

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Franklin A. Thomas

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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>	Thomas, Franklin A.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 26, 2017 and June 28, 2017
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2017
<b>Physical Description:</b>	17 uncompressed MOV digital video files (8:43:49).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Foundation executive and lawyer Franklin A. Thomas (1934 - 2021) was the first African American president of the Ford Foundation, after serving as the president and CEO of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 26, 2017 and June 28, 2017, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2017_088
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Franklin A. Thomas was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on April 26, 2017 and June 28, 2017, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 17 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Foundation executive and lawyer Franklin A. Thomas (1934 - 2021) was the first African American president of the Ford Foundation, after serving as the president and CEO of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation.

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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:

Thomas, Franklin A.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Thomas, Franklin A.--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:

Lawyer

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Foundation Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|LawMakers

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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 Franklin A. Thomas, April 26, 2017 and June 28, 2017. 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 Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_001, TRT: 1:32:47 ?

Franklin A. Thomas was born on May 27, 1934 in New York, New York to Viola Atherly Thomas and James Thomas. His father was born in Antigua, and left to work on the construction of the Panama Canal. He eventually moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where Thomas' parents met. Thomas' mother came to Boston from Barbados at the age of fifteen years old. She worked as a domestic; and, during World War II, as a lathe worker at the American Can Company. Thomas' parents settled in Brooklyn, New York, where they raised Thomas and his five older siblings. His parents separated when he was a toddler; and, from that time, Thomas was raised by his mother. Years later, his father suffered a stroke and returned to the family home, where Thomas' mother cared for him until his death. Thomas attended Brooklyn's P.S. 44, and belonged to the all-black Boy Scout troop at Concord Baptist Church, where he played in the drum and bugle corps alongside Earl G. Graves, Sr. In addition, Thomas narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_002, TRT: 2:35:25 ?

Franklin A. Thomas grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where he was raised by his mother, Viola Atherly Thomas, and four older sisters. As both Thomas' parents migrated on their own from the West Indies, he did not know his extended family, aside from his maternal uncle, Ben, who lived nearby. Thomas' mother worked as a domestic, and rented a portion of the family home to boarders in order to provide for her six children. She was a strong matriarch, and emphasized the importance of education and integrity. She also taught Thomas to trust the police for protection from gangs, several of which were active in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Growing up there, Thomas frequented the local ice cream shop, played the bugle with his Boy Scout troop and attended Episcopal church services with his family. He was also a student at Brooklyn's integrated J.H.S. 33, Mark Hopkins Junior High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:17 ?

Franklin A. Thomas attended P.S. 44 and J.H.S. 33 in Brooklyn, New York, where he excelled in his courses. He also played the bugle in the band, and performed in the school's theater productions. After enrolling at Franklin K. Lane High School, Thomas joined the school basketball team; and, when the coaches went on strike, played for the Carlton YMCA team with Albert Vann, Richard "Chink" Gaines and future NBA player Sihugo Green. Because Thomas graduated from high school one semester early, he was ineligible to compete in the championship game, which his team lost. During the semester before college, Thomas worked at New York City's Faucus and Baron engineering firm. He matriculated in the fall of 1952 at New York City's Columbia University, where he became a star player on the basketball team, and set the school's rebound record. He also experienced discrimination from a history

professor, who gave Thomas a low grade for his essay on American race relations.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:55 ?

