

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with A. J. Cooper, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cooper, Algernon, Jr., 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr.,
Dates:	June 21, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:50).
Abstract:	Association chief executive, lawyer, mayor, and nonprofit chief executive A. J. Cooper, Jr. (1944 -) founded the National Black Law Students Association, Inc. and the National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc. Cooper was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 21, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_140
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Attorney and founder of the National Black Law Students Association, Inc., and the National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc., Algernon ('Jay') Johnson Cooper, Jr. was born on May 30, 1944, in Mobile, Alabama. Cooper's parents were Gladys Catherine Mouton Cooper and Algernon Johnson Cooper, Sr., both graduates of Hampton University; he was also a descendent of the Seminole Chief Osceola. Cooper's father ran the family-owned Christian Burial Insurance Company. Cooper attended St. Peter Claver Elementary School in Mobile and subsequently went on to the Marmion Military Academy in Aurora, Illinois, in 1958, where he was the first African American student to attend. Cooper graduated in 1962 and followed his two older brothers to the University of Notre Dame to continue his education; there, he majored in Latin American history and earned his B.A. degree. In 1966, Cooper was accepted into New York University's Law School, at a time where there were only nine African American students enrolled out of six hundred. In the summers, Cooper worked as a summer associate at the law firm of Strasser, Spiegelburg, Freid & Frank. While at New York University Law School, Cooper founded the National Black Law Students Association in 1967.

In late 1967, Cooper joined Senator Robert F. Kennedy's U.S. Senate staff as an aide in New York. One year later, Cooper joined Senator Kennedy's presidential campaign, managed the Watts campaign headquarters, and was with Kennedy when he was assassinated. Cooper escorted Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Mays to the funeral ceremony at St. Patrick's Cathedral and later escorted Coretta Scott King on the funeral train from New York to Washington, D.C. for the senator's burial at Arlington Cemetery. After earning his law degree in 1969, Cooper moved to Alabama where he became a successful civil rights lawyer and litigator. In 1972, Cooper was elected mayor of Prichard, Alabama, a city of some 50,000 citizens; he was the first African American to defeat a white incumbent in the state of Alabama. As mayor, Cooper founded and served as the first president of the National Conference of Black Mayors.

After serving two terms as mayor, Cooper joined the staff of Moon Landrieu, the Secretary of the Department of

Housing and Urban Development, as Director of the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business. After that, Cooper became executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Cooper became a member of the professional staff of the House Ways and Means Committee, and then subsequently became the Chief of Staff and Tax Counsel to Congressman Harold Ford, Sr. In 1988, Cooper left the Hill and became a partner at the Washington, D.C. firm of Ginsburg, Feldman, and Bress, Chartered. Cooper's legal specialties included litigation, legislative and administrative law, tax policy, and finance. Cooper was a member of the bars of Alabama and the District of Columbia and resided in Atlanta, Georgia.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 21, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association chief executive, lawyer, mayor, and nonprofit chief executive A. J. Cooper, Jr. (1944 -) founded the National Black Law Students Association, Inc. and the National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc.

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:

Cooper, Algernon, Jr., 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Cooper, Algernon, Jr., 1944---Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

African American mayors--Alabama--Prichard--Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lawyer

Mayor

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers|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 A. J. Cooper, Jr., June 21, 2005. 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 A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. was born on May 30, 1944 in Mobile, Alabama to Gladys Mouton Cooper and Algernon Cooper, Sr. His mother, a descendant of General Alfred Mouton of the Confederate States Army, was born in Lafayette, Louisiana. She had four sisters, including Hyacinth Mouton, a nun at The Dominican Monastery of Saint Jude in Marbury, Alabama. Her sisters attended Xavier University of Louisiana, but Cooper's mother enrolled at Hampton Institute in Virginia, where she met Algernon Cooper, Sr. Cooper's father was born in Mobile to Alice and Osceola Cooper, a descendant of the Seminole Chief Osceola. He was raised by his great-aunt and great-uncle, Pearl Johnson Madison and William Madison, who founded the Christian Burial Insurance Company. Cooper's parents married in the late 1920s, and settled in Mobile's Down the Bay neighborhood to work for the family company. He has five siblings, including HistoryMaker Peggy Cooper Cafritz. Cooper recalls getting his first haircut and eating at Fletcher's BBQ.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

