

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Allen Sessoms

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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>	Sessoms, Allen, 1946-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 13, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:54:56).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Physicist and university president Allen Sessoms (1946 - ) served in many areas of the State Department before being hired as president of Delaware State University and the University of the District of Columbia. Sessoms was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_135
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Physicist and education administrator Allen Lee Sessoms was born in 1946. He attended Union College in New York where he graduated with his B.S. degree in physics in 1968. He then attended the University of Washington, where he obtained his M.S. degree in physics the following year. Sessoms went on to Yale University where he earned his Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) degree in physics in 1971 and his Ph.D. degree in physics in 1972. Following his graduate school work, Sessoms became a postdoctoral research associate at the Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) where he wrote computer programs and studied the production of quarks by high-energy protons at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab).

In 1973, Sessoms was hired to work as a scientific associate at the European Organization of Nuclear Research (CERN), where he researched quarks and similar particles. While at CERN, Sessoms became an assistant professor of physics at Harvard University. Sessoms moved to the U.S. State Department in 1980 as a senior technical advisor for the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. From 1982 to 1987, Sessoms served as Director of the Office of Nuclear Technology and Safeguards in the same Bureau before becoming a Counselor for Scientific and Technological Affairs at the United States Embassy in Paris, France. Sessoms then traveled to Mexico, where he was a Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs at the United States Embassy before serving as its Deputy Chief of Mission, then the largest United States diplomatic mission in the world. In 1993, Sessoms left the United States State Department and began working as executive vice president at the University of Massachusetts system and also became its vice president for academic affairs. Following his time in Massachusetts, Sessoms was named president of Queens College, part of The City University of New York. Sessoms then spent time at Harvard University, first as a visiting scholar and then as a fellow of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and as a lecturer in public policy. From 2003 to 2008, Sessoms served as the ninth president of Delaware State University prior to his appointment as president of the University of the District of Columbia. He is also a consultant to the U.S. intelligence community.

Sessoms has received a Ford Foundation Travel and Study Grant and an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Fellowship. He has been bestowed two honorary doctorates from Union College and Soka University in Japan. Sessoms also received the Medal of Highest Honor from Soka University and the Seikyo Culture Award in Japan. In 1999, the Yale University Graduate School Association awarded him the Wilbur Lucius Cross Medal and he was named the Officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques ("Officer of the Order of Academic Palms) in France.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Allen Sessoms was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Physicist and university president Allen Sessoms (1946 - ) served in many areas of the State Department before being hired as president of Delaware State University and the University of the District of Columbia.

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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:

Sessoms, Allen, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sessoms, Allen, 1946- --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:

Physicist

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University President

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|ScienceMakers

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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 Allen Sessoms, September 13, 2012. 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 Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:10 ?

Allen Sessoms describes his family background. Sessoms' mother, Lottie Beatrice Leff, was born in 1914 in Charleston, South Carolina. She moved to New York after high school to escape segregation in South Carolina. She then went to nursing school and became a practical nurse. Sessoms's father, Albert Earl Sessoms, was born in 1914 in Ahsokie, North Carolina. Like many African Americans at that time, he migrated to the North to escape the hostile racial climate in the South, and to seek better educational and employment opportunities. Albert Sessoms met and married Lattie Bernice Leff. Shortly after his marriage, he was drafted to serve in World War II. Albert Sessoms and Lottie Beatrice Leff had two sons and one daughter.

African American families--Southern States.

African Americans--Migrations.

African American nurses.

Race relations--Southern States--History--20th century.

World War, 1939-1945--African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:40 ?

Allen Sessoms was raised in the Bronx, New York. His family lived in a two-bedroom fourth floor apartment in the Fort Apache neighborhood of South Bronx. He attended PS99, where he demonstrated an early interest in math and science. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 increased his interest in science. During his early education, Sessoms was inspired by his mother and his kindergarten teacher, Ms. Euro. He was also inspired by books, particularly authors such as Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clark. During his summers as a young boy, Sessoms was active in the Cub Scouts and the Order of the Feather drum and bugle corps as well as the chorus. Sessoms also played the clarinet, trumpet, and soprano horn at Walter J. Damrosch Junior High School.

African Americans--Bronx (New York, N.Y.)

Sputnik satellites--History.

Science-fiction writers.

Childhood and youth--Activities--New York (State)--New York.

Wind instruments--Instruction and study.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:57 ?

Allen Sessoms attended Walter J. Damrosch Junior High School in the South Bronx, New York. Sessoms then attended Theodore Roosevelt High School, where he ran track. He also continued to be active in The Order of the Feather drum and bugle corps. Sessoms was encouraged to apply to Union College by his high school advisor. He worked at Brookhaven National Laboratory the summer before he started college, under the direction of Bob Adair and Larry Leipuner. Sessoms chose to major in physics at Union College, and describes the influence of his physics professor, Walter Pilcher. He also talks about his twin brother, Albert Sessoms, Jr., who also ran track, and went on to join the U.S. Air Force.

