

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watt, Melvin L., 1945-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt,
Dates:	December 2, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:46).
Abstract:	U.S. congressman The Honorable Melvin L. Watt (1945 -) was the second African American elected to Congress from North Carolina, serving on the Judicial, Financial Services and Joint Economic committees. Watt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 2, 2002, in Charlotte, North Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_218
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The second son of Evelyn Harris and the second African American elected to Congress from North Carolina, Melvin Watt has lived the life of a frontrunner. Born to a single teenaged mother in rural North Carolina in 1945, Watt's childhood home lacked electricity and indoor plumbing. Watt's fervent work ethic was demonstrated in his youth when he drove a school bus before and after school in order to contribute to the financial support of his family. His mother's encouragement to read and excel in school prepared Watt to graduate Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina in 1963 and to subsequently earn a scholarship to Yale University Law School.

After graduation, Watt returned to Charlotte, entering the law firm of Chambers, Stein, Ferguson and Becton. Watt worked as a civil rights attorney for twenty-two years, during which time he served one term in the North Carolina State Senate from 1985 to 1986. Declining to run for a second term or any other elective office until his two sons graduated from high school, Watt chose to work behind the scenes politically. He managed Harvey Gantt's campaigns for City Council, mayor of Charlotte and U.S. Senate. In 1992, with the formation of North Carolina's 12th District that included his hometown, Watt opted to run for Congress, with his eldest son, Brian, as his campaign manager.

As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Watt served on the Financial Services Committee and Judiciary Committee and is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law. He is one of two black members elected to Congress in this century. Watt is known as a progressive Democrat and fearless defender of civil liberties. He has been repeatedly reelected to Congress, where he has developed and supported legislation affecting African American and Latino citizens in the areas of housing, welfare, reparations and education.

Watt also loves sports. He has been the State Democratic Baseball Team's star pitcher and also plays tennis. He is a lifetime member of the NAACP, was president of the Mecklenburg County Bar Association and still attends his

childhood church, Mt. Olive Presbyterian Church, on Sundays. Watt and his wife, Eulada, have two sons, Brian and Jason, who are both graduates of their father's alma mater, Yale University.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 2, 2002, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. U.S. congressman The Honorable Melvin L. Watt (1945 -) was the second African American elected to Congress from North Carolina, serving on the Judicial, Financial Services and Joint Economic committees.

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:

Watt, Melvin L., 1945-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Watt, Melvin L., 1945- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

North Carolina

Occupations:

U.S. Congressman

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 Melvin L. Watt, December 2, 2002. 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 Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_001, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Melvin Watt describes his family history. Watt was born to Evelyn Mauney Watt and Graham Watt on August 26, 1945 in Charlotte, North Carolina. His mother's family can trace its ancestry back to Sylvie, an African woman who was enslaved and had seven daughters. Sylvie's grandson and Watt's great-great grandfather was Wesley Mauney who dictated his memoir at age eighty-six. Mauney was sold away from his mother and siblings, but he returned to North Carolina after slavery ended. Mauney worked in the lumber industry and bought hundreds of acres of land in North Carolina. Watt's father served in the U.S. Navy and then worked for General Electric. Watt's parents married when his mother was thirteen years old and his father was twenty-three. His parents separated when Watt was around five years old. His mother raised three boys and worked at the U.S. Postal Service as a mail sorter. Watt grew up in Dixie, North Carolina where he lived in a house with no plumbing or electricity until he was eight years old.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_002, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

Melvin Watt describes his childhood and school experiences. An avid reader, Watt looked forward to weekly visits to his rural home from the bookmobile. Watt's childhood home was adjacent to Mount Olive Presbyterian Church in Dixie, North Carolina where he attended church every Sunday. Watt attended all-black Plato Price School in Charlotte, North Carolina until schools were desegregated in 1961 when he was in tenth grade. Watt then attended and graduated from York Road High School. While in high school, Watt drove a school bus to make extra money and threatened to organize a strike which resulted in a new bus for black students. Watt was an activist from an early age, and his oldest brother's participation in Charlotte sit-ins led to him leaving college. Watt recalls being involved in many sports and activities as well as the encouragement he received from teachers during high school. Watt decided to enroll in the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill for a semester without a scholarship in 1963.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Melvin Watt talks about college and law school. When Watt arrived on campus at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1963, his three white roommates refused to share a room with him. A graduate student named Marvin Moode moved in and Watt emulated his excellent study habits which resulted in Watt earning high grades and getting financial assistance for the rest of his time in college. Although he did not make the all-white freshmen baseball team, Watt was a dorm advisor, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and president of the business honors fraternity. Watt knew early in high school that he wanted to be a lawyer. With his academic record, Watt was admitted to five law schools including UNC-Chapel Hill. However, he did not receive a Morehead Scholarship to UNC, so he ultimately chose to attend Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut. At Yale, his classmates included Paul Gewirtz, John Kecker, Andrew Fastow, David Kendall, and Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_004, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Melvin Watt talks about his political career. After graduating from Yale Law School in 1966, Watt returned to Charlotte, North Carolina to practice law at Chambers, Stein, Ferguson and Becton. Watt worked with Julius Chambers as a civil rights attorney for twenty-two years. Watt managed Harvey Gantt's campaigns for City Council in the 1970s, Mayor of Charlotte in 1979, and his

U.S. Senate run against Jesse Helms in 1990. In 1992, with the formation of North Carolina's 12th District that included his hometown, Watt ran for Congress against four other progressive Democrats and won both the primary and general elections. Watt focused on issues related to affordable housing and mass transit, economic empowerment, affirmative action, and education. Watt was the first African American elected to Congress from North Carolina in over a hundred years. Watt's first term in the U.S. Congress coincided with the election of President William "Bill" Clinton and major gains in the Congressional Black Caucus.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_005, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Melvin Watt talks about contemporary political issues. As a U.S. Congressman, Watt instituted a program called Trading Places where he performed different roles in the community to stay connected with his constituents. In light of the Patriot Act following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, Watt raised concerns about the federal government interfering with Americans' civil liberties. Watt supported a commissioned study into reparations and affirmative action efforts to compensate for past discrimination. Watt served on the House Judiciary Committee during President Bill Clinton's impeachment. Watt believes that the Clinton administration was largely successful despite the impeachment and that Bill Clinton set the standard for connecting with the black community and diversifying his cabinet appointments. Watt talks about U.S. political relations with Africa. Watt views his legacy as being the first African American elected to Congress from North Carolina since George H. White in 1898.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_001_006, TRT: 0:18:50 ?

Melvin Watt talks about how he would like to be remembered. Watt also describes his mother's pride in him. Watt concludes by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Melvin L. Watt, Section A2002_218_WATT_MELVIN_06_MED_001, TRT: 0:01:00 ?

This tape contains a :30 package produced by WBTV about Hon. Melvin L. Watt's interview with The HistoryMakers. WBTV anchor, Paul Cameron, talks about Watt's interview and how his story will be a part of The HistoryMakers national video and history archive. The footage in the broadcast featured The HistoryMakers video equipment and Watt's interview.