

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Mitchell

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## Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mitchell, James W., 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell,
Dates:	September 11, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:08:54).
Abstract:	Chemist James Mitchell (1943 - ) was the first African American honored as an AT&T Bell Laboratories Fellow, and is the Dean of the College of Engineering at Howard University. Mitchell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 11, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_236
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Research chemist James W. Mitchell was born on November 16, 1943 in Durham, North Carolina as the eldest and only son of tobacco factory workers. Mitchell’s interest in chemistry stemmed from the disciplines logical principles and their reliability. Mitchell received his B.S. degree in chemistry from North Carolina A & T State University in 1965, and his Ph.D. degree in chemistry from Iowa State University in 1970. His doctoral thesis focused on analytical chemistry, a branch of chemistry concerned with analyzing the characteristics and composition of matter.

Mitchell first joined AT & T Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey after receiving his doctorate. He chaired the Lab’s Affirmative Action Committee and was one of the founders of the Association of Black Laboratory Employees. In 1982, Mitchell was promoted to supervisor of the Inorganic Analytical Chemistry Research Group. Mitchell became head of the Analytical Chemistry Research Department in 1975. Under his leadership the department was transformed into an internationally renowned research organization. In 1985, Mitchell was named an AT & T Bell Laboratories Fellow, and, in 1989 he was extended membership into the National Academy of Engineering. He has written nearly 100 publications with as many citations attached to his work. He earned the 1999 Lifetime Achievement in Industry Award by the National Society of Black Engineers.

In 2002, Mitchell began his tenure at Howard University. He served as the David and Lucille Packard Professor of Materials Science, Director of the CREST Nanoscale Analytical Sciences Research and Education Center, Professor of Chemical Engineering, and Dean of the College of Engineering. Mitchell has also lectured internationally. In addition, he co-authored a book, *Contamination Control in Trace Analysis*, published more than seventy-five scientific papers, and invented instruments and processes. He also served as a member of the editorial advisory boards of *Analytical Chemistry* and *Mikrochimica Acta*. Mitchell and his wife Jean live in Washington, D.C. They have three children.

James W. Mitchell was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 11, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Mitchell was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 11, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Chemist James Mitchell (1943 - ) was the first African American honored as an AT&T Bell Laboratories Fellow, and is the Dean of the College of Engineering at Howard University.

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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:

Mitchell, James W., 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Mitchell, James W., 1943---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:

Chemist

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

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 James Mitchell, September 11, 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 James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:53 ?  
James Mitchell describes his family history. His mother, Eunice Mitchell, was born in October of 1920 in Oxford, North Carolina. After graduating from Mary Porter High School, she attended college and studied nursing. Despite her nursing training, she worked in textile, curtain, and tobacco factories in Durham, North Carolina. Mitchell's father, Willie Lee Mitchell, was born in January of

1920 in Orange County, North Carolina. He attended school up to the seventh grade and worked on the farm during most of his growing up. After serving in the Navy for five years, he worked in the tobacco factories. Mitchell was born in Durham, North Carolina in 1943 and was the oldest of his four sisters. He talks about his family and describes his memories of growing up. Mitchell attended Pearson Elementary School for one year and transferred to Burton Elementary School, which he remembers fondly.

Affirmative action programs.

Affirmative action programs.

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Affirmative action programs.

Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:16 ?

James Mitchell attended Burton Elementary School in Durham, North Carolina. After his mother told him of the great opportunities education would bring to his life, he was convinced and acquired a passion for his education. His favorite subjects were math and science, and he enjoyed playing basketball and horseshoes. Mitchell also created toys and bicycles from various scrap materials. Mitchell's childhood influences were his parents, teachers, and his church. He attended Ebenezer Children's Baptist Church during his childhood. Mitchell attended Whittit Junior High School and Hillside High School in North Carolina.

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Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:40 ?

James Mitchell's parents separated for eight years prior to attending his entrance into Hillside High School, in 1958. While his own relationship with his father remained positive, his sisters were negatively affected by his absence. As a junior in high school, Mitchell participated in a summer science program sponsored by the National Science Foundation at North Carolina Central University. His experiences in that program propelled his interest in science and strengthened his desire to pursue a doctorate degree in chemistry. After graduating sixth in his class in 1961, Mitchell attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, where he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement during that time.

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Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:37 ?

James Mitchell attended North Carolina A&T State University during the Civil Rights Movement. He talks about his participation in the movement as well as the political and racial climate of the school during that time. Mitchell studied chemistry and was mentored by Dr. Cecil Edwards, a nutritional scientist who encouraged his research; Dr. Pendergrass, who provided him with chemistry

experiments; and Dr. Gerald Edwards, the head of the chemistry department, who was instrumental in his decision to not pursue advanced ROTC. During his time at North Carolina A&T, Mitchell was a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and maintained a 3.94 GPA. During his summer breaks he worked at the Knife and Fork Inn in Atlantic City, New Jersey where he earned an average of \$120 a week. After graduating with his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1965, Mitchell went on to pursue his Ph.D. degree in chemistry at Iowa State University.

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Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:03 ?

James Mitchell received his Ph.D. degree in chemistry from Iowa State University in 1970. His dissertation was on the separation of rare earth elements, which have practical uses in various types of industry. Mitchell joined Bell Laboratories in 1970 as a staff scientist. He was promoted to supervisor of the Inorganic Analytical Chemistry Research Group in 1972 and became head of the Analytical Chemistry Research Department in 1975. While at Bell Labs, Mitchell's major projects focused on the purification of optical wave guide technology and In Situ generation chemistry. He also developed five patents, which were associated with the generation of inorganic compounds and microwave plasma decomposition of diamonds. Mitchell talks about his other professional activities and awards.

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Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_006, TRT: 6:31:05 ?

James Mitchell spent thirty years at Bell Laboratories. In addition to his research and development, he was involved in the development of undergraduate research programs. In 1994, Mitchell was honored as Iowa State University's first George Washington Carver Lecturer. In 1995, AT&T merged with Lucent Technologies and became known as Lucent Bell Technologies. Mitchell was appointed as director of the Materials Reliability and Ecology Research Laboratory there and, in 2001, he served as vice president of the Communications Materials Research Laboratory. After a brief retirement, in 2002, Mitchell joined the faculty of Howard University in Washington, D.C. He was appointed as dean of the college of engineering in 2009. Mitchell describes his goals for the college of engineering and talks about the challenges he faces as dean. He shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community and reflects upon his legacy and life choices.

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Video Oral History Interview with James Mitchell, Section A2012\_236\_001\_007, TRT: 7:06:20 ?

James Mitchell talks about his parents' reaction to his academic accomplishments and successful career. He also shares his advice for young people and reflects on how he would like to be remembered.

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