

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilder, Lawrence Douglas, 1931-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder,
Dates:	July 22, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	16 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:06:51).
Abstract:	Governor The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder (1931 -) was the first African American to hold a position in the Virginia State Senate in almost one hundred years. Following a long term in the senate, Wilder became the first black lieutenant governor in the United States; after five years in that position, he was elected governor of Virginia, becoming the first African American to become governor of a state in United States history. Wilder was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 22, 2004, in Richmond, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_105
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former governor of Virginia L. Douglas Wilder was born in Richmond, Virginia, on January 17, 1931. The second youngest of eight children, Wilder often spent time as a child at the local barbershop listening to political debates. After graduating from Armstrong High School at the age of sixteen, Wilder attended Virginia Union University, while he worked as a waiter to pay his way through college. Wilder earned his B.A. degree in chemistry from Virginia Union in 1951; the following year he was drafted into the army and sent to Korea. In Korea Wilder would lead a group of POW's under his watch through artillery fire to rescue a group of wounded American soldiers, which earned him the Bronze Star.

Following his time in the Army, Wilder decided to become a lawyer, and in 1956, he entered Howard University. While at Howard University, Wilder met Henry Marsh, the future mayor of Richmond, and had the opportunity to watch Thurgood Marshall and a number of other notables hone their skills in moot court. Wilder also met Eunice Montgomery during his days as a student, and the two married on October 11, 1958. Wilder opened his law firm, which would become Wilder, Gregory & Associates, in 1961, and was soon asked by Spottswood Robinson, who had worked on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, to take on some of his excess workload. While Wilder's legal career got off to a successful start, he refused to sit on the segregated side of courtrooms, and often argued with judges about the treatment of his clients. Over the next decade and a half, Wilder argued several famous cases, including his defense of William Penn, an infamous serial killer, which resulted in a hung jury. In 1969, Wilder successfully ran for the Virginia State Senate, becoming the first African American to hold a position there in almost one hundred years. In his first speech in the Senate, Wilder blasted the use of the racially offensive song, Carry Me Back to Old Virginny, and though his bill to repeal the anthem fell short, his reputation as an orator was secured.

During his time in the Senate, Wilder supported a number of bills that were beneficial to low-income residents, and was also a major proponent of anti-discrimination bills. Wilder was most active, however, in reforming legislation relating to juvenile criminal offenders. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Wilder also fought to secure a state holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, birthday, which finally succeeded in 1984. The following year, Wilder won an election to become the first black lieutenant governor in the United States in a landslide victory. After five years as lieutenant governor, Wilder was elected governor of Virginia, the first African American to become governor of a state in United States history. Coming into office in a budget crisis, Wilder was forced to make job and pay cuts, but in the end, *Financial Magazine* named Virginia the best-managed state in the country. Throughout his term in office, Wilder worked hard to support his low-income constituents and to promote equal opportunities for women and minorities.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 22, 2004, in Richmond, Virginia, and was recorded on 16 Betacame SP videocassettes. Governor The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder (1931 -) was the first African American to hold a position in the Virginia State Senate in almost one hundred years. Following a long term in the senate, Wilder became the first black lieutenant governor in the United States; after five years in that position, he was elected governor of Virginia, becoming the first African American to become governor of a state in United States history.

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:

Wilder, Lawrence Douglas, 1931-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Wilder, Lawrence Douglas, 1931---Interviews

African American government executives--Virginia--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

African American politicians--Virginia--Interviews

Governors--Virginia--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Virginia

Occupations:

