maintain its identity. Now that it continues to be safe—both of these communities are safe neighborhoods, for whatever reason, and the patrons of the *Globe*, the workers of the *Globe* and others who shook their fingers at Charlestown and South Boston communities are the very people who are buying, owning, and converting properties into multi-million dollar profits.

**GORDON:** It seems, just looking back on this, that a lot of people looking from the outside looked at this situation as, these people in Charlestown and South Boston are racists, they don't want these people coming into their community, where I think people didn't understand that it was more about being told that my student—my child has to go here, or my child has to go there, when there's school right down the street. Do you feel that was the main issue in Charlestown?

**COLLINS:** Absolutely. I think—let me say this. Of course there are some people who are bigots, and this was sport to them, but for the majority of the people they did not want to be told where to send their kids. They paid taxes, they spent their whole lives in the comfort of their community and being in a place where there is a built-in, almost, protection for one another, people watch out for one another's kids because there were so many other things to distract a family. It's a sense of place that they were being robbed of and there were those in the black community that felt the same way. Improve the quality of education in the school system, don't move people around from a good school—a so-called good school to a not-so-good school and from a not-so-good school to a good school. If it was the quality of education that was the issue, it didn't matter what neighborhood it was in. That was the position people had.

**GORDON:** Now, I know we talked about this a little bit in the beginning, but you were involved with some politicians—you named Kevin White.<sup>4</sup> Can you just briefly talk a little bit about your association with him during this time of desegregation?

**COLLINS:** I'll try to incorporate that as well as my own experience in politics because I served an elected office myself. In 1975—1974 there was a state representative election; the sitting

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin White (1929- ) served as mayor of Boston from 1968 to 1984.

representative retired, and a number of Charlestown people ran for office, and that included part of East Boston. So half a dozen former Kevin White supporters ran against each other and it ended up being not a pleasant campaign. So I was tapped in 1975 to try to manage all these conflicting personalities to get Kevin White reelected, and I managed to do that.

During that period of time—I think I mentioned this to you off the record, but now I’ll put it on the record—in 1975, I was part of a group of people who brokered an agreement or truce with the anti-busing crowd. I remember doing it on a Sunday morning, having people from Powder Keg and R.O.A.R., some of the local—some of the politicians, Kevin White, some of his aides and others in the community. We basically sat down and asked them what they needed. There was an agreement on recreational activities, on some educational activities, on job opportunities, and in return, Kevin White was able to settle down the anti-busing negative antagonism toward his campaign. In fact that meeting produced the slogan which Powder Keg used to develop the campaign against Joe Timilty:<sup>5</sup> “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know.” We convinced them that Joe Timilty was likely no different than Kevin White would be. Kevin White was someone you knew and someone who would come to the table and negotiate some kind of truce. We were able to keep a lid on the anti-busing crowd through that campaign. So this was—at the time I was twenty-four years old, right in the thick of something that became historic and I didn’t even know it.

Then later on the following year in addition to working for the city, I started a small business and with my partners we agreed to house the Tip O’Neill<sup>6</sup> for Congress campaign out of our offices, and this was the year that when he was elected he was going to become the speaker—Speaker of the House in Congress—but he had an anti-busing candidate against him and he was very concerned, so we mounted on a big campaign and I recall our plate glass windows being broken because we were supporters of “that liberal Tip O’Neill.” So that was my second experience in politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph F. Timilty (1938- ) served in the Massachusetts State Senate and was defeated by Kevin White in Boston mayoral elections in both 1975 and 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts’ Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987.

My third experience in politics took place in 1977. I had just been elected because Dennis Kerney, the state rep, was appointed sheriff, and I won the special election. And I recall being in Kevin White's office when a group of students from Valley Forge, Pennsylvania—black students—in a yellow bus toured the Bunker Hill Monument only to be attacked by a group of kids with hockey sticks. It was front page news, all over the state and all over the country. I happened to have been with the mayor and walked with him—drove with him to Mass General Hospital and the very next morning my face is on the front page of the *Herald American* and the *Globe* denouncing what took place. So it was—I took a lot of heat. I took a lot of positive heat and negative heat. Positive for being there and standing up for the community and negative heat because I looked like I was a “bleeding heart” and why was I standing there. It was a mixed bag, but by and large, the people in the community were happy I was there standing up for the community letting people know we weren't all hoodlums.

**GORDON:** Did you stay active within the political world, or did you kind of keep—kind of move into the private sector but still keep your ear to the grindstone?

**COLLINS:** Yeah, I've been active in politics all my life. It's something you can't avoid. I stay active in government affairs, if you will, I participate in multicultural activities because I believe that the society we live in is multicultural and global, and I want to be informed and I encourage my kids to be the same way. But I did join the private sector and I try to be as active as I can and learn the lessons of the seventies and bring those lessons into the twenty-first century.

**GORDON:** How would—kind of wrapping up here—how would you say Charlestown has changed or evolved in the thirty-year period since the busing—the Garrity decision, I should say—would you say it's kind of the same, or it's different, or—?

**COLLINS:** I would say it is a lot different. There is a fraction of the middle-income type; lower-middle, upwardly mobile types are pretty much gone. They've left the community and moved to the suburban areas, and what you have now are the fairly well-off, the young urban professionals, the empty-nesters, and those people who appreciate the architecture, the housing

and the convenience to the city—of Charlestown to the city. Then you have the lower middle class to poor who are there. So you have the extremes. You lost basically, in my opinion, the core of the community. They've moved on. There are people who are trying to replace it and try to give a semblance of community to the neighborhood but it is not the same as it used to be. Catholic churches are closing, the public schools are changing. The Charlestown High School basketball team is all black, and they are a very good basketball team. But basically people don't send their kids to public schools anymore; there aren't enough kids going, and there aren't enough kids going to the parochial schools because they moved out.

South Boston, because it is much bigger than Charlestown, is going to take a longer time, but the same thing is happening, especially with the waterfront expansion. The people who are living there, as much as they'd love to stay there, they can't afford it, and those who like the diversity don't want to deal with the new issues that are now creeping in there are heroine use, drug use, and other substance abuse. And so the cycle continues. Neither Charlestown nor South Boston are immune from things that suburban neighborhoods are experiencing.

**GORDON:** Okay, last question. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about—your experiences, busing, or anything about Charlestown?

**COLLINS:** The main point I'd like to convey is that the people of Charlestown had very little resources with which to express their feelings. They couldn't hire lawyers so they protested the only way they knew how. They were trying to preserve their rights and I think that they were right to do that. There were, as I said, a handful of hoodlums who took matters into their own hands, and those were the problems that the press focused on. The majority of the people there were sincere, they were not bigots, and they saw their community being torn apart and their control over their own future being taken away. They knew instinctively that the end result was not going to be a better education. They knew instinctively that the end result was not going to be a better community. They knew instinctively there was going to be turmoil for much of their adult lives and much of their children's lives, and for whose purpose? Even today, there are a handful that claim that the educational system is better. I think that more—the majority of people say it is no better than it was before busing.

So busing as a means to integrate, all they did was make it instead of a majority white school system, now it's a majority black school system. So they didn't get down to the real issues—the real core issues: the housing and jobs, cultural differences. And just because there are cultural differences, doesn't mean people are bigoted. I think that was the flaw; they tried to come up with a political solution to something that was more deep-rooted than that. So they decided to mess up the lives of a generation of people for some future expectation that I don't think has been met.

**GORDON:** Okay, thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**