Oral History Interview of John Griffin

Interview Date: June 18, 1979

Interviewed by: David Robbins

Citation: Griffin, John. Interviewed by David Robbins. Suffolk University Oral History Project, SOH-017. 18 June 1979. Transcript and audio available. Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Interview Summary
John Griffin, a former Suffolk University faculty member and trustee, discusses his role in the establishment of the university’s undergraduate programs in the 1930s, including the creation of the business school and the school of journalism. Griffin describes the school’s founder Gleason Archer, the inner workings of the school, the development of new departments, and the key personnel who helped build Suffolk University.

Subject Headings
Archer, Gleason Leonard, 1880-1966
McNamara, Dorothy M.
Suffolk University—History

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DAVID ROBBINS: This is an interview with Mr. John Griffin, conducted at Suffolk University on June 18, 1979 by David Robbins. Mr. Griffin, you came to Suffolk University in 1934. What brought you to Suffolk? How did you find out about the new school?

JOHN GRIFFIN: Well, a colleague of mine at the Brockton Memorial High School, Frank Altiere, came to me one day at school and said, “They’re going to require candidates for a bachelor of law degree to have two years of college.” Now at Suffolk, they haven’t got any college, and they said, I’m going in to see Gleason Archer and tell him the idea of opening up his own liberal arts school so that he can prepare his students for the law school and give them the two years collegiate training required. Of course, that’s gone out from, as you know, from two years now, it requires a Bachelor’s degree.

So, he made the appointment and I walked in to Myrtle Street and met Gleason Archer. He explained our mission of organizing a college and giving him the opportunity to prepare men for law school within Suffolk Law School. I think it was known then as Suffolk Law School. And later on, I think, they changed the charter to Suffolk University.

ROBBINS: Right, in 1937.

GRIFFIN: Yeah. So we sat down, and we told him what would be the basic elements in the college of liberal arts and sciences, and drew up an outline of courses. And then we went over them with Gleason Archer. Then the next question was to prepare a synopsis of the courses that were to be given. All the courses were basic courses: history and economics. There was no accounting. It’s economics, government—mostly in the social sciences. And then the next step was to go out and get the men to teach the courses, which we did. They had Professor Looney, who later on became Dean of Boston Teachers College; Mark Crockett in government, one
named Sheehan, who taught English at the Public Latin School. So those three—they were the nuclei, you might say, of faculty.

**ROBBINS:** Were they teaching full-time at Suffolk, or just—

**GRIFFIN:** No, they were teaching part-time. And I was appointed a professor of economics—why, I don’t know, but I was. I organized the course and brought in enough students to pay my way. That’s where we worked out. Then, as the school began to grow and develop and began, you might say, gel a little bit, why, changes were made. As more men were brought in, the curriculum was expanded. And then we finally, to conform to the requirements for admission to law school, we had to develop a four-year course for candidates who wanted to go to law school.

**ROBBINS:** Do you remember when that happened?

**GRIFFIN:** Well, I would say about three, four years later. And it was during that time that—well, we were like a stepchild, you might say. The law school was the institution. I think at that time, I think Gleason Archer had—I don’t think I’m wrong. It’d have to be checked—2,400 day and evening students.

**ROBBINS:** He had a lot. It was a huge law school at the time.

**GRIFFIN:** It was 2,400. And I think the tuition was $125 a semester. Yeah, a semester. And they were all lectures, of course—talking about the law school, they were all lectures. And Gleason Archer had a ticket system. You would go to the Bursar’s Office, and you would buy the tickets which represented—I forget what—I don’t know what the denomination was, but it was a modest sum, anyway. And you’d buy a book of tickets. Then you’d write your name on the tickets. And a student on his way through law school would monitor the class, so that when you went into class, you had a ticket, which he collected. Now some of the students didn’t have money enough to buy tickets in advance. So he used to borrow tickets from other students, then write their name on the tickets. The tickets were numbered, you see, so it didn’t make any
difference, where the source of the tickets, because Archer had the money for that particular ticket in the till. And then tickets were taken to the office, and they were posted on a ledger card that was set up for each student. And as the tickets came in, they were pasted on the card, so that at the end of the year, you would have to have all those squares filled. Otherwise, you wouldn’t get your marks. You wouldn’t get your degree.