Drum and bugle corps--New York (State)--New York.

Union College (Schenectady, N.Y.).

Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Physics--Vocational guidance.

Twins--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:07 ?

Allen Sessoms graduated from Union College in 1968, and went on to pursue an M.S. degree in theoretical nuclear physics at the University of Washington. Sessoms then moved back to the east coast for his doctoral studies at Yale University, where he first worked with D. Alan Bromley, who later became the National Science Advisor to President George H.W. Bush. Guided by his thesis advisor, Bob Adair, Sessoms' research focused on the structure and function of the K meson particle. In 1972 and 1973, Sessoms pursued postdoctoral research with Adair at Brookhaven National Laboratory, and then went to CERN, in Switzerland, on a Ford Foundation grant. Sessoms describes his experience at the University of Washington and Yale University. He also talks about the tumultuous political climate in America in the 1960s, comments upon race relations in the United States, and on the lack of preparation in the sciences, at HBCUs.

Nuclear physics--Study and teaching (Higher)--United States.

Bromley, D. Allan (David Allan), 1926-2005.

Kaons--Research.

Race relations in the United States.

African American universities and colleges--Curricula.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:46 ?

In 1973, Allen Sessoms received a Ford Foundation Grant to work as a scientific associate at the European Organization of Nuclear Research (CERN), in Geneva, Switzerland. Sessoms describes his experience in Geneva, and his work in experimental particle physics on the Intersecting Storage Ring Collider (ISR). He returned to the United States in 1974, and became an assistant professor of physics at Harvard University. During this time, Sessoms received a Sloan Foundation Fellowship to work at the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), and describes his experience there. Sessoms also served as the nuclear science advisor at the U.S. State Department in the 1980s, under the Carter and Reagan administrations. Sessoms also talks about his views on science as a global enterprise, his experience of interacting with prominent physicists during his tenure at Harvard University, and his relationship with physicist, Richard Feynman.

European Organization for Nuclear Research.

Science--Scholarships, fellowships, etc.

United States. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

Harvard University--Faculty.

Feynman, Richard P. (Richard Phillips), 1918-1988.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:47 ?

From 1982 to 1987, Sessoms served as the director of the Office of Nuclear and Technical Safeguards for the Bureau of Oceans and International Environment of Scientific Affairs, specifically focusing on nuclear safety. While at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, Austria, Sessoms met and married his wife. In 1987, he accepted a position as a counselor for scientific and technological affairs at the U.S. embassy in Paris, France, where he was involved in mediating the scientific controversy over the credits for the discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Sessoms then served as a minister-counselor for political affairs and the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Mexico, from 1989 to 1993. He then moved into higher education administration, and served as the executive vice president for the University of Massachusetts system, and later, as the president of Queens College, New York.

Executive advisory bodies.

HIV (Viruses)--Research--History.

Diplomatic and consular service, American--France.

Diplomatic and consular service, American--Mexico.

Universities and colleges--United States--Administration.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:30 ?

From 1995 to 2000, Allen Sessoms served as the president of Queens College, where he worked to improve the quality of campus life through the introduction of dormitories, and emphasized the development of strong research programs. Sessoms returned to the faculty of Harvard University in 2001, where he taught at the Belford Center for Science and International Affairs. In 2003, Sessoms became the president of Delaware State University, where he improved the academic programs, established doctoral programs, enhanced campus life, and garnered state-wide recognition for the university. He also strengthened the university's athletic potential, secured significantly higher levels of funding, and focused on increased enrollment and greater diversity in the student body. Sessoms describes his experience at Delaware State University, and talks about his transition to the presidency of the University of the District of Columbia. He also reflects upon the rigors of a career in experimental physics.

Universities and colleges--Administration--United States.

Queens College (New York, N.Y.).

Delaware State University.

University of the District of Columbia.

Physics--Experiments--Vocational guidance.

Video Oral History Interview with Allen Sessoms, Section A2012\_135\_001\_008, TRT: 8:27:59 ?

In 2008, Allen Sessoms served as president of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), where he made improvements that strengthened the quality of education, enrollment and grant-based funding at the institution. Sessoms talks about the history and diverse demographics of UDC, and its affordability relative to other universities in the Washington, D.C area. He also discusses his focus on STEM education and international studies, to prepare graduates for careers in the current global environment. Sessoms reflects upon his legacy as the president of UDC, and upon his life and career. Finally, he talks about his family, and his four children.

University of the District of Columbia--History.

Science--Technology--Engineering--Mathematics--Study and teaching (Higher).

International relations--Study and teaching (Higher).

Work and family.