

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Cheek

---

## 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>	Cheek, James E.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 6, 2003 and September 16, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:33:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	University president James Cheek (1932 - 2010 ) served as the president of Howard University for more than twenty years. Cheek was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 6, 2003 and September 16, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_222
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

James Edward Cheek, president emeritus of Howard University, was born in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, on December 4, 1932. Despite severe eye cataracts, Cheek was an honor student at Washington Street Grammar School. He graduated from Immanuel Lutheran College with a secondary diploma in 1950 and served as a member of the United States Air Force in Korea in 1951. Earning a B.A. in sociology and history from Shaw University in 1955, Cheek received a master's of divinity from Colgate Rochester University in 1958 and a Ph.D. from Drew University in 1962. During this period he was honored with a Colgate Rochester Fellowship, a Rockefeller Doctoral Fellowship and a Lily Foundation Fellowship. Cheek was a professor of New Testament Theology at Virginia Union University when he was named president of Shaw University in 1963, at the age of thirty. In 1968, he was appointed president of Howard University. During Cheek's twenty-year tenure at Howard, the student population increased by 3,500 and the number of schools, colleges, research programs, full-time faculty and Ph.D. programs increased dramatically. Howard's budget increased from \$43 million to \$417 million as the federal appropriation went from \$29 million to \$178 million. He was named Washingtonian of the Year in 1980 and in 1983, while still serving as president of Howard, Cheek was awarded the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The recipient of hundreds of awards and nineteen honorary degrees, Cheek served as a board member of several colleges and universities including the University of Miami, Drew University, Colgate Rochester University, New York Institute of Technology, Benedict College, Florida Memorial College, Fisk University and Howard University. His presidential appointments included the Board of Foreign Scholarships, National Advisory Council to the Peace Corps, UNESCO, Commission on Selection of White House Fellows and the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Cheek and his wife, Celestine, were parents of a son and a daughter and had two grandchildren.

Cheek passed away on January 8, 2010 at age 77.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Cheek was conducted by Larry Crowe and Sandra Ford Johnson on November 6, 2003 and September 16, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. University president James Cheek (1932 - 2010 ) served as the president of Howard University for more than twenty years.

---

# 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®.

---

# 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.

---

# Controlled Access Terms

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

## Persons:

Cheek, James E.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Johnson, Sandra Ford (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cheek, James E.--Interviews

---

# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Howard University

---

## Occupations:

University President

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

---

## 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 James Cheek, November 6, 2003 and September 16, 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).

---

## 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.

---

## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

James Cheek describes his family's heritage going through his mother's and his father's ethnic and geographic backgrounds. Cheek then describes the personalities of both his mother and his father, noting that both of them had very clear plans about the academic successes and career choices of their five children. Cheek then tells a family legend about the sale of his grandfather's old

farm, sharing that the family believes his grandfather's spirit came back to prevent the sale. Cheek briefly describes Halifax County, the area of North Carolina in which he grew up. Cheek then talks about being diagnosed with cataracts as a five-year old, and being told that he would go blind by age fifteen. Cheek describes how he compensated for his poor vision in school by using his keen memory.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:01 ?

James Cheek describes his childhood battle with cataracts. He tells of the segregation he faced at his doctor's office, and describes in detail the numerous surgeries needed to correct his vision. Cheek jumps ahead to his freshman year at Shaw University, talking about how his father disapproved of his first girlfriend due to her dark skin, which led Cheek to start dating two women. Cheek explains why he and other college students chose to sign up for the U.S. Air Force at the onset of the Korean War. Cheek goes back to his high school days, and tells of his expulsion from a public high school. Cheek then talks about moving to a private school, where he developed an interest in Classic languages and theology. Cheek briefly describes his time in the Air Force, including his continued courtship of his two college girlfriends.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