And when Price Waterhouse came in to look at our accounting system. They not only thought it was unique, but they thought it was the most efficient system they ever saw for collecting money -tuition- and not holding the student up in advance for the full amount. In other words, it was pay as you go. And then if the dean wanted to know—Gleason Archer, we always called him Dean—if Dean Archer wanted to know whether students were attending their classes or not, he’d pull their ledger cards out, and he had a ready-made record of attendance of students at the class. Now that didn’t mean you were there, because you could have passed in a couple of tickets—one for your friend, for example, with his name on it, one with your name on it. And it was very simple. And the ledger card was broken down so that there were squares, you might say, blocked off. So all you had to do was put them on as you received them. Then when the time came to grant the degrees, all Gleason Archer had to do was find out if you owed any money, which was very simple. He’d look at the ledger card. You either had it, or you didn’t. If you didn’t, he’d call you in.

And sometimes his office would watch the students and help the students to get tickets so they could stay in the law school. And I’m telling you, you have to give Dorothy McNamara and Catherine Caraher full credit. They knew all the students, because the students came in, and that’s where they paid their bills, and that’s where they got their tickets. So they knew everybody who came in. And that was day as well as evening. And it was interesting to—I saw the cards. She pointed it out to me, and Price Waterhouse, in those days, were top dogs there. And boy, they were just astounded when they went over the system.

ROBBINS: Was the ticket system used in the college as well as the law school?
GRiffin: No.

ROBBINS: No.

GRiffin: No. No, the college, you paid your tuition in advance. It wasn’t very much—I don’t know what it was, a $125 each semester. And we had a lot of vocational teachers who were looking for degrees in the Boston school system. And we had a class set up and a curriculum set up for them, so that they could get their academic bachelor’s degree and fulfill the requirement by taking history and government, English, composition, reading, so forth. It was quite interesting.

ROBBINS: So you were actually instrumental in setting the school in motion. You weren’t just hired to teach here.

GRiffin: Oh that’s right, yeah. I just came in. I used to come in—I’d leave the school at 3:00 and I’d be in here at—well, I’d be in here at quarter past three, on Myrtle Street. We had our office over on Myrtle Street. And I’d come in and there was a desk there, and … (inaudible) sat down at the desk and started writing out synopses of courses, checking on expanding the curriculum, and that sort of thing. And Altiere was doing the same thing. He was interested in science, so Altiere helped set up biology and chemistry, and we interviewed people. But Archer always had the last word. And that’s the way it went.

ROBBINS: Did you teach in the day and the evening division, or just the evening?

GRiffin: I taught afternoons. I only taught one course, because then they dropped the economics course, because this group of men that I knew personally graduated and there was no need of economics at that time.

ROBBINS: So you just dropped the course?
GRiffin: Right, so we dropped it, yeah. Very informal. We didn’t have any faculty meetings. I don’t recall a faculty meeting. Maybe there was one, but I didn’t get to it. But Archer interviewed different men, got different ideas, got a lot of help with people who cooperated in helping him. And the Department of Education helped him out.

Robbins: How many students did you have, say the first year you were there?

GRiffin: Oh, in the college? Not too many. I suppose if we had 100, we were doing pretty well.

Robbins: Was it kind of lonely in your classroom, or did you get a good turnout?

GRiffin: Well, no, but I enjoyed it. I liked it. We had examinations. We had—well, they were sort of planned, you know, it wasn’t hit or miss. We knew when we were going to open up and when to close. We knew each session would be an hour. We took attendance and gave final examinations, turned our marks in. And I saw the young men—not young men, they had some age on them—they weren’t graduates, but we offered them an opportunity to take courses of collegiate caliber and substance. And of course, they were vocationally minded men, by the weekend, the academic. But gave them some good men. Mark Crockett I know, is a crackerjack. Mark is a good man, down-to-earth, (inaudible) a good history man, a no-nonsense fellow. This is it; you either learn it, or you take the consequences.

Robbins: Do you have any idea how the school got located at 59 Hancock Street?

GRiffin: Yes, Archer owned the building.

Robbins: So he just set up there.

GRiffin: So we—it was an opportune time and place to set the college up in there. And you go in the front door. There were desks there, and we had the office set up there. All the marks
were kept there. It was just a question of the facilities being there. Gleason Archer owned the building, for it to work.

**ROBBINS:** How did you become a Trustee? How did that come about?

**GRIFFIN:** Well, that came after we organized the business school. Archer asked me if I wanted to serve, and I said, I’d be very happy to. And I had in the meantime arranged for dinners, you know, for Gleason Archer and faculty and kids. Strange enough, though, they were very formal dinners. He used to hold them at the Engineers’ Club, which was at that time Commonwealth Avenue and Arlington Street, the old Lowell—owned by the Lowell Institute. And then I had turns in the University Club, held dinners, the idea being to bring people together and get people interested with the school. And Archer asked me if I would serve, and I said I would. No emolument, never a bit. We used to meet every month then.

