

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Richard Warren, 1953-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts,
Dates:	May 1, 2008 and September 28, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007 and 2008
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:08:48).
Abstract:	Federal district court judge and lawyer The Honorable Richard W. Roberts (1953 -) was named chief of the criminal section of the Civil Rights Division by the United States Justice Department in 1995. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 1, 2008 and September 28, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_275
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

United States District Court Judge Richard Warren Roberts was born in New York City. Roberts graduated cum laude with an A.B. degree from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. In 1983, Roberts was a founding member of the Washington chapter of Concerned Black Men, Inc. and served as the deputy general counsel of the organization. In 1978, Roberts received his Masters of International Administration degree from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. That same year, he received his J.D. degree from Columbia University.

From 1978 until 1982, Roberts served as a trial attorney in the criminal section of the Civil Rights Division for the United States Department of Justice. As a federal prosecutor, Roberts successfully prosecuted several high profile cases, including the killing of two Salt Lake City joggers in a racially motivated sniper attack. The offender, Joseph Paul Franklin, was a serial killer who was suspected of killing as many as twenty people between 1977 and 1980. Roberts's conviction led to Franklin's confession of various assassination attempts including magazine publisher Larry Flynt, and the 1980 shooting of Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. Roberts worked in private practice in Washington, D.C. from 1982 to 1986 and as Assistant U.S. Attorney for the southern district of New York from 1986 to 1988. Roberts returned to Washington, D.C. in 1988, and worked for the U.S. Attorney's Office until 1995. In 1990, at the age of thirty-seven, Roberts prosecuted then Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry for violating federal narcotics laws. Mayor Barry had been arrested in a sting operation at the Vista Hotel by the FBI and Washington, D.C. police for crack cocaine use and possession.

After working as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in Washington, D.C., in 1993, Roberts was appointed by U.S. Attorney Eric Holder as the principal Assistant U.S. Attorney, serving as second-in-command of the office. In 1995, Roberts was named chief of the criminal section of the Civil Rights Division by the United States Justice Department.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 1, 2008 and September 28, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal district court judge and lawyer The Honorable Richard W. Roberts (1953 -) was named chief of the criminal section of the Civil Rights Division by the United States Justice Department in 1995.

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:

Roberts, Richard Warren, 1953-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Roberts, Richard Warren, 1953- --Interviews

African American judges--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Federal District Court Judge

Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, May 1, 2008 and September 28, 2007. 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 The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_001_001, TRT: 0:30:21 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts was born on June 21, 1953 in New York City to Angeline Tynes Roberts and Beverly Roberts. In Virginia, his maternal grandmother, Lucy Rich Tynes, ran the Northern Neck Academy; and his maternal grandfather, Joseph Walter Tynes, taught at the Virginia Theological Seminary. They moved with their ten children to Greensboro, North Carolina, where his maternal grandfather pastored Providence Baptist Church. His maternal great uncle, George Tynes, was an agricultural researcher in Russia, where he married Maria Alexandrovna Tynes, and had three children, including journalist Slava Tynes. Roberts' mother studied music at the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, and was later the first black chorister at New York City's Metropolitan Opera. Roberts describes his mother's siblings, including minister Theodore Tynes, pastor Morris Harrison Tynes, porter Francis Tynes, correctional officer Jacob Tynes, dentist Victor Tynes and opera singer Margaret Tynes.

African American judges--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_001_002, TRT: 0:30:12 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts' father was born in Fernandina, Florida to Wilhelmina Williams Roberts and Richard Samuel Roberts. They moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where Roberts' father attended Benedict College. He later earned a master's degree in English at New York University, and began a Ph.D. program there, but moved to Greensboro, North Carolina before completing his dissertation. Roberts' father became an English professor at the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, and later chaired the department. There, Roberts' mother was one of his students. They married and moved to New York City; where, after poet Countee Cullen passed away, Roberts' father assumed his teaching position at Frederick Douglass Junior High School, 139. He later became an assistant principal, while Roberts' mother joined the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera House. Roberts recalls his maternal aunt, Margaret Tynes' part in Duke Ellington's 'A Drum Is A Woman,' and her husband, designer Hans von Klier.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts' paternal grandfather, custodian Richard Samuel Roberts, was a self-taught photographer, and opened a photography studio in the black business district of Columbia, South Carolina in 1920. After his death in 1936, his children preserved his glass plate negatives. In 1986, historian Thomas L. Johnson approached Roberts' paternal uncle, Cornelius Roberts, about the photographs. Together with photography expert Phillip C. Dunn, they published 'A True Likeness: The Black South of Richard Samuel Roberts, 1920-1936,' and housed Roberts' paternal grandfather's art in the Columbia Museum of Art. Roberts' parents met and married in Greensboro, North Carolina, and moved to the Riverton Houses in New York City's Harlem community. There, his father held multiple teaching positions, including as an English as a Second Language instructor. Roberts also describes his father's siblings, law librarian Gerald Roberts, and teachers Cornelius Roberts and Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_001_004, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts' family moved when he was four years old

