

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William T. Coleman, Jr.

PERSON

Coleman, William T. (William Thaddeus),
1920-2017

Alternative Names: William T. Coleman, Jr.;

Life Dates: July 7, 1920-March 31, 2017

Place of Birth: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Work: Washington, DC

Occupations: Corporate Lawyer; Presidential Secretary

Biographical Note

William Thaddeus Coleman, Jr., was the first African American to clerk for a U.S. Supreme Court justice, served as secretary of transportation under the Ford administration, and helped try numerous important civil rights cases. He was born on July 7, 1920, in the Germantown district of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to William Thaddeus and Laura Beatrice Mason Coleman. Coleman's father was a director of the Germantown boys club for forty years, and as a result, Coleman met many African American notables at an early age, including W.E.B. DuBois. After attending an all-black segregated elementary school, Coleman attended the mostly-white Germantown High School. After high school, Coleman attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated summa cum laude with his B.A. degree in 1941. Eager to work in law ever since childhood, Coleman attended Harvard Law School later that year. In 1943, he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps. As defense counsel for eighteen courts-martial, he won acquittals for sixteen. He returned to Harvard Law School after the war.

In 1946, Coleman received his L.L.B. degree magna cum laude from Harvard Law School, after becoming the third African American man to serve on the board of editors of the Harvard Law Review. He was a Langdell fellow, and was therefore permitted to stay at Harvard Law School to study for an extra year. In 1947, he was admitted to the bar and obtained a job working as a law clerk with Judge Herbert F. Goodrich of the Third Circuit's U.S. Court of Appeals. The following year, he became U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Felix Frankfurter's law clerk, and as such, he was the first African American to clerk for the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1949, Coleman joined Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton, and Garrison, a noted New

York law firm, where he met Thurgood Marshall and worked pro bono to assist Marshall with NAACP cases. In 1952, Coleman became the first African American to join an all-white firm, and in 1966, he became partner at Dilworth, Paxon, Kalish, Levy and Coleman. Coleman worked in the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1950s, including five cases for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) cases that led directly to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. He also served as co-counsel for *McLaughlin v. Florida*, a case that decided the constitutionality of interracial marriages.

In 1959, President Eisenhower convinced Coleman to work on the President's commission on employment policy; Coleman continued to work in presidential commissions for Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, including the Warren commission's investigation of Kennedy's assassination. In 1971, Coleman was elected president of the NAACP-LDF. In 1975, Coleman was appointed President Gerald Ford's Secretary of Transportation, becoming only the second African American to hold a cabinet-level position. During his tenure, he created the first Statement of National Transportation Policy in U.S. history. When Carter became president in 1976, Coleman returned to the private sector, becoming a senior partner of the Los Angeles-based O'Melveny & Myers law firm. In 1995, Coleman was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his contributions to the legal profession and to society.

Coleman passed away on March 31, 2017 at the age of 96.

Related Entries

Germantown High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Roosevelt Middle School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Thomas Meehan School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

John E. Hill School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Harvard Law School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Pennsylvania [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

U.S Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1946 to 1948]

Law Clerk for the Honorable Herbert F. Goodrich

U.S. Supreme Court [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1948 to 1949]

Law Clerk for Justice Felix Frankfurter

Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1949 to ?]

Associate Attorney

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1950 to ?]

Counsel

Dilworth, Paxson, Kalish and Levy [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1952 to 1975]

Associate, Senior Partner

U.S. Department of Transportation [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1974 to 1977]

Secretary of the Department of Transportation

O'Melveny and Myers [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1977 to ?]

Attorney

Chase Manhattan Bank (JP Morgan Chase) [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board of Directors

IBM Corporation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board of Directors

Pan American World Airways [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board of Directors

Western Savings Fund Society [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board of Directors

CIGNA Corporation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board of Directors

Philadelphia Museum of Art [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Trustee, Vice President

American Bar Association [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

American College of Trial Lawyers [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the American Law Institute [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the American Society of International Law [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the American Academy of Appellate Lawyers [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Phi Beta Kappa [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Pi Gamma Mu [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

The American Philosophical Society [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the Order of the Coif [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

the Ford Motor Company [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member, Board of Directors