**ROBBINS:** Once a month.

**GRIFFIN:** Every month except July and August. And we’d meet all around the circuit. They well, brought them in to the Harvard Club, and once the Parker House, once the University Club, the Engineers’ Club, and wherever. And we used to meet here, too, in the Trustees’ Room. We never had any dinners at all—all business.

**ROBBINS:** You mentioned the foundation of the business school. Did you play a direct role in that?

**GRIFFIN:** Yeah. I, yes—it dawned on me—I had known a lot about—I was in commercial subjects in high school, and I knew what BU [Boston University] had done. And I remembered Dean Lord over there. I remember when they started. And it was a very, very profitable school, because they brought men in to teach specific subjects. So they attracted people interested in a specific subject. It might not be given the following year, because apparently, people might not be interested in it. So I had the bright idea: we’ve got to have a business school here. We’ve got
the space. We have the charter now in which to develop a school. And I broached it to Archer, and “Well,” he said, “Why don’t you do something about it?” So for five dollars a night, I used to work three nights a week there. The first thing I did was make up my mind that what we wanted—and to me, I always felt very strongly about it—what we wanted was good, solid accounting department. And we give it a lot of thought, and that was, you might say, the cornerstone of our business school.

Then another thing I did, was I—I don’t know how many catalogs I got, for business schools around the East here, the Northeast. And went over the schools very carefully and got what you’d call a distribution of accounting. And now we’ve got the distribution of courses, and certain courses always appeared in all the various catalogs, such as accounting, for example: banking and finance, sales, sales management, advertising, courses like that.

So I worked up a distribution sheet, which was the original curriculum of the Suffolk University Business School, and then wrote up a synopsis of each course, so that whoever came in to the school had a synopsis of what you were to teach. It wasn’t too difficult, because if you read enough of them, they generally followed a pattern. And there were certain basic courses. I was talking to the retiring chairman of the accounting department of New York University, and he gave us a lot of time. I’m trying to think of his name, and I can’t. But he spent a lot of time and talked to Archer. But he never came on, I don’t know why. But we picked up good men, and then we got into sales, sales management—courses like that.

And along about that time, I brought a friend of mine in, Paul Newsome. And you know, the Newsome Associates? He’s one of the three (inaudible). He’s retired now, but I think the name Newsome was still one of the top names in PR and journalism. Well, I had known Paul because I had worked on the Weymouth Gazette and Transcript. And I sold him the idea that we ought to have what they call a prepress. We called it a shopping guide. I’d go around and sell the space, you know, and he used the Gazette for printers. And then I’d go around and pick them up and distribute them door to door, myself, and do it every Saturday morning.
So I got to know Paul Newsome pretty well. And Paul had moved into town, so I brought him in to meet Gleason Archer. And he hit upon the idea, we ought to have a School of Journalism. Newsome had a very fertile mind. He just exuded ideas, and so he sold Gleason Archer the idea of the Department of Journalism, and do outreach to people and got a brochure ready, and it was interesting. We had—I don’t know if you remember Marjorie Mills who just died. Well, she was a sponsor of the school. And Bill Cunningham was a sponsor. Newsome knew his way around, and he gave us the names of these people who were sponsors of our School of Journalism. And what do you think happened? We didn’t get the permission of these people to use their name as sponsors. Oh boy, I’m telling you. Archer was madder than blazes. He called me in, and I thought he was going to throw me out. He said, “You know what this fellow Newsome did?” and I said, “No.” He said, “He’s got their names as sponsors of the Department of Journalism, and I’m getting calls saying they never supported it, never gave permission to have their name used.” So Archer had to mop up the blood by getting in touch with each one and smoothing things over, at which he was very adept.

But the school kept on. But we moved around in the building. We sandwiched the classes in between the law school, you know. And we had Carrolla Bryant, Miss Bryant, who came out of a radio office in New York, and she ran the office. She was very—I would say very efficient, very businesslike, and she did a lot of good, although she was the boss. She knew what she wanted, and she’d have things done.

We had—you know, adjustments had to be made. You’re trying to improve the scholarly aspects of the schools, you know, trying to set standards, trying to attract students. But it grew, slowly but surely, and I’m glad to see it flower a little bit. Now the Business School is quite a school, and the School of Management and so forth.

**ROBBINS:** Was Esther Newsome, the librarian, related to Paul Newsome?

**GRIFFIN:** Yeah, she was his sister.
ROBBINS: Oh really?

GRIFFIN: Yeah. Why, did you know Esther?