Governor

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, July 22, 2004.
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 The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_001, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder was born on January 17, 1931 in Richmond, Virginia. He describes his father's childhood and paternal family ancestry. His father earned \$50 dollars a week as an insurance salesman, and served as a deacon and trustee at the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. Wilder describes his mother's, Beulah Olive Richards', childhood in Charles City, Virginia, New Jersey, and in Richmond. Wilder lists his seven siblings and their birth order. He remembers experiencing segregation, and receiving his first lesson in racial pride. Wilder grew up in Church Hill, Virginia, and developed his skills as an orator in the local barbershop. He remembers seeing the Brooklyn Dodgers play against the St. Louis Cardinals in 1947, when Enos Slaughter spiked Jackie Robinson. Wilder talks about playing semi-professional football, boxing with his brother and fighting with his elder sisters.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_001E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_002, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder remembers community discussions his father hosted on the porch of their home in Richmond, Virginia. He talks about his father's personality and upbringing, and the sights, sounds, and smells of Richmond. Wilder talks about his mother's initial aversion to politics, and her contribution to financing his undergraduate education. Wilder attended George Mason Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia. He attended Armstrong High School and graduated at sixteen years old. Wilder then enrolled at Virginia Union University in 1947, and remembers when HistoryMaker Oliver W. Hill became the first black city councilmen, elected in 1948. Wilder talks about majoring in chemistry and the scarce job market in the 1950s. He remembers his professors and mentors at Virginia Union University including Dr. Benjamin Mays and Belford Lawson, Jr. Wilder also talks about pledging Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and being drafted into the Korean War in 1952.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_002E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_003, TRT: 0:30:05 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder was drafted into the Korean War in 1952, and based at Camp Breckenridge in Morganfield, Kentucky. He was sent to the front lines where he earned a Bronze Star in the Battle of Pork Chop Hill. During this period, Wilder became interested in African independence movements and U.S. policies in Asia and Africa. He also learned firsthand about the consequences of warfare. After returning from Korea, he worked in a medical examiner's office. He was inspired to go to law school by the civil rights victory in *Brown v. the Board of Education* and entered Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. Wilder describes his experience as a student at Howard where he was exposed to Howard Law School's notable faculty and alumni including Thurgood Marshall, James Nabrit, and Herbert O. Reid. He talks about an interaction with civil rights attorney and U.S. Federal District Court Judge Spottswood W. Robinson, III.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section B2004_105_001_003E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section B2004_105_001_004, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder had the opportunity to develop a relationship with Thurgood Marshall and remembers his stories of civil rights lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston. He describes the academic environment at Howard Law School in Washington, D.C. and his classmate HistoryMaker Henry L. Marsh III. Wilder graduated from law school in 1959, passed the bar exam the same year, and was admitted to the Virginia bar in 1960. Wilder faced discrimination within the bar; there were separate benches and bars for black and white lawyers. He organized a meeting of the black bar to encourage integration within courtrooms, law offices, and the Virginia circuit bench. Wilder remembers the influence of HistoryMakers Charles T. Duncan, an evidence professor at Howard Law, Oliver W. Hill and Samuel Wilbert Tucker. Wilder describes his litigating style and recalls memorable cases, including his defense of Curtis Poindexter for the murder of Judge S. A. Cunningham and the Bruce Tucker heart transplant investigation.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section B2004_105_001_004E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section B2004_105_001_005, TRT: 0:31:06 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder established a successful law practice in Richmond, Virginia. In 1968, he filed a civil redress lawsuit on behalf of the family of Bruce Tucker, a man whose organs had been removed and transplanted only one hour after his presumed brain death. Wilder lost, but the case initiated a reexamination of the legal definition of death. In 1959 through 1964, the State of Virginia closed Prince Edward County schools in defiance of the *Brown v. Board* decision. Frustrated, Wilder ran for the Virginia General Assembly in 1969 and won. There had not been an African American in the state senate since Reconstruction. The election was held before Richmond annexed Chesterfield County, which would have impacted the voter demographics. He talks about his campaign strategy and the controversy surrounding his election. In his first speech on the assembly floor, he introduced a bill to repeal the Virginia state song, 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.' His parents were proud of his success.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section B2004_105_001_005E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_006, TRT: 0:30:44 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder served in the Virginia State Senate for sixteen years. He developed strong relationships with Virginia Senator William Vincent “Bill” Rawlings and State Representative Dr. William P. Robinson. As two of Virginia’s black legislators, Wilder and Robinson made certain to publicly support and collaborate with one another. Wilder, Robinson, and Dr. William Ferguson Reid, the first African American elected to the Virginia Assembly in 1968, participated in the establishment of the Democratic Black Caucus of Virginia. Wilder talks about his record in the legislature, including voting in opposition of capital punishment and passing the bill to observe Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday as a holiday. Wilder also talks about his relationship with former lieutenant governor Charles “Chuck” Robb, who served from 1978 to 1982. Wilder ran for lieutenant governor in 1985 and won, becoming the first African American to win a statewide election in Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_006E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder was elected lieutenant governor of Virginia in 1985. As part of his campaign strategy, Wilder toured southwest Virginia, where he was less well-known, for sixty days and received endorsements from Virginia politician Charles Spittal “Chuck” Robb and Virginia Attorney General Gerald L. Baliles. He won the election with nearly 52 percent of votes. As lieutenant governor, he established a weapons background check. In 1989, he ran for Governor of Virginia. Wilder raised record amounts of funding for his lieutenant governor and gubernatorial campaigns. He recalls stories from the campaign trail such as shooting a low-cost impromptu commercial in Lunenburg County, Virginia and being asked publicly about his stance on abortion by a state resident. Wilder was elected the first African American and 66th governor of Virginia in 1989. He assumed office in January of 1990 and began tackling Virginia’s multi-billion dollar budget deficit and established a \$200 million dollar rainy day fund.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_007E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_008, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder faced criticism for his fiscal conservatism and how he managed Virginia’s budget deficit during his term as governor from 1990 to 1994. As governor, he continued to advocate for handgun regulation. Wilder is the first “Richmonder” to be elected both lieutenant governor and governor. After his term as governor, he declined presidencies at both his alma maters, helped reform Richmond’s mayoral election process and was elected mayor of Richmond in 2004. He served as mayor until 2009. During his mayoral campaign he faced criticism for speaking at Republican events. Wilder talks about helping to increase African American participation in politics and considers the significance of his governorship. He also describes his concerns for the African American community, his legacy, the origin of his name, and the risks of succumbing to flattery.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable L. Douglas Wilder, Section
B2004_105_001_008E, TRT: