

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter Douglas

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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>	Douglas, Walter, 1933-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 7, 2010 and June 9, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:39:42).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Auto sales entrepreneur and nonprofit chief executive Walter Douglas (1933 - ) was owner of Avis Ford in suburban Detroit. He previously served as president of the nonprofit New Detroit, Inc. Douglas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 7, 2010 and June 9, 2010, in Southfield, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_042
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Businessman and Detroit civic pioneer Walter Edmond Douglas, Sr. was born in North Carolina, and raised in the town of Hamlet, a major railroad community. His parents were educators. Douglas holds two degree from North Carolina Central University. He earned his B.A. degree in accounting in 1954. A year later, Douglas earned his M.B.A. from North Carolina Central University. Upon graduation, he briefly taught at Edward Waters Junior College in Jacksonville Florida, before being drafted into the U.S. Army. In 1965, Douglas was hired by the Internal Revenue Service. An assignment transfer brought him to Detroit in 1966.

Douglas was deeply moved by the July 1967 riots in Detroit, which was the worst in American history at the time. He began volunteering around the city, and his efforts were noticed by city leaders. In 1972, he became the vice-president of New Detroit Inc, a nonprofit founded in 1967 to deal with the city's racial and employment tensions. Douglas became a key advisor of Coleman Young, the city's first African American mayor, following Young's election in 1974. Young appointed Douglas to several positions, notably, the city's new civilian police commission. In 1978, Douglas was named president of New Detroit. He remained in that position, until he decided to test the private sector.

The year was 1985 when entered into a car dealer ownership a minority training program hosted by the Ford Motor company. The purpose of the program was to give more African American a chance to own dealerships. In 1986, Douglas purchased a share in Avis Ford in suburban Detroit, a historic dealership owned by the founder of the Avis Rent-a-Car System. Douglas became majority owner in 1992. Since then, he has earned a host of awards for the success of his dealership, and his continued work within the Detroit community as a philanthropist. In 2006, he turned over the business operation to his son, Mark. He lives in suburban Detroit with his wife of more than forty years, Retha.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter Douglas was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 7, 2010 and June 9, 2010, in Southfield, Michigan, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Auto sales entrepreneur and nonprofit chief executive Walter Douglas (1933 - ) was owner of Avis Ford in suburban Detroit. He previously served as president of the nonprofit New Detroit, Inc.

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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:

Douglas, Walter, 1933-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Douglas, Walter, 1933- --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:

Auto Sales Entrepreneur

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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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 Walter Douglas, June 7, 2010 and June 9, 2010. 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 Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 0:32:02 ?

Walter Douglas was born on August 22, 1933 in Hamlet, North Carolina to Inez Highland Douglas and Frederick Douglas, Jr. His mother's ancestors included both Scottish immigrants and African American slaves. Douglas' paternal grandfather, Scipio Douglas, owned a 1000-acre farm and a large home in North Carolina, which were expropriated from the family after his early death in 1919. Seeking education, Douglas' father left the farm without his father's permission to attend High Point High School in High Point, North Carolina. He aspired to buy back the family farm, but was persuaded by Douglas' mother to live in

Hamlet, which was a major terminal of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. After Douglas' parents married, his mother attended the Fayetteville State Teachers College, and left Douglas and his siblings in the care of their father and paternal aunt, Odessa Douglas. Both Douglas' parents earned graduate degrees, and secured teaching positions at the Hamlet Avenue School, where his father was the principal.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Walter Douglas grew up in the small town of Hamlet, North Carolina, which was a hub of the Seaboard Air Ride Railroad. The railroad operated the Terminal Hotel, which hosted such notables as Booker T. Washington and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt; and Douglas' neighbor, contralto Florence Smith, once organized a concert by singer Roland Hayes, where blacks and whites were segregated on either side of the theater. Douglas completed the second grade at the Hamlet Avenue School, where the faculty included his parents, Inez Highland Douglas and Frederick Douglas, Sr. Douglas then transitioned to Pine Street School, which also located in Hamlet. He began the sixth grade at Hamlet's Capital Highway High School, where he worked as a school bus driver to earn extra money. During the summers, he visited South Carolina's all-black Atlantic Beach with fellow congregants from St. Peter's United Methodist Church. After graduating from high school, Douglas studied commerce at the North Carolina College at Durham.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Walter Douglas graduated in 1950 from Capital Highway High School in Hamlet, North Carolina. He then enrolled at the North Carolina College at Durham, where his brother, Frederick Douglas, Jr., was already a student. Douglas joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, and earned a business degree. He went on to teach at the Edward Waters Junior College in Jacksonville, Florida and the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he was mentored by Dean Joseph E. Fuller, and worked to expand the library's resources for business students. Shortly before the start of the school year in 1956, Douglas was drafted into the U.S. Army, where he served as a company clerk at Fort Jackson in South Carolina and at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. He then received a class A assignment at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where he met businessmen like Joseph Berger and Clemmie Spangler, Jr. When the end Korean War ended, Douglas left the U.S. Army and became a clerk for the Internal Revenue Service.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:27 ?