ROBBINS: I’ve heard her name very often.

GRIFFIN: Yeah? In connection with what?

[Interruption]

GRIFFIN: See the Dean lived in what we called the Old Law School building. He had an apartment in the top of the building. And his family lived there. So he lived right on the job.

ROBBINS: Actually, the Derne Street building, this—

GRIFFIN: The old school, yeah.

ROBBINS: Oh, I didn’t realize that.

GRIFFIN: Oh sure, he had an apartment. And I remember distinctly, the City of Boston brought suit to recover taxes on the area which was used by the Dean as living quarters. They wanted to sue the Dean with taxes for his residence. And Bill Graham, a Trustee, killed that. He represented Dean Archer, and the Dean escaped that drag on his pocketbook. Because he was the Dean. The Dean came out from Sabattus [Maine] without anything. And Sabattus was a lumber camp. Did you know that?

ROBBINS: I’ve read his books, and it’s an extraordinary story.

GRIFFIN: Yeah, yeah. And he came in to town, and he opened up this small place in Roxbury. And then—well, he had an idea. But you see, Boston was filled with people like that—like
Archer in the field of education, and Mariano who, like the Dean, founded a school, and his school is the School of Pharmacy, which later was—and I was a Trustee of that at one time. And that was taken over by Northeastern, when Mariano got out. And Archer started this. And the Fischer School, Fischer Junior College, was started by the Fischer Brothers. And there are a number of schools that were started at that time by people in the community. You see, Boston was a very intellectual community.

ROBBINS: What sort of a man was Gleason Archer?

GRiffin: Well, he was a temperate man, and a hard worker, very industrious, very diligent, and very dedicated. And he had likes and dislikes, and sometimes he said things that I think could have been left unsaid. But he had one goal, and that was to expand and guide the Suffolk University Law School. He was a scholar. There wasn’t any question about it. He had quite a record of intellectual achievement. He wrote the history of radio. He wrote, I told you, the history of the Bay Colony, which he broadcast over the radio.

He wrote all the law books that were used in the law school. I don’t know how many there were. I’m not a lawyer. But they must have had some merit, because the graduates of Harvard Law School and I presume other law schools, getting ready for the bar examination, would use Gleason Archer’s books. And his theory was, rather than have these young men, who were getting ready to practice law, spend time which they didn’t have, because they had to work, going over cases and following the case method, he took it upon himself to give the student the conclusion. Of course, some people questioned the—what do you call it, the intellectual approach to the law, because you didn’t think out the law. You just were given the answer. And you spent your time learning the answers. So when you took the bar examination, you had the answers to the various questions.

Anyway, I had a friend here, believe it or not, who applied for admission to the Law School back in the twenties. I won’t mention any names, but he’s a personal friend of mine. And he went to Archer and said, “I’d like to be admitted to the Law School.” He said, “Do you have a high
school diploma?” He said, “No, I haven’t.” Well Archer said, “Why don’t you go to Berkeley Prep?” which was the YMCA Preparatory School in those days. And he went to Berkeley Prep, and got the equivalent of a high school education in credits. So he came to Archer and he showed Archer what he had done, that he had studied at Berkeley, and the credits he’d received, along with what he had in an uncompleted high school education, for the equivalent of a high school diploma. And Archer admitted him. And do you know, he passed the bar the first time? Was that quite an achievement?

ROBBINS: Yes.

GRiffin: First time. And he came, he’d never finished the high school. And I knew him, and I knew him very well. He never practiced law because he—he was a policeman. But it stood him in good stead. But I’ve talked to men - eminent trial lawyers - that owed all they ever had to Gleason Archer giving them the opportunity to study law. And a lot of men passed the bar and never practiced. In fact, I had one man who worked for me who went nights to law school, and he passed the bar. But he never practiced, because he had a family and he couldn’t afford to open up his office and wait for clients. He had to earn bread and butter to keep the family going and pay his rent. But he worked for me for years. And they (inaudible) but he never stuck to it. And we had students here that, believe it or not, never came back for their degree. They graduated from law school and never came back for their degree.

ROBBINS: That’s strange.

