

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John H. Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, John H. (John Harold), 1918-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson,
Dates:	December 16, 2004 and November 11, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:20:06).
Abstract:	Magazine publishing chief executive and corporate chief executive John H. Johnson (1918 - 2005) is widely regarded as most influential African American publisher in history. Johnson's publications include Ebony and Jet. He is a Spingarn Medal winner. Johnson's wife, Eunice, and daughter, Linda Johnson-Rice, continue to retain full control of Johnson Publishing as the only two shareholders in the company. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 16, 2004 and November 11, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_231
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

John H. Johnson, widely regarded as the most influential African American publisher in American history, was born on January 19, 1918, in Arkansas City, Arkansas, to Leroy and Gertrude Johnson Williams. Growing up in Arkansas City, no high schools existed for black students, so Johnson repeated the eighth grade to continue his education. After moving to Chicago with his family shortly thereafter, Johnson attended DuSable High School, where he graduated with honors.

After graduating from high school, Johnson went to work for the Supreme Life Insurance Company while attending the University of Chicago. While with Supreme, he was given the job of compiling weekly news clippings for his boss, which eventually gave him the idea for his first publication, Negro Digest. In 1942, after graduating from the University of Chicago, he acted on this idea, and with a \$500 loan against his mother's furniture and \$6,000 raised through charter subscriptions, Johnson launched Negro Digest, which later became Black World. Three years later, he launched Ebony, which has remained the number-one African American magazine in the world every year since its founding. In 1951, Johnson Publishing expanded again, with the creation of Jet, the world's largest African American news weekly magazine.

Johnson also expanded from magazine publishing into book publishing, and owned Fashion Fair Cosmetics, the largest black-owned cosmetics company in the world, Supreme Beauty Products, and produced television specials. Johnson also later became chairman and CEO of Supreme Life Insurance, where he had begun his career.

In addition to his business and publishing acumen, Johnson was highly involved at both community and the national level. In 1957, he accompanied then-Vice President Richard Nixon to nine African nations, and two years

later, to Russia and Poland. President John F. Kennedy sent Johnson to the Ivory Coast in 1961 as Special Ambassador to the independence ceremonies taking place there, and President Johnson sent him to Kenya in 1963 for the same purpose. President Nixon later appointed him to the Commission for the Observance of the 25th Anniversary of the United Nations.

Johnson was also the recipient of numerous awards that spanned decades, from the Spingarn Medal to the Most Outstanding Black Publisher in History Award from the National Newspaper Publishers Association. Johnson Publishing has also been named the number one black business by Black Enterprise four times. In 1996, President Bill Clinton awarded Johnson with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. He also received more than thirty honorary doctoral degrees from institutions across the country, and served as a board member or trustee of numerous businesses and philanthropic and cultural organizations.

Johnson's wife, Eunice, and daughter, Linda Johnson-Rice, continue to retain full control of Johnson Publishing as the only two shareholders in the company.

Johnson passed away on August 8, 2005 at the age of 87.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John H. Johnson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on December 16, 2004 and November 11, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Magazine publishing chief executive and corporate chief executive John H. Johnson (1918 - 2005) is widely regarded as most influential African American publisher in history. Johnson's publications include Ebony and Jet. He is a Spingarn Medal winner. Johnson's wife, Eunice, and daughter, Linda Johnson-Rice, continue to retain full control of Johnson Publishing as the only two shareholders in the company.

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:

Johnson, John H. (John Harold), 1918-2005

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, John H. (John Harold), 1918-2005--Interviews

Publishers and publishing--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American business enterprises--Illinois--Chicago

Family-owned business enterprises--Illinois--Chicago

Publications--Illinois--Chicago

Rural-urban migration--United States

Depressions--1929--United States

DuSable High School

Arkansas City (Ark.)--Social life and Customs

Gibson, Truman K. (Truman Kella), 1912-2005

Dickerson, Earl B., 1891-1986

Dawson, William L. (William Levi), 1886-1970

Passing (Identity)--United States

Ebony (Chicago, Ill.)