Franklin A. Thomas was raised by his mother, Viola Atherly Thomas, in Brooklyn, New York. His mother's philosophy of self-determination influenced his perception of racial discrimination; and it was not until visiting his oldest sister, Audrey Thomas, in Washington, D.C. that Thomas realized the severity of segregation in the United States. His mother also emphasized the importance of higher education; and, with her encouragement, Thomas enrolled at New York City's Columbia University. There, he served as captain of the school's basketball team, and set several records as the team's rebounder, which continued to stand at the time of the interview. He also participated in the NAACP's investigation of discriminatory housing policies at off-campus apartments, where African American applicants were frequently rejected. After completing his bachelor's degree, Thomas enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, where he served as a navigator in the Strategic Air Command under General Curtis LeMay.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:52 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served as a navigator in the Strategic Air Command of the U.S. Air Force, as his poor eyesight and tall stature precluded him from becoming a pilot. Around this time, he married his first wife, Dawn Conrada. After four years of service, Thomas enrolled at New York City's Columbia Law School, where he excelled as a student, and enjoyed learning about civil procedure. Upon graduation, he worked briefly at the Housing and Home Finance Agency, until obtaining a position at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York. There, Thomas was supervised by Robert M. Morgenthau and Stephen E. Kaufman; who, in 1965, chose Thomas and his fellow assistant U.S. attorney Pierre N. Leval to prosecute four men accused of conspiring to bomb the Statue of Liberty. Thomas went on to become New York City's deputy police commissioner. He served under New York City Mayor John Lindsay, and was instrumental in the establishment of the police department's Civilian Complaint Review Board.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:54 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served as deputy police commissioner under New York City Mayor John Lindsay. He was one of the few African Americans to hold office in Mayor Lindsay's administration; and, in this role, established the Civilian Complaint Review Board, which was tasked with oversight of the police department and its commissioner, Howard R. Leary. In 1967, Thomas left the police department and briefly worked in private law practice, before being contacted by New York's U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Thomas' childhood friend, publishing entrepreneur Earl G. Graves, Sr., had recommended Thomas to head Kennedy's newly formed development organization, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) in Brooklyn, New York. At the time, the organization was split between a board of black community leaders like Elsie Richardson, and a majority-white board of business elites. Thomas was offered the presidency of the BSRC, and accepted with the intention of staying for two years.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_007, TRT: 7:33:25 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served as president of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) from 1967 to 1977. During this time, he worked with community leaders and the corporation's funding entity, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Development and Services Corporation, to rejuvenate the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Through initiatives like the Community Home Improvement Program, the BSRC renovated commercial buildings and brownstone homes, and provided jobs for the local youth. The BSRC also worked to improve residents' quality of life, establishing Brooklyn's first cable television company, Continental Cablevision, Inc. The BSRC received funding from the Ford Foundation; where, in 1972, Thomas met Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. through the foundation's vice president, Mitchell Sviridoff. Thomas and Jordan became friends; and, in their roles as corporate board members, travelled together to South Africa to study the role of American multinational companies in the country's system of apartheid.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:37 ?

Franklin A. Thomas met John Hay Whitney and financier Benno C. Schmidt, Sr. through the board of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) in Brooklyn, New York. Soon after, Thomas and Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. were invited to join the board of Whitney's charitable foundation, the John Hay Whitney Foundation, where Thomas later served as the interim head. Through his service on Whitney's board, Thomas met and married Whitney's adopted stepdaughter, Kate Roosevelt Whitney, who was also the granddaughter of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Thomas left the BSRC in 1977, and opened a private law practice in New York City. Soon after, he was asked to head the Rockefeller Foundation's multiyear study of U.S. policy regarding South African apartheid. While still engaged with the Rockefeller Foundation's project, he was approached by the Ford Foundation, where he was a board member, to interview for the foundation's presidency. Thomas accepted, and assumed the Ford Foundation presidency in 1979.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_009, TRT: 9:31:44 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served on the boards of numerous corporate and civic organizations, including Citibank, N.A., the Alcoa Corporation and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, during his presidency of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC). He left the BSRC in 1977; and, in 1979, became the president of the Ford Foundation, following the departure of McGeorge Bundy. During Thomas' tenure, his greatest concerns were resolving the foundation's budget problems and focusing its funding efforts on solutions to global poverty. To accomplish these goals, he reduced the organization's staff, and created grassroots programs at the international and domestic levels. At first, both Thomas' staff and outside critics protested his proposed administrative changes; but, after he succeeded in growing the foundation's endowment, they welcomed his leadership. Thomas left the Ford Foundation in 1996, and continued to monitor the progress of the foundation under his successor, Darren Walker.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_001\_010, TRT: 10:02:22 ?

Franklin A. Thomas talks about his charitable board memberships, including his service on the boards of the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John Hay Whitney Foundation and the Vincent Astor Foundation, all of which were located in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_011, TRT: 11:32:15 ?

Franklin A. Thomas was the captain of the basketball team at both Franklin K. Lane High School and Columbia University in New York City. During his senior year of high school, Thomas' team, including Gilbert L. Scott and Albert Vann, advanced to the citywide championships; but Thomas graduated early, making him ineligible to play, and the team lost the game. Thomas matriculated at Columbia University, where he was offered an academic scholarship and a place on the school's basketball team. Both Thomas' mother, Viola Atherly Thomas, and high school basketball coach urged him not to accept a sports scholarship, as his education would be impacted if he were injured and unable to play. Thomas recalls facing little discrimination while in college, although he was one of the school's few black students; and reflects upon his mother's influence on his perception of racism. Thomas remained active at his alma mater after graduation, and returned to mediate the student protests of 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_012, TRT: 12:33:51 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York under Robert M. Morgenthau, who became his friend and mentor. As an assistant U.S. attorney, Thomas worked alongside Pierre N. Leval and Stephen E. Kaufman to obtain convictions of four domestic terrorists who conspired to bomb several major U.S. landmarks. He also witnessed the inconsistencies created by mandatory minimum sentencing for federal crimes. Thomas left the U.S. attorney's office in 1965, and went on to serve as New York City's deputy police commissioner under Commissioner Howard R. Leary and New York City Mayor John Lindsay. In 1966, U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy created the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) as part of his commitment to the neighborhood during his presidential campaign. Thomas was initially recommended to the BSRC through his childhood friend, Earl G. Graves, Sr., who worked on Kennedy's staff; and, in 1967, Thomas became the organization's president.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_013, TRT: 13:34:48 ?

