

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Justin Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Justin, 1933-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson,
Dates:	August 11, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:10).
Abstract:	Judge The Honorable Justin Johnson (1933 - 2021) was the second African American judge appointed to Pennsylvania's Superior Court in twenty-seven years. He was chairman of the Pennsylvania Board of Examiners from 1983 to 1989, and a trustee of Carnegie Mellon University and Princeton Theological Seminary. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 11, 2008, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_101
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pennsylvania Superior Court judge Justin Morris Johnson was born on August 19, 1933, in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, to Irene and Oliver Johnson. He received his A.B. degree from the University of Chicago in 1954, where he graduated with a Bond Medal. Johnson served in the United States Air Force from 1956 to 1959 as an aircraft commander, and from 1963 to 1973 as a major. In 1962, Johnson received his J.D. degree from the University of Chicago.

Upon graduation from law school, Johnson worked for the firm of Johnson, Johnson & Johnson, where he eventually became a partner and sole proprietor. After fifteen years at the law firm, Johnson became the assistant solicitor and assistant secretary for the Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh-Mt. Oliver board of education. He remained in that capacity until he became a partner at Berkman, Ruslander, Pohl, Liber & Engel from 1978 to 1980. In 1980, Johnson was appointed to the Pennsylvania Superior Court, making him the second African American judge appointed to Pennsylvania's Superior Court in twenty-seven years. While on the bench, Johnson served as an adjunct professor at Duquesne University Law School.

Johnson has served on the board of trustees for Mercy Hospital, Southside Hospital, United Way of Allegheny Company, and Princeton Theological Seminary, and is a life trustee of Carnegie Mellon University. He was chairman of the Pennsylvania Board of Examiners from 1983 to 1989.

Johnson is the recipient of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Citizen's Award; Top Hat Award for distinguished judicial services; Homer S. Brown Service Award; Presidents Award by the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association; Award of Merit by the Pittsburgh Young Adult Club; and the Man of the Year Award from Bethesda Presbyterian Church.

Johnson was the father of three children and resided in Pittsburgh with his wife, Florence.

Johnson passed away on October 29, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 11, 2008, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Judge The Honorable Justin Johnson (1933 - 2021) was the second African American judge appointed to Pennsylvania's Superior Court in twenty-seven years. He was chairman of the Pennsylvania Board of Examiners from 1983 to 1989, and a trustee of Carnegie Mellon University and Princeton Theological Seminary.

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:

Johnson, Justin, 1933-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Justin, 1933- --Interviews

African American judges--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

College trustees--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Superior Court Judge

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 Justin Johnson, August 11, 2008.
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 Justin Johnson, Section A2008_101_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

The Honorable Justin Johnson was born on August 19, 1933 in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania to Irene Morris Johnson and Oliver Johnson. His maternal grandfather, Joseph Morris, was an African Methodist Episcopal minister and the son of a Civil War veteran. Johnson's mother was raised in Braddock, a town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the eldest of her four sisters was killed by a train as a teenager. Johnson's father was born in White Hall, Virginia, and raised in Braddock. He met Johnson's mother while attending Braddock High School, where there were African American students in their class. Johnson's mother studied home economics at Wilberforce University, and taught there for two years before marrying Johnson's father. After Johnson's father was admitted the Harvard Law School, his family sold their land in Virginia to pay the tuition. During his studies, he was drafted into World War I, after which he could no longer afford to attend. He graduated instead from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

African American judges--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

College trustees--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson, Section A2008_101_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Justin Johnson's parents, Irene Morris Johnson and Oliver Johnson, met at Braddock High School, where they were two of three African American students. His father graduated from Howard University, and then attended the Harvard Law School for one year before being drafted into World War I, where he fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. After the war, Johnson's father was financially unable to return to Harvard Law School, and instead earned a degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in 1922. Later that year, Johnson's parents married in Wilberforce, Ohio and settled in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. Johnson's father established a law practice in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he shared an office building with his fellow African American attorneys. Johnson grew up in Wilkinsburg, where his mother was active with the YWCA. He had four siblings, including his oldest brother, who died in World War II when Johnson was twelve years old.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson, Section A2008_101_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

The Honorable Justin Johnson grew up in Wilkinsburg, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His family belonged to the St. Mark A.M.E. Church, where he attended Sunday school and sang in the choir. He enjoyed playing softball in the alley near his house, and watching Saturday matinee films at the Warner Theatre and State Theatre. Although the theaters were integrated, several local eateries refused to seat African American patrons; and, near Johnson's father's law office in downtown Pittsburgh, all the restaurants were segregated. At this point in the interview, Johnson reflects upon his early experiences of racial discrimination. He was the only black student in his classes at Wilkinsburg High School; and, although he was active in extracurricular activities like the band and choir, he was unwelcome at the school's social events. However, he was encouraged by two of his teachers, one of whom recommended that he apply to

the University of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson, Section A2008_101_001_004,
TRT: 0:30:30 ?

The Honorable Justin Johnson was raised in a black professional household, and attended majority-white schools in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. His father, attorney Oliver Johnson, encouraged him to study law from an early age, but Johnson aspired instead to become a tap dancer like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. Johnson had few African American friends until 1951, when he matriculated at the University of Chicago. He graduated in three years, and immediately entered the University of Chicago Law School. After one year, Johnson left school to join the U.S. Air Force, where he experienced less discrimination than his older brother, who served in the Korean War a few years prior. Johnson was trained by flight instructor Richard Allen at the Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma, and he began a three-year tour at the Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii. Upon completing his service, Johnson considered becoming a commercial pilot, but was rejected because of his race. He then reenrolled at the University of Chicago Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Justin Johnson, Section A2008_101_001_005,
TRT: 0:29:50 ?

The Honorable Justin Johnson experienced housing discrimination while serving at the Hickam Air Force Base near Honolulu, Hawaii, but eventually moved in with other service members at an upscale residence. Upon completing his U.S. military service, Johnson returned to Chicago, Illinois to attend the University of Chicago Law School, and met his wife shortly afterwards. They married in 1961, and had their first child in 1962. During law school, Johnson worked at the post office to support his growing family. He received his law degree in 1962, and joined his father and brother at their law practice in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There, the United Negro Protest Committee was organizing demonstrations against hiring discrimination at majority businesses. Johnson’s brother, Livingstone Johnson, represented the civil rights group as a negotiator, and their clientele also included individual protesters. Such cases were often brought before Magistrate John Chapas, who sometimes assigned illegal probation sentences.