Cosmetics industry

Commercial real estate--United States

Success in business
Business planning--United States
Harvard Business School
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Nixon, Richard M.--(Richard Milhous),--1913-1994
Nkrumah, Kwame, 1909-1972
Sleet, Moneta, 1926-1996
Johnson, Robert E.
Bennett, Lerone, 1928-
Major, Gerri, 1894-1984
Saunders, Doris E.
Rockefeller, Winthrop, 1912-1973
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
De Leon, Robert, 1904-1961
Adoptive parents--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews
Powell, Adam Clayton, 1908-1972
Daley, Richard J., 1902-1976
Caroll, Dianne
Davis, Sammy
Carroll, Diahann
Robinson, Jackie, 1919-1972
Louis, Joe, 1914-1981

Fashion shows--Illinois--Chicago

Cable television--United States

Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006--Anecdotes

Charles, Ray, 1930-2004--Anecdotes

Muhammad, Ali--Anecdotes

Mentoring in business--Illinois--Chicago

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Magazine Publishing Chief Executive

Corporate Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|MediaMakers

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 John H. Johnson, December 16, 2004 and November 11, 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 John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_001, TRT: 0:30:52 ?

Publisher John H. Johnson recalls his childhood and youth. He remembers his small town, Arkansas City, Arkansas and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. He talks about moving with his mother to the South Side of Chicago in 1933, recalling his impressions of the big city, employment difficulties during the Great Depression and the shame he felt at being on welfare. He discusses in detail his experiences at Wendell Phillips High School and DuSable High School, including his work on the school paper, which was his introduction to journalism. He also credits people who influenced him as a youth, especially a white teacher, Mary Herrick, who took students to museums, invited them to her home and helped them financially, and black entrepreneur Harry Pace, who gave Johnson a job at his Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company so that he could go to college.

Publishers and publishing--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American business enterprises--Illinois--Chicago.

Family-owned business enterprises--Illinois--Chicago.

Publications--Illinois--Chicago.

Rural-urban migration--United States.

Depressions--1929--United States.

DuSable High School.

Arkansas City (Ark.)--Social life and customs.

Gibson, Truman K. (Truman Kella), 1912-2005.

Dickerson, Earl B., 1891-1986.

Dawson, William L. (William Levi), 1886-1970.

Passing (Identity)--United States.

Ebony (Chicago, Ill.).

Cosmetics industry.

Commercial real estate--United States.

Success in business.

Business planning--United States.

Harvard Business School.

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Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994.
Nkrumah, Kwame, 1909-1972.
Sleet, Moneta, 1926-1996.
Johnson, Robert E. (Robert Edward), 1922-1995.
Bennett, Lerone, 1928-.
Major, Gerri, 1894-1984.
Saunders, Doris E.
Rockefeller, Winthrop, 1912-1973.
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963.
De Leon, Robert, 1904-1961.
Adoptive parents--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.
Powell, Adam Clayton, 1908-1972.
Daley, Richard J., 1902-1976.
Davis, Sammy, 1925-1990.
Carroll, Diahann.
Robinson, Jackie, 1919-1972.
Louis, Joe, 1914-1981.
Fashion shows--Illinois--Chicago.
Cable television--United States.
Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006.
Charles, Ray, 1930-2004.
Muhammad, Ali.
Mentoring in business--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_002, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Publisher John H. Johnson talks about the business lessons he learned from Harry H. Pace, Truman K. Gibson, Sr., Earl Dickerson and other executives at the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company. He recalls working on Dickerson's campaign staff and compares Dickerson with another African American politician from Chicago, William L. Dawson. Mr. Johnson also explains why Harry Pace, after a lifetime of living as a black man and supporting black causes, moved to the suburbs and began passing for white. Finally he discusses his idea for the creation of Negro Digest and the advice Pace gave him about starting his new publication.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_003, TRT: 0:30:48 ?