from New York City's Harlem neighborhood to southern Queens, New York. They purchased a home in an integrated neighborhood, which became predominantly black due to white flight. There, Roberts played outside with the neighborhood children until dark, under the supervision of all the adults in the community. He was bused to the predominantly white P.S. 124, Osmond A. Church School, where he excelled. He skipped the second grade; and, along with another black student, was at the top of his class. From 1964, Roberts was bused to the mostly white J.H.S 202, Robert H. Goddard School in the Howard Beach neighborhood. Although the residents had protested the school's integration just one year before his arrival, Roberts was accepted by most of his classmates, and excelled academically. He then attended the public John Adams High School for one year, before being admitted to the private High School of Music and Art, which was racially diverse.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section A2007_275_001_005, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City. There, he was inspired by his tenth grade biology teacher, Mrs. Mapp. His favorite subject was math, and he aspired to become a mathematician. Roberts also joined the black student society, which advocated for the representation of African music and dance at the school's semiannual concert. The administration was supportive; and, in his senior year, the students performed traditional South African songs and boot dances. His chorus director, Sybil Mandel, encouraged him to assume leadership roles, and assigned him a solo in the school's production of Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana,' as well as a solo in Ludwig van Beethoven's 'Symphony No. 9,' which he sang at Carnegie Hall for his graduation. He belonged to the National Honor Society, and graduated at the top of his class in 1970. Roberts also recalls the deaths of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and his father's civil rights activism.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section A2007_275_001_006, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts enrolled in 1970 at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he was one of seven black male students in the college's first coeducational class. He considered transferring due to the gender imbalance, but chose to remain once the ensuing classes brought more men to campus. Roberts majored in black studies and political science. As the school lacked a black politics course, he participated in an exchange program at Princeton University, where he studied under Professor Marguerite Ross Barnett during his junior year. In 1973, Roberts was influenced by the Attica prison rebellion to become a criminal defense lawyer. He was also interested in East Africa; and, upon graduating in 1974, received a scholarship to the School for International Training Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont. Roberts interned in 1975 at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. He talks about the ideas of Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere and Pan-Africanist Maulana Karenga.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section A2007_275_001_007, TRT: 0:28:49 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts arrived in Nairobi, Kenya at the height of the political tension over Jomo Kenyatta's presidency. He remained for three months, and then returned to the United States, where he enrolled in a summer program at the Council on Legal Education Opportunity to prepare for law school. In 1975, Roberts matriculated at Columbia Law School in New York City, where he joined the Black American Law Students Association. At his first

year orientation, he argued with law professor Walter Gellhorn, who had participated in a letter campaign to President Gerald Rudolph Ford, Jr. against affirmative action. During Roberts' first year of law school, he was inspired by property law professor Curtis J. Berger. In his second year, he decided to pursue a career in public service; and, in his final year, he studied neighborhood development and housing under Kellis E. Parker, the law school's sole African American professor. Roberts also talks about the Congress of Afrikan People.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_002_008, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts graduated from Columbia Law School in 1978, and received a master's degree from the School for International Training Graduate Institute after completing his thesis. He was accepted to the U.S. Attorney's Office honors program, and was hired as a trial lawyer by U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell and Drew S. Days III of the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. In 1980, white supremacist Joseph Paul Franklin killed two black teenaged joggers, Ted Fields and David Martin, in Utah; and was linked to the shootings of other African Americans, including civil rights leader Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. Roberts monitored the federal case against Franklin, who was found guilty and sentenced to two consecutive life terms in 1981. He also prosecuted slavers who had imprisoned and abused migrant farm workers, as well as cult leader Robert Allan Carr of the Church of God and True Holiness, in which children were beaten and forced to work at a meat processing plant in North Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_002_009, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts was appointed as the coordinator of involuntary servitude cases for the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, where he prosecuted cult member Jimmy Conyers for child slavery. Roberts left the division in 1982 to join Covington and Burling LLP in Washington, D.C., where he focused on civil litigation. In 1986, he joined the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, serving under U.S. attorney Rudy Giuliani. In 1988, Roberts transitioned to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, where he was assigned to investigate Mayor Marion Barry's drug use. The FBI organized a sting operation at the Vista Hotel, where Mayor Barry was taped using crack cocaine, and later arrested. Roberts prosecuted the case, after which Mayor Barry was sentenced to six months in prison. Then, in 1993, Eric H. Holder, Jr. became the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, and appointed Roberts as his principal assistant.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section
A2007_275_002_010, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts served as the principal U.S. assistant attorney under U.S. attorney Eric H. Holder, Jr. until 1995, when he was recruited by U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and U.S. Assistant Attorney General Deval L. Patrick to head the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia. There, he investigated a string of arsons in black churches; discrimination in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and post-trial matters in the Rodney King case. In 1998, Roberts became a federal judge on the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, where he oversaw campaign finance fraud cases; Guantanamo Bay detention center inmates' petitions for release; and a sexual harassment case at the D.C. Department of Corrections. Roberts describes his judicial philosophy, his hopes

and concerns for the African American community and the Washington, D.C. chapter of Concerned Black Men. He also reflects upon his life.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Richard W. Roberts, Section A2007_275_002_011, TRT: 0:14:00 ?

The Honorable Richard W. Roberts reflects upon his family and legacy. He also talks about the members of the judiciary who influenced him, including Judge Norma Holloway Johnson, who was the first African American woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Roberts concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.