GRiffin: And the reason for that was, they came here to pass the bar, period. That’s all. Pass the bar—and they did and never came back. And of course today, that’s all they ever do. But you see, he gave the student—and a lot that was said, a lot of people who criticized this school, ought to read the facts on the building, and read what Archer had to say, that this is a school that would give opportunity to everybody, to those who worked and those who were poor. And—

ROBBINS: He did.
GRIFFIN: Can you imagine getting a law degree and training for the law for $400? But he didn’t earn a lot of money. And we had some—believe it or not, people like Dorothy McNamara and Catherine Caraher and others who worked in the office, they did a lot of guidance work, you know it? They’d go over the ledger cards. A boy would come in and say, “Well I’ve got drop out. Well, why’ve you got to drop out? Well, I haven’t got a job, haven’t got any money.” Well, they found some way of keeping those young men in school. And I think their guidance was a lot more effective than the high powered guidance that they have today. They—and you know, if you get right down to it, this was in addition to running the office. In other words, there was no separate guidance department. These are girls in the office. And you came in, and you signed up. So they knew you right off the bat.

I was with Archer when he put the first addition on this building. And he did all that work himself. He paid the men, he got the contractor—he got a foreman, rather. And it used to be a special event when every week they’d pay the people who worked on the building. And all that money came out of Archer, in the sense that he raised the money, and he spent it. And he was a very prudent spender. I remember he had his—I don’t know what his relationship was now, brother-in-law or not, I don’t know. But he had him design the building. And then he asked for part of his fee back as a contribution to the building fund of the school.

But I was with Archer when we used to go over the plans. I’d run errands for him ... (inaudible). And quite an achievement, when you figure it out, that this school, in the early days, all of the money came out of tuition. And of course, he wasn’t—I don’t think he was a high liver in the sense he had these ... (inaudible). I don’t think he expanded his personal living standards. I think he was a very modest man. But he was a hard worker. He worked till 3:00 in the morning writing books, you know. And it’s an amazing thing when you figure it out, that he wrote all the books that were used in the school.

ROBBINS: That is amazing. That’s an extraordinary achievement.
GRiffin: Yeah. And I don’t know anything about the law, but they—I suppose the books are down the shelf, there. And I suppose the royalties helped finance the school. He used to sell bricks, you know. If he needed money to expand, why he’d sell bricks and I don’t know, I’d pay a dollar a brick, and Judge Benton, I remember buying a brick for a dollar, and he’d go around the class and ask for contributions.

Robbins: Well even so, the school was pretty heavily in debt at the end of the Second World War, wasn’t it?

GRiffin: Oh yes, it was, because of the fact that they had no student body. You see, there was no endowment then. He had no endowment. All his income, frankly, was based on tuition that he received. And when the war came along, why Good Lord, there was practically nobody here. We had the graduation in the auditorium there. But he put the auditorium in. And he had loyal Trustees. They stayed with him. And a lot of his angels had died, like [George] Frost, who was president of the Boston Garter. Men used to wear garters in those days, and one of the most prosperous firms was the Boston Garter. They made garters for men and armbands, you know, for men. And Frost became interested in him. That was before my day. And then Evans, the president of the Boston Five Cents Savings Bank, Beaumont Evans, became interested in him and sort of guided him through the difficult days. And then, what’s his name? Martin Lomasney, who was one of the prominent political ward bosses.

ROBBINS: Certainly, a legend.

GRiffin: And—that’s right. And he used to refer—he was going to help the little fella on the Hill, meaning Archer. But you know, Archer lived very frugally until he got his feet on the ground. And I think he was befriended when he came into Boston by friends of the—I think it was Jesse Tirrell and his wife. And they took him in and took care of him and made sure he had a place to sleep, that sort of thing. But you know, he never forgot. To show the character of the man, he never forgot the people who helped him. And for years, I never saw the list—tooth bad—but for years, he used to make out checks. I don’t know whether they were monthly or weekly,
it’s somewhere in the archives. And he used to mail those checks out to people who had
befriended him. And those checks when out, unsolicited by these people. And I don’t know how
many he had. He had quite a few pensioners on the list.

And in addition to that, why he was loyal to the people who worked for him. And you know, it’s
an interesting thing—he never had anybody who came out of this school, to my knowledge, who
ever got into trouble or was disbarred. There was one man, I won’t mention his name out of
charity, and Archer—he got into trouble. He had a drinking problem. And believe it or not, he
was on the faculty, and Archer solicited money to help this man because he didn’t have anything.
So that’s the kind of man he was. And he did a lot of things. It’s too bad, you know, that a lot of
that information is gone. So everybody knows how you know, Archer’s one of these fellows. It’s
all for me and not for anybody else. But he brought it back into the school. I remember the
second wing he put on, and he did that all himself. He figured he could save money by putting
that wing up himself. And he also was the administrator of the school. He ran the school as
well— [Interview ends abruptly]

END OF INTERVIEW