

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Margaret Bush Wilson

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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>	Wilson, Margaret Bush, 1919-2009
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 17, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:25:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Association branch chief executive and real estate lawyer Margaret Bush Wilson (1919 - 2009 ) was formerly St. Louis NAACP chapter president and a Missouri NAACP president, and served nine terms as chairman of the national NAACP board. An accomplished attorney, she was instrumental in Shelley v. Kraemer, a 1948 Supreme Court ruling that held housing covenants unenforceable. Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 17, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_177
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

NAACP leader, activist attorney Margaret Bush Wilson was born Margaret Bush on January 30, 1919, in St. Louis, Missouri. Wilson's father, a railway postal clerk, James Thomas Bush was a 1900 Prairie View A&M graduate and her mother, Margaret Bernice Casey Bush taught kindergarten. Both of Wilson's parents were active in the local NAACP, with her mother serving as an executive board member. Wilson attended grade school on the grounds of Sumner High School where lifelong friend Julia Davis mentored her. After graduating from Sumner High School in 1935, Wilson enrolled at Talladega College where she was awarded a Juliette Derricotte Fellowship to study at Visva-Bharati University in India, and where she met Nobel Prize winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore. Wilson graduated in 1939 with her B.S. degree in economics. A beneficiary of the Gains v. Canada law suit, Wilson enrolled in Missouri's newly created Lincoln University Law School, graduating and passing the bar in 1943. Wilson was in the second class which had one other woman enrolled; she was the second woman of color admitted to practice in Missouri, joining Dorothy Freeman, Edith Sampson, Frankie Freeman, Sadie Alexander and other female law pioneers.

Starting as a clerk/secretary for attorney David Grant, Wilson was soon hired by the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Electrification Administration. Marrying Robert E. Wilson in 1944, Wilson joined her husband in Chicago as he finished Kent College of Law. In 1946, Wilson returned to St. Louis and started the law firm Wilson and Wilson with her husband. Wilson's specialty was real estate law, which complimented her father's profession as a realtor. Wilson served as counsel for the black Real Estate Brokers Association, initiated by her father, and was instrumental in Shelley v. Kramer, a 1948 Supreme Court ruling that held housing covenants unenforceable. Active in the St. Louis NAACP, Wilson became St. Louis NAACP branch president in 1958 and worked cooperatively with Marion Oldham of CORE. During Wilson's presidency, the NAACP won several civil rights cases including the Rankin Trade School Case and the Jefferson Bank case. In 1962, Wilson became

president of the Missouri NAACP. During President Lyndon Johnson's administration, Wilson served as deputy director of the Model Cities Program. As head of Lawyers for Housing in 1966, Wilson proposed the creation of one thousand new units of housing. In 1975, Wilson became chairman of the national NAACP board, serving nine terms.

During the 1980s, Wilson served as chairman of the board of the Mutual Insurance Company of New York, Real Estate Investment Trust. Wilson was also past board chairman of two historically black colleges, St. Augustine's College and Talladega, in addition to serving on numerous boards for national companies and nonprofit organizations. A trustee-emerita of Washington University and Webster University, Wilson served as chair of Law Day 2000 for the American Bar Association.

Wilson, whose hero was Celie, the victim in a nineteenth century Missouri slavery trial, raised one son and was continuing to practice law in St. Louis at the time of her HistoryMakers interview.

Wilson passed away on August 11, 2009 at the age of 90.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Margaret Bush Wilson was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 17, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association branch chief executive and real estate lawyer Margaret Bush Wilson (1919 - 2009 ) was formerly St. Louis NAACP chapter president and a Missouri NAACP president, and served nine terms as chairman of the national NAACP board. An accomplished attorney, she was instrumental in Shelley v. Kraemer, a 1948 Supreme Court ruling that held housing covenants unenforceable.

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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:

Wilson, Margaret Bush, 1919-2009

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Wilson, Margaret Bush, 1919-2009 --Interviews

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African American women lawyers--Interviews

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African American women 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:

Real Estate Lawyer

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Association Branch Chief Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|LawMakers

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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 Margaret Bush Wilson, December 17, 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 Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:34 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson was born on January 30, 1919 in St. Louis, Missouri to Margaret Casey Bush and James T. Bush, Sr. Her maternal grandfather was born on a plantation in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He ran away, and found a job as a cabin boy on a boat. Her maternal grandmother was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and may have been related to J.P. Morgan. During the Civil War, she and her mother were sent to St. Louis for safety. Wilson's paternal grandparents were enslaved on neighboring plantations in McKinney, Texas. After emancipation, they acquired a farm in town, where Wilson's father was raised. He graduated from Prairie View State Normal School in 1900, and taught briefly on an Indian reservation, then became a clerk for the Railway Mail Service. While working on the railway, he purchased two apartment buildings in St. Louis, and met Wilson's mother on a riverboat. Wilson's father experienced racial discrimination from his white coworkers, and quit two years before receiving his lifetime pension.

African American women lawyers--Interviews.