African American mayors--Alabama--Prichard--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. grew up in the Down the Bay neighborhood of Mobile, Alabama. He attended St. Peter Claver Elementary School and frequented the Davis Avenue Branch of the Mobile Public Library and the Davis Avenue Recreation Center. Cooper visited his great-aunt, Pearl Johnson Madison, at her summer home in Fairhope, Alabama. He watched movies in Mobile at both the all-black Harlem Theatre and the Saenger Theatre, where he snuck into the whites-only section. Cooper's family sometimes hosted Bishop Fulton Sheen for dinner. In 1956, his older brother, William Cooper, attempted to integrate McGill-Toolen Catholic High School in Mobile, but was rejected by Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen. Cooper applied and was accepted in 1958 to Marmion Military Academy in Aurora, Illinois, a Benedictine school where he was the first African American student. He recalls the Davis v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County case and local civil rights leaders like Wiley Bolden, Sr. and John LeFlore.

Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_003, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. resented segregation at restaurants and public accommodations in Mobile, Alabama. Cooper attended boarding school at Marmion Military Academy in Aurora, Illinois, where he was mentored by Father Wulston Mork and Father Luke Bohr and became editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. Upon graduating in 1962, Cooper joined his older brother, William Cooper, at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, where he was one of twenty-four African American students. He was active in student government,

and pressured university president Theodore Hesburgh to recruit more African American students. Cooper brought HistoryMaker Dick Gregory and Nina Simone to Notre Dame for a fundraiser. He majored in Latin American history, had a summer job in Washington, D.C. through the Foreign Affairs Scholars Program, and graduated in 1966. Cooper participated in civil rights marches in Mobile, and decided to attend law school due to the example of lawyers Archibald Lescene and Vernon Z. Crawford.

Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_004, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. entered New York University School of Law in 1966. His mentors included Leroy Clark, W. Haywood Burns, and HistoryMaker The Honorable Robert L. Carter. That same year, Cooper founded the National Black Law Students Association (NBLSA). HistoryMaker Earl G. Graves, Sr. hired him as part of Senator Robert Kennedy's staff in 1967, and Cooper worked on his presidential campaign. After Kennedy's assassination, Cooper escorted Coretta Scott King to Washington, D.C. for the funeral. With NBLSA, he supported the Columbia University protests and the desegregation of the New York Athletic Club. After graduation, Cooper worked at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. He recalls arranging civil rights speeches with HistoryMakers The Honorables John Lewis and Julian Bond. Returning to Mobile, Cooper became a partner at the law firm Crawford, Fields and Cooper and successfully sued to integrate Fletcher's BBQ. He was elected the first black mayor of Prichard, Alabama in 1972.

Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_005, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. founded the National Conference of Black Mayors in 1974. While serving as mayor of Prichard, Alabama from 1972 to 1980, Cooper appointed Frankie Fields Smith as the city's first black female judge and named black chairpersons to the planning commission and housing authority. He headed the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization at the Department of Housing and Urban Development under Secretary Moon Landrieu. After President Jimmy Carter left office in 1981, Cooper remained in Washington, D.C. as executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus and then chief of staff for Representative Harold Ford, Sr. Cooper became a partner at Ginsburg, Feldman and Bress in 1988. In 2001, he married BJ Hampton and moved to Atlanta. He reflects on Maynard Jackson's efforts to increase black voter turnout and HistoryMaker Eddie Williams' leadership of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Cooper also describes his future plans and struggle with acute depression.

Video Oral History Interview with A. J. Cooper, Jr., Section A2005_140_001_006, TRT: 0:19:20 ?

A. J. Cooper, Jr. describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. In reflecting upon his life and his legacy, he lists two major accomplishments, which are founding the Black American Law Students Association, later renamed the National Black Law Students Association, and founding the National Conference of Black Mayors. Cooper concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.