

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer

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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>	Sawyer, Eugene
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 29, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:32:16).
<b>Abstract:</b>	City alderman and mayor The Honorable Eugene Sawyer (1934 - 2008 ) was the mayor of Chicago in addition to being a successful entrepreneur. Sawyer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 29, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_024
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil servant and former Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer was born in Greensboro, Alabama, on September 3, 1934, to Bernice and Eugene Sawyer, Sr. The oldest of six children, Sawyer graduated from Alabama State University in Montgomery in 1956 with his B.S. degree in secondary education. While still in school, Sawyer traveled to Chicago every summer to live with his aunt on the South Side and work odd jobs.

After graduating from college, Sawyer taught high school math and chemistry for one year in Prentiss, Mississippi; in 1957, he moved to Chicago permanently to pursue a career in laboratory science. Sawyer spent two years working for Rockford Sprinklers before he was hired at a South Side water filtration plant in 1959 to work as a lab technician. At the same time, Sawyer joined the Democratic Ward Organization of the 6th Ward, where he worked his way up through both the organization and the city water department. Over time, Sawyer served as president of the 6th Ward Young Democrats; financial secretary for the entire ward organization; and president.

Sawyer served as alderman of the 6th Ward from 1971 until 1988; in 1987, following the unexpected death of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, he was elected by the City Council to serve as acting mayor of the City of Chicago. Sawyer was sworn in at 4:01 a.m. on December 2, 1987, after a contentious fight that divided Chicago's African American community. During his tenure as mayor, Sawyer expanded Chicago's governmental outreach to develop cooperative partnerships with business and industry.

Following his term as mayor, Sawyer and his friend, businessman Charles Harrison, III, partnered to form CEI International, a reseller of natural gas and other fuels; he served as vice president of the company until 1997.

Sawyer was an active member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity since 1953 and a trustee at Vernon Park Church and vice chairman of the board of the Wyatt Center.

Sawyer married his wife, Veronica, on September 7, 1996.

Eugene Sawyer passed away on January 19, 2008, at the age of seventy-three.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 29, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. City alderman and mayor The Honorable Eugene Sawyer (1934 - 2008 ) was the mayor of Chicago in addition to being a successful entrepreneur.

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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:

Sawyer, Eugene

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sawyer, Eugene --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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Chicago (Ill.)

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Chicago (Ill.)

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### Occupations:

City Alderman

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Mayor

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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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 The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, January 29, 2003. 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 The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_001,  
TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer begins by describing his family background and telling of his mother and father's lives, including his father's mortician business. Sawyer describes his childhood in Greensboro, Alabama, remembering his family life and favorite activities as well as describing race relations in the town. Sawyer then details his school years, talking about his academic success and extracurricular activities.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_002,  
TRT: 0:29:23 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer recalls his college years at Alabama State University in Montgomery. He details his involvement in civil rights activities, telling of the Montgomery bus boycott and the bombing of Martin Luther King Jr's house. Sawyer talks about his first job as a math teacher in Mississippi and explains how he came to Chicago to work as a plumber. Sawyer then recounts how he first became involved in Chicago politics, working with the Young Democrats in the Woodlawn neighborhood.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_003,  
TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer details his successful 1971 campaign for Alderman of Chicago's 6th Ward. Sawyer discusses his strategies and then details his relationship with the constituents of the ward. Sawyer then describes the changing world of Chicago politics in the late 1970s after the death of longtime Mayor Richard J. Daley. Sawyer also comments on Daley's relationship with Chicago's black community.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_004,  
TRT: 0:30:46 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer evaluates Jane Byrne's term as mayor of Chicago. He then recalls in detail Harold Washington's campaign for mayor, explaining his contributions to the campaign and discusses the many personalities who came together to achieve victory. Sawyer then discusses his role as Chairman of the Rules Committee in Washington's administration. Sawyer discusses Chicago politics in the 1980s, including federal investigations of aldermen and opposition to Washington in the City Council.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_005,  
TRT: 0:30:59 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer remembers the death of Mayor Harold Washington and the flurry of political activity that followed. Sawyer then describes in detail the process that led to his election as acting mayor of Chicago, telling of debates over his candidacy, opposition from other members of the African American community, and the day of the City Council vote.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_006,  
TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer recounts his tenure as mayor of the city of Chicago from 1987 to 1989. He discusses some of the difficulties he had as acting mayor after the death of Harold Washington, including the controversy surrounding Steve Cokely, a junior staff member. Sawyer also focuses on his accomplishments as mayor, including passing a gay rights ordinance and installing lights at Wrigley Field to raise revenue. He then remembers the 1989 election, in which he was defeated by Richard M. Daley.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Eugene Sawyer, Section A2003\_024\_001\_007,

TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Chicago Mayor and Alderman Eugene Sawyer discusses his life after politics, and describes his career with CEI International, Inc, an energy company. Sawyer then reflects on his life and career, calling for unity in Chicago's African Americans and shares his hopes for their future. Finally, Sawyer discusses his family and considers his legacy.