Publisher John H. Johnson talks about the first year of publication of Negro Digest, 1942-1943, including its funding (using his mother's furniture as collateral for a loan), the direct marketing campaign that provided the initial subscribers, the building of a distribution network and the publication's sales success despite predictions that a magazine targeted at blacks would not make a profit. He also recalls his first meeting with his wife, at that time Eunice Walker, and their marriage in 1941, and relates an anecdote about his mother's pride in his success.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_004, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Publisher John H. Johnson recalls the early years of his publishing empire in the 1940s, including the creation of Ebony as a black counterpart to Life magazine, the new publication's quick popularity and circulation success, and its difficulty,

nevertheless, in attracting major advertisers. Johnson tells the story of how he landed his first major advertiser, Zenith Radio, and gives examples of his successful strategies for selling the Ebony Fashion Fair cosmetic line to department stores in the 1970s. He also talks about facing discrimination in trying to purchase commercial real estate in the 1940s and 1950s, and he comments on his relationships with other African American publishers.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_005, TRT: 0:30:30 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson talks about building his publishing empire in the late 1940s and 1950s, buying out competitors and recruiting the best talent he could find from black newspapers, schools, and organizations. He talks about his own work in advertising sales and circulation, and willingness to change with the times. He also covers other issues, such as serving on Harvard Business School's advisory board and getting his Ebony Fashion Fair cosmetics line into the Neiman Marcus department stores.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_001_006, TRT: 0:22:42 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson talks about meetings with U.S. and foreign leaders including Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon and Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah. Johnson describes the difficulties he faced in building his company headquarters in downtown Chicago and his great pride in this, the only building in a central business district built by an African American. He expresses optimism for the future of the black community and pleasure that he helped black people to believe in themselves.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_002_007, TRT: 0:28:00 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson remembers some of Johnson Publishing Company's notable staff members: Moneta Sleet, Jr., Robert E. Johnson, Lerone Bennett, Jr., Gerri Major, and Doris Saunders.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_002_008, TRT: 0:29:00 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson remembers some of the notable people who have worked for Johnson Publishing Company over the years, including Hans J. Massaquoi, Basil Phillips, Isaac Sutton, Herbert Temple and Bill Grayson, in the course of these recollections sharing some of his own management philosophy and sales techniques. Mr. Johnson also relates notable occasions when he was able to overcome obstacles with the help of powerful contacts such as Winthrop Rockefeller and John F. Kennedy.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_002_009, TRT: 0:31:00 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson shares memories about Johnson Publishing Company staff members including June Acie Rhinehart, Robert DeLeon, Simeon Booker and Lydia Davis Eady, as well as celebrities including Sammy Davis, Jr., Joe Louis, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Jackie Robinson and Diahann Carroll; he recalls serving as best man at the wedding of Miss Carroll and Jet magazine editor DeLeon. Johnson also relates the decision to hire an in-house counsel to vet all stories before publication and tells of his difficulty in renting offices in Los Angeles, where he again encountered discrimination in the area of commercial real estate.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_002_010, TRT: 0:30:00 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson recalls events in his career and the people he has known, including African American politician Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley. He talks about the adoption of his two children and the early death of his son from sickle cell anemia. He discusses the Ebony Fashion Fair shows organized by Freda DeKnight and Johnson's wife, Eunice Walker Johnson, about his magazines' international distribution, his

foray into cable television, his participation on corporate boards and his magazines' stance of political neutrality.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_002_011, TRT: 0:26:30 ?
Publisher John H. Johnson talks about his mentors Harry Pace and Earl B. Dickerson, the great influence of his mother, his feelings about passing on the company to his daughter, Linda Johnson Rice, and later his granddaughter Alexa Rice, both of whom he sees as examples of strong women. He also shares anecdotes about Ray Charles, Muhammad Ali and Gordon Parks.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_Johnson_JohnH_06_MED_001, TRT: 0:04:00 ?
This tape contains three clips from the Founder of Johnson Publishing, John H. Johnson's, HistoryMakers interview. In the clips, Johnson talks about his mother being a major influence in his life and encouraging him to try his hardest to succeed in his dream of publishing.

Video Oral History Interview with John H. Johnson, Section A2004_231_Johnson_JohnH_06_MED_002, TRT: 0:16:37