

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Fred Davis

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Davis, Fred, 1934-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 23, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:39).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Insurance entrepreneur and city council member Fred Davis (1934 - 2020) was a Memphis city council member during 1968 sanitation workers strike. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 23, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_140
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Rising to become the first black chairman of the Memphis City Council, Fred L. Davis was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on May 8, 1934. After graduating from Manassas High School in Memphis in 1953, Davis went to Tennessee State University. After he graduated in 1957 with his BS, Davis entered the Army and served in France for two years. After returning from the Army, he began pursuing his Master's Degree at Memphis State University. Before graduating with his Master's, Davis was elected to serve on the city council.

Davis opened his own insurance agency, Fred L. Davis Insurance, in 1967. The agency was one of the first African American-owned insurance agencies in the South. When the sanitation workers of Memphis went on strike in 1968, Davis was serving on the city council. Siding with the strikers, Davis urged the city to recognize their union. Over the course of several months, there was violence by the police against the strikers when they would march, and leaders from the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came to support the strike. It was this strike that brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis, where he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, and the strike ended soon thereafter. Davis later became the first African American chairman of the Memphis City Council.

Fred Davis Insurance is one of the most respected companies in Memphis, growing from a small office to a powerhouse of sales. Davis himself is very active in the community, serving on the board of directors of the Assissi Foundation, as a trustee of the Community Foundation, a director of the Memphis Leadership Foundation and a past president of the University of Memphis Society. He has been presented with the Humanitarian of the Year Award by the National Council of Christians and Jews and the Communicator of the Year Award by the Public Relations Society. Davis is married with three children and two grandchildren.

Davis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 23, 2003.

Davis passed away on May 12, 2020.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Fred Davis was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 23, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Insurance entrepreneur and city council member Fred Davis (1934 - 2020) was a Memphis city council member during 1968 sanitation workers strike.

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# Restrictions

## Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

## Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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# Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

Davis, Fred, 1934-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Davis, Fred, 1934---Interviews

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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Memphis (Tenn.)

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## Occupations:

Civil Rights Leader

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Entrepreneur

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|CivicMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, June 23, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Fred Davis was born on May 8, 1934 in Memphis, Tennessee to Charity Holmes Davis and Frank Davis. Davis knows little about his family history, but believes his maternal grandmother was Native American and his paternal grandfather was a slave. Charity Holmes Davis was born in 1899 in Lula, Mississippi and

worked as a domestic. Having learned to read and write as an adult, she made sure her children learned these skills early. Frank Davis, a barber and entrepreneur, was born in Mississippi in 1892 and likely moved to Memphis in the 1930s. Davis describes his father as a bright man with little formal education whose opinions were respected in the community. Davis' parents did not live together for the majority of his childhood and he lived with each of his parents at different times. Growing up poor, Davis remembers spending time on a plantation in Arkansas where he picked cotton in order to earn money for school clothes. In 1972, Davis became the first black chairman of the Memphis City Council.

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Fred Davis describes his education and early work experience. Growing up poor in Memphis, Tennessee, Davis often spent time on an Arkansas cotton plantation in order to earn money for school. His jobs on the plantation included picking and chopping cotton, carrying water, and driving mules. Davis first attended the Florida Street School, but then transferred to a private Seventh Day Adventist school. In order to afford the tuition, his mother took a job in Knoxville, Tennessee and Davis lived for a time with a neighbor, Priscilla Hawkins, who had been a slave. Soon after, Davis began to live with his father. Later at Manassas High School, Davis served as student council president and editor of the newspaper while also working at the Peabody Hotel. A successful Manassas graduate, Davis was featured in the book "Portrait of a Ghetto School" by Addie Jones, one of his former teachers. Attending college at Tennessee State University, Davis worked in the cafeteria and waited tables at area clubs and hotels.

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Fred Davis talks about starting Fred L. Davis Insurance and being elected one of the first African Americans on the Memphis, Tennessee city council. When Davis graduated from Tennessee State University in 1957, there were no African American-owned insurance agencies in the South. Unsatisfied with having to work through a white agent, in 1967 Davis started his own agency with the help of his mentors, prominent Memphis insurance agents John Collier and Jim Collier. At this same time, the city government changed from a city commissioner form to a city council. Davis ran for city council and, in large part because of his success as a door-to-door insurance agent, was elected as one of the first African American councilmen along with Joe Patterson and James Netters.

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Fred Davis describes the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike. As a member of the Memphis city council, Davis convinced the other council members to hold a public hearing. Immediately, union leaders took over and the individual workers could not be heard. Later, busses of sanitation workers were brought to the meeting so that the hall was filled to double capacity. Tensions escalated and Davis almost came to blows with union leader T.O. Jones before order was restored. Davis also talks about the original wage negotiations and how the fifteen cent raise he offered the sanitation workers was refused. Davis describes a group of militant young activists in Memphis called The Invaders who sought to disrupt the efforts of established civil rights leaders and recalls how Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to help in Memphis during the strike. At the end of the tape, Davis describes experiencing death threats because of his involvement in the strike.

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Fred Davis describes the aftermath of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968 and his own civic engagement in Memphis, Tennessee. Davis learned of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination when his representative never arrived for the sanitation workers strike negotiation meeting. In the aftermath, many cities faced riots, but Davis believes he and other black leaders were able to contain some of that anger in Memphis by being visible within the communities. Davis talks about the changes he has seen in Memphis since the 1960s. He continues to maintain his business in his original community in order to be an example to others. Davis was involved in founding the Mid-South Minority Business Council, an organization that works on minority economic development. Also, as the chairman of the Memphis city council, he played an integral role in moving the FedEx corporate headquarters to Memphis.

Video Oral History Interview with Fred Davis, Section A2003\_140\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Fred Davis describes his involvement in the Society of Entrepreneurs and explains some of the unique aspects of his business, Fred L. Davis Insurance. Davis reflects on his hopes and concerns for the African American community, which include understanding corporate America in order to be fully successful in American society. Reflecting on his legacy, Davis speaks about the Brannon-McCullough Health Clinic, a night clinic which he helped to found. Davis also talks about his wife and children, and says he would like to be remembered as someone who tried to use his gifts to make life better for others. At the end of the tape, Davis narrates his photographs.