Walter Douglas worked as a computer programmer at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) from 1959. He obtained the position despite the discriminatory hiring practices of a white secretary, who denied him an application form because of his race. As computer technology improved during the 1960s, the IRS sought federal permission to build data center; and, with help from U.S. Senator from Michigan Patrick V. McNamara, obtained funds for a facility in Detroit, Michigan. Douglas was assigned to work there, and moved with his wife and two children to Detroit's Green Acres neighborhood. He joined the congregation of the Central United Methodist Church, and began studying theology at the nearby First Presbyterian Church. While in Detroit, Douglas witnessed the riots of 1967, and the shootout between police and members of the Republic of New Afrika at the New Bethel Baptist Church in 1969. Douglas also recalls meeting his wife, Retha Hughes Douglas, at the North Carolina College at Durham.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Walter Douglas was the first vice president of New Detroit, a minority business development corporation in Detroit, Michigan that was founded in response to the riots of 1967. New Detroit sponsored the election of Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young, in 1972. Despite initial concerns about the lack of support from the United Automobile Workers union, Coleman Young defeated the union's candidate, Mel Ravitz, in the primary election, and went on to beat John Nichols, the Republican nominee. In his role as vice president of New Detroit, Douglas worked closely with Mayor Young and his appointees, many of whom were originally appointed by Mayor Young's predecessor, Roman Briggs. Mayor Young's administration focused on issues like police reform, and worked to ensure equal hiring and promotion practices for African Americans and women. At the time, many white police officers owned apartments in the city to qualify as Detroit citizens, while their families lived in the suburbs in protest of busing.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

Walter Douglas was a resident of Detroit, Michigan during the election of Mayor Coleman Young in 1972. During his tenure, Mayor Young worked to revitalize the city through economic development projects like the construction of the Joe Louis Arena and a General Motors Corporation plant. He also became the target of racially based criticism from the city's conservative politicians. In 1976, Douglas was appointed the chief civilian of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners, and was named the president of New Detroit. He also joined the board of the Health Alliance Plan of Michigan, Inc. In response to the lack of minority automotive dealers in Detroit, Douglas enrolled in the Ford Minority Dealers Association's training program in 1985. He left the program before graduating, in order to purchase 49 percent ownership of the Avis Ford Inc. dealership in Southfield, Michigan. He frequently conflicted with the dealership's founder, Warren Avis, from whom he acquired the rest of the company in 1992.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Walter Douglas became the sole owner of the Avis Ford, Inc. car dealership in 1992, despite an attempt by the original owner, Warren Avis, to intimidate him during the negotiation. At this point in the interview, Douglas reflects upon his experiences as a car dealer, including his early mistake of purchasing Ford Taurus models with Instaclear windshields, which were more expensive and less sturdy than regular windshields. Douglas received little help from the Ford Motor Company's executive offices until the hiring of CEO Alan Mulally, who improved the company's communication with dealers. Mulally also improved the company's product lines through the creative leadership of designer Edward T. Welburn. During his transition to the automotive sales industry, Douglas remained active with New Detroit in Detroit, Michigan. He talks about his dealership's success, which he attributed to his diverse staff and courteous treatment of customers; and concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon his life.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Douglas, Section A2010\_042\_002\_008, TRT: 0:08:03 ?

Walter Douglas reflects upon his life and legacy, his family and his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.