James Cheek gives a lengthy description of his service in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War, beginning with his time on a base in Minnesota. Cheek describes the racism he encountered there due to his relationships with white women and their families. After being transferred to a base in San Francisco, Cheek talks about preparing to be sent to Korea for active duty, only to be transferred to Alaska instead, after his parents talked to key politicians. Cheek describes planning to marry his girlfriend, Celestine, in Alaska, but tells that her mother's stroke prevented them from doing so. In order to marry Celestine, Cheek applied for discharge. He describes the lengthy medical process he went through to successfully receive a discharge. Cheek then talks about his return to undergraduate study at Shaw University, where he led a student strike against the administration, leading to his temporary expulsion. Cheek explains that the leadership he displayed during the strike earned him the respect of the Board of Trustees.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

James Cheek tells the story of how he met his wife, Celestine, as a freshman at Shaw University, leading him into a brief discussion about his children's success. Cheek then tells the story of his daughter Janet's struggle with a congenital heart defect, detailing her first surgeries as child all the way up to her time at the Mayo Clinic. Cheek speaks warmly of the Mayo Clinic in describing how the doctors there saved his daughter's life. Cheek moves back into a discussion of his own story, talking about his desire to attend divinity school and describing his time at the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. Cheek talks about his desire to become a professor, not a minister, and study both philosophy and theology. Cheek explains that his desire for a "double major" led to a complicated search for a graduate school, which ended with him attending Drew University.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_002\_005, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

James Cheek describes his experience as a graduate student of philosophy and theology at Drew University. He talks about the hardships of being the only African American graduate student at the university, including the efforts of a professor to protest Cheek's dissertation. Cheek discusses his first job offers after he successfully completed his graduate study, explaining that he turned

down a position at Lafayette College because they emphasized race as a condition of his hiring. Cheek talks about leaving his first teaching job at Virginia Union University after two years to become president at his alma mater, Shaw University. Cheek describes the dire financial conditions of the school upon his arrival, and outlines the steps he took to bring Shaw out of debt and into prosperity. Cheek says that during his fundraising efforts, he at times clashed in the press with Jesse Helms, who was a radio commentator at the time. Cheek explains that despite their clashes, he thinks of Helms as a good Senator whose relationship with African Americans is misunderstood.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_002\_006, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

James Cheek discusses his success as president of Shaw University, detailing his plans for expansion and the creation of Shaw's professional schools. Cheek says by the end of his presidency, Shaw's student body had doubled in size. Cheek explains that his success at Shaw made him an attractive candidate for the presidency at Howard University. He tells of receiving frequent phone calls from Howard's Board of Trustees, though Cheek always declined them. Cheek talks about finally relenting and going to meet with Howard's presidential search committee in New York City. Cheek details this meeting, and Howard's further efforts to persuade him to accept the position. He explains why he finally was forced to accept the offer, when a story of their previous meetings leaked to the media. Cheek talks about the two presidents who preceded him at Howard, which leads him into a discussion of black student activism during the Civil Rights Movement. He details the formation of the Congress for the Unity of Black Students, which took place at Shaw University while Cheek was still president there.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_002\_007, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

James Cheek talks about student activism at Shaw University in 1968, detailing the failure to establish the Congress for the Unity of Black Students. Cheek then moves on to his time at Howard University, saying that his reputation for discipline and respect preceded him to Howard from Shaw. Cheek explains how he persuaded the federal government to increase its financial contributions to Howard by circulating a report comparing Howard to similar white universities. Cheek tells of serving as an advisor to President Richard Nixon in the wake of student unrest in 1970, during which time he became disappointed with the apathy of many black college presidents. Cheek returns to his achievements at Howard, talking about its numerous professional schools, its recognition as a Category One research institution, and Howard's radio and television stations. Cheek then provides descriptions of several photographs, most of which depict Cheek and family members.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cheek, Section A2003\_222\_002\_008, TRT: 0:05:47 ?

James Cheek concludes the interview by reflecting on his career. He gives his hopes and concerns for the future of the African American community. Cheek discusses some regrets he had during his career as an educator. Cheek remembers his past ambition to be a prolific writer and hopes to start writing his memoirs soon. Cheek discusses his legacy and how he wants to be remembered as an educator who helped a successful cause.