African American women civil rights workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:49 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson remembers the reaction of a white woman whose hand she accidentally held, mistaking it for her mother's. Wilson grew up as a middle child in a mixed-income neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri frequented by street vendors. As a child, she rooted for the city's baseball teams, and resented her father's preferential treatment of her brother. Wilson studied elocution and ballet, and excelled at math. Her family attended St. James A.M.E. Church, but Wilson refused to formally join. Her mother was a friend of Poro College founder Annie Malone, who built the auditorium where the community gathered for events. Wilson's parents were involved in the NAACP, and her mother traveled to Indianapolis, Indiana for the convention. Wilson met W.E.B. Du Bois when he addressed St. Louis' chapter. Due to school overcrowding, she attended kindergarten in a portable classroom at Charles H. Sumner High School. Her favorite teacher was Julia Davis, an expert on the history of African Americans in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson attended Charles H. Sumner High School, where many of her teachers had Ph.D.s, early because of overcrowding in St. Louis' schools. Wilson spent her time in Sumner A Cappella Choir or writing. She saw Cab Calloway perform, and visited The Municipal Opera Association of St. Louis. Her father helped black homeowners challenge predatory lenders. He bought a larger house just before the Great Depression hit, and suffered financially. Wilson and her family temporarily lived with her housekeeper. Wilson graduated high school as valedictorian, and was awarded a scholarship from Swope Shoe Company to attend college. She planned to attend Alabama's Talladega College, but her scholarship was revoked after her interview with the company. Wilson enrolled instead at Stowe Teachers College. Her high school teachers raised funds for tuition, and Wilson transferred to Talladega College. She was awarded a fellowship to travel to India for a year, and embarked in 1939.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:16 ?

Margaret Wilson spent six months in India at Visva-Bharati University. She met Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Indians often asked her about segregation, and expected her to be a talented singer based on her race. She reflects on the impact of her trip, and describes what she saw of the caste system. Concerned about returning home after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Wilson left India six months early. She resumed her studies at Talladega College, where she was mentored by Hilda Davis, the dean of women, and influenced by Bus Haynes and Gene Cater. She also participated in theater productions. In revolt against the limitation of women to certain professions, Wilson refused to take classes related to nursing, social work or teaching. When she graduated in 1939, a friend encouraged her to apply to law school. She attended Lincoln University School of Law, which was established in response to the case of *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*. The case was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1938.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson studied at Lincoln University School of Law under Howard University trained lawyers, like William L. Taylor and Scovel Richardson. Wilson met her husband, but he was drafted to serve in World War II before completing his degree. Wilson passed Missouri's bar exam in 1943, and began practicing real estate law for her father. She worked under David Grant in St. Louis, and tried her first case with his tutelage. In 1943, Wilson took the civil service exam for lawyers, and obtained a position in the U.S. Department of Agriculture working for the Rural Electrification Administration [REA]. She advised rural farmers on how to get electricity to their farms. After World War II, her husband opted to complete his law degree in Chicago, Illinois, where the couple lived until 1947. Wilson talks about the case of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which was argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948. She describes her father's role in the case, which dealt with restrictive housing covenants.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson's father formed the Real Estate Brokers Association of St. Louis after the loss of *Shelley v. Kraemer* before the Supreme Court of Missouri. Wilson helped mobilize the community and raise funds as the case moved to the U.S. Supreme Court. Wilson speculates about the motivations of

the three judges who recused themselves from the case. She theorizes that President Harry S. Truman's distant connection to her father may have influenced the Shelley's victory. Years later, Wilson and other members of The Girl Friends, Inc. made the Shelley house a historic landmark. In 1948, Wilson ran an unsuccessful campaign for U.S. Congress on the Progressive Party ticket. After *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* in 1954, her son attended St. Louis' first integrated kindergarten. Wilson recalls her reaction to the decision. In 1958, Wilson became president of the local NAACP chapter. One of her first victories as president was the integration of the David Ranken Trade School.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:52 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson worked at the St. Louis Model Cities program in the mid-1960s, and quickly became acting director. As president of the St. Louis chapter of the NAACP, Wilson facilitated its strong relationship with the local CORE chapter. Wilson remembers bringing a busload of people from St. Louis to the March on Washington. She argues that the organizers missed a valuable opportunity to further mobilize the marchers. She shares her favorable impression of Roy Wilkins, who was also in attendance. As chairman of the NAACP's national board, she was tasked with addressing the organization's debt. She explains how, after she recuperated the budget, mismanagement by Benjamin Hooks' administration left the organization in debt again. When the NAACP lost a million-dollar lawsuit, Wilson rallied members from across the country to raise funds. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NAACP in *NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co.*, protecting the right to boycott.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_008, TRT: 0:28:54 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson left the Model Cities program to counsel community organizations through Lawyers for Housing. She recalls the disappointment when, upon entering office, President Richard Milhous Nixon cut the program's funding. She worked with a group of lawyers to create the Land Reutilization Authority to enable the city to sell unused properties it had acquired. Wilson organized the NAACP's first delegation to Africa, which included Broadus Butler and Maida Springer-Kemp. She reflects upon the importance of W.E.B. Du Bois' goal of building relationships within the African diaspora. Wilson's husband was the lead attorney defending CORE members in the Jefferson Bank and Trust Company case, which prohibited discriminatory hiring practices in St. Louis' banks. At the time of the interview, Wilson continued to practice law. Wilson reflects upon her life, and recalls an encounter with a graduate of Rankin Trade School. Wilson also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Margaret Bush Wilson, Section A2006\_177\_001\_009, TRT: 0:30:32 ?

Margaret Bush Wilson hosted Clarence Thomas at her home for a summer, while he worked at the St. Louis attorney general's office as a young man. He returned to the city years later to see her accept an award from the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis. Wilson recounts the story of Celia, an enslaved girl who killed her slave master. In 1855, Celia was tried in the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*, and was executed. Wilson explains the significance of the case in the history of the State of Missouri, and why she finds the story personally inspiring. She commissioned Solomon Thurman to paint a portrait of Celia, which she hung in her office. Wilson describes her hopes for

the future of the United States, and talks about her remaining family. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.