

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William T. Coleman, Jr.

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## 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>	Coleman, William T. (William Thaddeus), 1920-2017
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 7, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:23:40).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Corporate lawyer and presidential secretary William T. Coleman, Jr. (1920 - 2017) was the second African American to hold a Presidential Cabinet position as Secretary of Transportation, the first African American clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court, and the first African American to join an all-white law firm; he was senior partner of O'Melveny & Myers LLP. Coleman was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 7, 2006, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_132
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William T. Coleman, Jr. was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on November 7, 2006, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate lawyer and presidential secretary William T. Coleman, Jr. (1920 - 2017) was the second African American to hold a Presidential Cabinet position as Secretary of Transportation, the first African American clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court, and the first African American to join an all-white law firm; he was senior partner of O'Melveny & Myers LLP.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

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

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

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

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African American lawyers--Interviews

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Cabinet officers--United States--Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Corporate Lawyer

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Presidential Secretary

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers|PoliticalMakers

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## 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 William T. Coleman, Jr., November 7, 2006. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. was born on July 7, 1920 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Laura Mason Coleman and William T. Coleman, Sr. His maternal great-great-grandfather, an Episcopal minister, hosted escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad. Later, his maternal grandfather worked for the post office in Baltimore, Maryland, where his mother graduated from the Colored High School, and became a German teacher. Coleman's paternal great-grandmother owned a large farm in Culpeper, Virginia. Born in Baltimore, Coleman's father was sent to Hampton, Virginia to attend the Armstrong-Slater Trade School, and then the Hampton National and Agricultural Institute. His father went on to serve as the first black director of the Wissahickon Boys' Club in Philadelphia. There, Coleman grew up in the integrated Germantown neighborhood, where white parents did not allow their children to play with him. He attended the segregated Thomas Meehan School, and then the Joseph E. Hill School, where he excelled despite his dyslexia.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Cabinet officers--United States--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. became interested in law at twelve years old, when he heard a case argued before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia City Hall. He was aware of civil rights, as the National Urban League director Lester Blackwell Granger was a frequent guest in his childhood home. In Philadelphia, Coleman attended the integrated Germantown High School, where the swim team disbanded rather than allow him to join. By that time, Coleman was certain he wanted to pursue law, and his role models included NAACP litigator Charles Hamilton Houston, Judge William H. Hastie and the local Judge Raymond Pace Alexander. Coleman attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied at the Wharton School, and joined Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. He was one of fifteen black students, and experienced discrimination when the university refused to award him a Phi Beta Kappa

Society key. He lived at home while in college, and his exposure to Philadelphia's economic and racial inequality fueled his activism.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. graduated summa cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and attended Harvard Law School in 1941 on a scholarship. He was one of three African Americans in his class, and befriended politician Elliot Lee Richardson on his first day. Later in 1941, Coleman was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps. He reported to Keesler Army Airfield in Mississippi, where he faced racial discrimination. He trained as a Corps Information Systems Control Officer at Harvard Business School, and was assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group. While Coleman was stationed at Indiana's Camp Atterbury, the white troops refused African Americans entry to the officer's club. Upon challenging this discrimination, 104 black soldiers were arrested. Together with Theodore M. Berry and Thurgood Marshall, Coleman helped to acquit the soldiers by proving unlawful segregation in court. He then returned to Harvard Law School in 1945. Coleman also describes his wife, Lovida Hardin Coleman.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. became the third African American editor of the Harvard Law Review in 1942. He also was awarded the John H. Beale Prize for earning the highest mark in his conflict of laws class. Despite graduating magna cum laude and first in his class from Harvard Law School in 1946, Coleman had difficulty obtaining a position due to discriminatory hiring practices. He remained at Harvard Law School until 1947 as a teaching fellow. After his fellowship, he began a clerkship with Herbert F. Goodrich, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Coleman was later recommended by his professor, Paul A. Freund, to a clerkship with U.S. Supreme Court Judge Felix Frankfurter, and became the first African American clerk in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court. There, he clerked alongside his friend Elliot Lee Richardson. As Frankfurter's clerk, Coleman wrote opinions for *Wolf v. Colorado* in 1949, and antitrust cases. He also describes Justice Frankfurter and his judicial approach.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. experienced racial discrimination in Washington D.C., where he was unable to dine with his fellow law clerks while serving under U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. In 1949, Coleman returned to Philadelphia with his wife. He was unable to find a local position, but was hired by the corporate law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison, LLP, and commuted daily to New York City. There, his casework centered on entertainment litigation, and his clients included composer Cole Porter. In 1950, Coleman was recruited by Thurgood Marshall to assist with the five school segregation cases that led to the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954. Together with Constance Baker Motley, Robert L. Carter and Charles T. Duncan, he prepared strategy; provided insight into the U.S. Supreme Court justices; and wrote to former classmates for research on state policies. Coleman also describes the other members of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:51 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr., was the first African American associate at the Philadelphia law firm of Dilworth, Paxson, Kalish and Levy in 1953. When the firm's secretaries learned of his race, they threatened to quit. However, the firm retained Coleman under pressure from businessman Walter Annenberg. Coleman later became the senior partner in charge of litigation, and represented clients such as Pan American World Airways and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority. Coleman helped Thurgood Marshall prepare for two weeks before the decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. He describes the case's arguments, and the impact of the ruling. In 1956, Raymond Pace Alexander brought Coleman onto the Girard College case, and he later successfully argued for the college's desegregation before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1958, Coleman served as chair of the board for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and on the board of Western Savings Fund Society.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_007, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. served on the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy in 1964 with J. Lee Rankin, where he sought to determine the existence of a foreign conspiracy in the president's death. For the Watergate trial, Coleman was offered a position as chief counsel, but chose to remain in private practice, and wrote an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* calling for President Richard Nixon's resignation. In 1974, Coleman turned down several positions in the cabinet of President Gerald Ford, Jr.; but, with the encouragement of his daughter, Lovida Hardin Coleman, Jr., became the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation. During his tenure, Coleman oversaw the completion of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways; began the Washington, D.C. subway system; regulated automobile seatbelts and airbags; and granted landing rights to the Concorde airliner, for which France's president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, made him an officer of the French Legion of Honor.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. drafted a comprehensive transportation policy as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation. President Gerald Ford, Jr. provisionally offered him the position of attorney general, but was not reelected in 1977. By then, Coleman was a senior partner at Dilworth, Paxson, Kalish, Levy and Coleman, but left to resume his former corporate board memberships, and joined the board of IBM. At the recommendation of former U.S. Attorney General Elliot Lee Richardson, he also joined the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars as a Distinguished Scholar. He was later contacted by Warren Christopher, who offered him a position at the Washington, D.C. office of the law firm of O'Melveny and Myers LLP. There, through his corporate connections, Coleman engaged clients like Chase Manhattan Bank and Ford Motor Company. He describes the globalization of legal practice, and the need for African American lawyers in the business sector.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Coleman, Jr., Section A2006\_132\_001\_009, TRT: 0:22:20 ?

William T. Coleman, Jr. received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995 from President Bill Clinton, who was his son's, William T. Coleman III's former roommate and friend from Yale Law School. Coleman describes his three children, and his concerns about the state of education in the African American community. He also reflects upon his legacy, and how he would like to be

remembered. Coleman concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.