

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Franklin A. Thomas

PERSON

Thomas, Franklin A.

Alternative Names: Franklin A. Thomas;

Life Dates: May 27, 1934-December 22, 2021

Place of Birth: Brooklyn , New York, USA

Residence: New York, NY

Work: New York, NY

Occupations: Lawyer; Foundation Executive

Biographical Note

Foundation executive and lawyer Franklin A. Thomas was born on May 24, 1934 in Brooklyn, New York, to James and Viola Thomas. He graduated from Franklin K. Lane High School in 1952 and attended Columbia University, where he played basketball, became the first African American to captain an Ivy League basketball team, and was named the league's most valuable player in 1955 and 1956. Thomas earned his B.A. degree from Columbia in 1956 and his L.L.B. degree from Columbia Law School in 1963.

After receiving his B.A. degree, Thomas joined the U.S. Air Force as a strategic air command navigator, where he served as captain from 1956 to 1960. In 1964, he was admitted to the New York State Bar and began his legal career as an attorney at the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency's New York office. During the same year, Thomas served as Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York. From 1965 to 1967, he served as deputy police commissioner in charge of legal matters for the New York City Police Department, where he established the Civilian Complaint Review Board. From 1967 to 1977, Thomas served as president and chief executive officer for the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, where he was credited with raising approximately \$63 million in public and private funds and served in the forefront of community redevelopment efforts. Thomas resumed his private legal practice from 1977 to 1979, when he was selected to serve as the first African American president of the Ford Foundation, where he served until 1996.

Thomas served as the chairman of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Study Commission on U.S. Policy Toward South Africa from 1979 to 1981 and produced the

comprehensive, groundbreaking report on apartheid, *Time Running Out*. He went on to serve as a member of the U.S. Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on South Africa from 1985 to 1987, where he later served as chairman.

Thomas also served as chairman of the Study Commission on United States Policy Toward Southern Africa and the September 11th Fund. He served on the board of directors for the Aluminum Company of America, Avaya, CBS Inc., Cummins Engine Co., Inc., Citicorp/Citibank, and Lucent Technologies. In 2005, Thomas founded the TFF Study Group, a nonprofit organization dedicated to development in South Africa.

Thomas was the recipient of numerous awards, including The Lyndon Baines Johnson Award for "Contributions to the Betterment of Urban Life," the John Jay and Alexander Hamilton Awards from Columbia College, and Columbia Law School's James Kent Medal for distinguished professional achievement. He also was the recipient of Columbia University's Medal of Excellence. He was granted honorary degrees from Bank Street College, Columbia University, Fordham University, New School University, Pace University, Pratt University, and Yale University. In 2003, Thomas was named one of four "kingmakers" in corporate America by *Fortune* magazine.

Franklin A. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 28, 2017.

Thomas passed away on December 22, 2021.

Related Entries

Franklin K. Lane High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Columbia University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

J.H.S. 33 Mark Hopkins Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

P.S. 44 Marcus Garvey Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Columbia Law School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Ford Foundation [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

President

Faucus and Baron [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

U.S. Air Force [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Captain

Housing and Home Finance Agency [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

New York City Police Department [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

deputy police commissioner

Civilian Complain Review Board [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

President

Boy Scouts of America [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Citibank, N.A. [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Director of the Board

John Hay Whitney Foundation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Rockefeller Foundation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Alcoa Corporation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

CBS [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Vincent Astor Foundation [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Cummins Engine Company [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

September 11th Fund [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]