Franklin A. Thomas served as president of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC) from 1967 to 1977. The organization included community organizers like Elsie Richardson and Robert "Sonny" Carson; and business elites like CBS executive William S. Paley and financier Benno C. Schmidt, Sr., who served on the board of the BSRC's financing entity, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Development and Services Corporation (D and S). Many feared that the BSRC would fail after the assassination of its founder, Robert F. Kennedy; but Thomas ensured the organization's success by absorbing D and S into the BSRC, and encouraging communication between the community and business leaders. During Thomas' presidential tenure, the BSRC focused on redeveloping commercial, residential and public properties in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Thomas also served on the Knapp Commission, which was convened in 1970 by Mayor John Lindsay to investigate corruption in the New York City Police Department.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_014, TRT: 14:39:14 ?

Franklin A. Thomas was asked to join the board of the Ford Foundation while serving as president of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC). Thomas' early involvement with the Ford Foundation elicited invitations to the

boards of numerous charitable and corporate organizations, including the Cummins Engine Company, whose chairman, J. Irwin Miller, served on the board of the Ford Foundation; and whose chief executive, Henry Schacht, became Thomas' longtime associate. Thomas was also invited to the John Hay Whitney Foundation board after being introduced to philanthropist John Hay Whitney. These connections were instrumental to Thomas' achievements at the BSRC, including the establishment of Medgar Evers College and Continental Cablevision, Inc., and the construction of superblocks designed by architect I.M. Pei. Thomas divorced his first wife, Dawn Conrada, in 1972; and later married Whitney's adopted stepdaughter, Kate Roosevelt Whitney, who also served on the board of her father's foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_015, TRT: 15:31:38 ?

Franklin A. Thomas became acquainted with philanthropist John Hay Whitney and his wife, Betsey Cushing Roosevelt Whitney, while serving on the board of the John Hay Whitney Foundation. During the 1970s, Thomas married Whitney's adopted stepdaughter, Kate Roosevelt Whitney, who also served on the foundation's board. At the time, both were divorced with children. While serving on Whitney's board, Thomas also joined the board of the Ford Foundation, which was searching for a new president to replace McGeorge Bundy. After reviewing hundreds of applicants, the board asked Thomas to take on the position; and, although he was engaged by the Rockefeller Foundation as the head of a study commission on South Africa, he decided to accept. Thomas assumed the presidency of the Ford Foundation in 1979, during a budget crisis created by prior mismanagement of the organization's assets. Around this time, Thomas was offered a role in the administration of President Jimmy Carter as U.S. Secretary of HUD, which he declined.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_016, TRT: 16:34:56 ?

Franklin A. Thomas assumed the presidency of the Ford Foundation in 1979. His initial goals for the organization were balancing the budget, and refocusing funding efforts from academic studies to practical programs. At the start of his tenure, Thomas was criticized in The New York Times for his plan to decrease costs by terminating a quarter of the staff. Nevertheless, he implemented the changes; and, after he succeeded in stabilizing the foundation's endowment, much of the criticism was recanted. In addition to restructuring the administrative side of the foundation, Thomas concentrated on distributing grants to anti-poverty organizations, both internationally and within the United States. While serving as president, Thomas sought advice and counsel from his friend and colleague, Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. The two met while serving on the board of the Ford Foundation, and collaborated on an early study of U.S. investments in South Africa. Thomas also befriended Jordan's mother, Mary Griggs Jordan.

Video Oral History Interview with Franklin A. Thomas, Section A2017\_088\_002\_017, TRT: 17:29:49 ?

Franklin A. Thomas was asked to head the Rockefeller Foundation's study of U.S. policy in South Africa, which led to publication of the groundbreaking 'Time Running Out' report in 1981. While in South Africa, Thomas became acquainted with the officials of the Afrikaner government, including South African President F.W. de Klerk; and the African National Congress (ANC), which was led by Nelson Mandela. Thomas facilitated negotiations between the ANC and Afrikaner policymakers throughout the 1980s, and was instrumental in



Mandela's release from prison in 1990. Later, he brought de Klerk and Mandela to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where they marched together in a parade. Thomas and his wife, Kate Roosevelt Whitney, remained friends with Mandela until his death in 2013. Thomas reflects upon the United States' international status at the time of the interview, and share his concerns for the African American and world communities. He also reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered.