

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Wesley Fountain

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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>	Fountain, John W. 1960 -
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 16, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:29:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Journalism professor John Wesley Fountain (1960 - ) is one of the most prominent black newspaper columnists in Chicago. Fountain was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 16, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_114
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author and newspaper columnist John W. Fountain was born in Chicago, Illinois on September 29, 1960 to Gwendolyn Hagler and John Wesley Fountain. Fountain graduated from Chicago's Providence-St. Mel High School in 1978. After attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for a year, he enrolled at Wilbur Wright College in Chicago in January 1983. After earning his Associate's degree, Fountain re-enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1984, where he graduated with his B.S. and M.S. degrees in journalism in 1987 and 1989, respectively. Fountain was hired as a staff writer at the *Chicago Tribune* after college.

In 1995, Fountain was hired as a general assignment reporter for the *Washington Post*, where he worked for five years. From 2000 to 2003, he served as a national correspondent for *The New York Times*. He left full-time newspaper journalism in 2003 to serve as a visiting scholar at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. A year later, Fountain was hired as a full professor with tenure at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, his alma mater. He taught introductory and advanced journalism classes for the university before being hired at Roosevelt University in Chicago as a tenured full professor. Fountain was asked to write a weekly column for the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2010. PublicAffairs Books published Fountain's critically acclaimed memoir *True Vine: A Young Black Man's Journey of Faith, Hope, and Clarity* in 2003. He also published a collection of essays titled, *Dear Dad: Reflections on Fatherhood* through WestSide Press, a publishing company he started in 2009.

Fountain has won numerous honors for feature writing from the National Association of Black Journalists, the Associated Press, the American Association of University Women, and the Society of Professional Journalists. In 2001, he received the New York Times Publisher's Award for his coverage of the Mississippi River Flood. In 2003, while a national correspondent for *The New York Times*, he was a finalist in features and sports writing for the Peter Lisagor Award. In 2011, Fountain received the Chicago Headline Club's prestigious Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism for his work as a columnist in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

John W. Fountain was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 16, 2012.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Wesley Fountain was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 16, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalism professor John Wesley Fountain (1960 - ) is one of the most prominent black newspaper columnists in Chicago.

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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:

Fountain, John W. 1960 -

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Fountain, John W. 1960 - --Interviews

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African American journalists--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

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African American college teachers--Illinois--Chicago--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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Roosevelt University

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## Occupations:

Journalism Professor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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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 John Wesley Fountain, April 16, 2012. 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 John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:06 ?

John Wesley Fountain was born on September 29, 1960 in Chicago, Illinois, to John Fountain and Gwendolyn Clincy. His maternal great-great grandfather, Burton Roy, was born a slave in Atlanta, Georgia, and as a free man worked as a sharecropper in Cairo and Pulaski, Illinois. Fountain's maternal grandparents, George and Florence Hagler, had moved from Cairo to Chicago in 1943 as part of the Great Migration, and lived in the ALBA Homes projects before moving to the North Lawndale neighborhood nicknamed "K-Town" in 1956. While K-Town was maligned by the Chicago Tribune in 1984 as 'the American Millstone,' Fountain details the positive aspects of his community and his upbringing in K-Town. His earliest memories are of his alcoholic and abusive father, who was arrested when Fountain was four years old.

African American families.

Slavery--Georgia--Atlanta.

Rural-urban migration--United States.

African American neighborhood--Illinois--Chicago.

Childhood and youth--Illinois--Chicago.

African American fathers.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:27 ?

John Fountain describes his family and his childhood experiences. His grandfather, George Hagler, was a postman, pastor, and the primary male role model in his life. His grandmother, Florence Hagler, was a brilliant seamstress and his best friend. Fountain fondly remembers growing up on his block at 16th and Komensky with his mother, step-father, and three younger siblings, playing games with all of the other boys, and celebrating with food. In 1964, he attended Roswell B. Mason Elementary School, and was part of the first class of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Head Start program. Fountain details his experience at his Pentecostal church, the True Vine Church of God in Christ, and reflects upon how his grandmother made faith tangible for him despite his natural inclination to question matters of faith.

African American families.

Childhood and youth--Activities--Illinois--Chicago.

African American grandparents--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Education, Elementary--Illinois--Chicago.

African American churches--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Religion--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:23 ?

John Fountain describes his interests in grade school and at Providence St. Mel School, and speaks about the theatrical nature of the services at the True Vine Church of God in Christ. Despite growing up in poverty, Fountain recalls his early interests in reading, writing, and playing guitar, as well as the constant presence of both Motown and church music and the impact they had upon him and his community. He attended Providence St. Mel School, which was headed by Principal Paul Adams, from 1974 to 1978. Fountain describes Providence St. Mel School as a safe and fertile environment. In high school, Fountain participated in Project Upward Bound, which exposed him to a safe and clean neighborhood and motivated him to excel.

African Americans--Education--Illinois--Chicago.  
African American churches--Illinois--Chicago.  
Childhood and youth--Activities--Illinois--Chicago.  
Music.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:22 ?

John Fountain reflects on Chicago's race relations in the late 1960s and his experiences attending Providence St. Mel High School. As a high school student, Fountain used extracurricular activities like basketball, track, and Project Upward Bound to fill his time and keep him away from gang activity on Chicago's West Side. He recalls watching the riots on the West Side in 1968, and their devastating economic impact for West Side businesses. He also recalls how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination was felt in his community. While at Providence St. Mel, Fountain was exposed to African American literature by his teachers, who were politically radical nuns. Inspired by reading the 'Invisible Man,' Fountain wrote an essay called 'I am a Shadow' that led to his interest in becoming a journalist. He was also empowered politically by black Chicago journalists Lu Palmer and Vernon Jarrett, and by his mother's strong moral beliefs.

Race relations--Illinois--Chicago.  
African Americans--Education, Secondary--Illinois--Chicago.  
Jarrett, Vernon, 1921-2004.  
Riots--Illinois--Chicago.  
African American authors.  
Role models--African American.  
Palmer, Lu.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:36 ?

John Fountain recalls his experiences after graduating from Providence St. Mel School in 1978. After his high school sweetheart, Robin, gave birth to his first son, John Fountain III, he began his freshman year at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. During this year, he decided that he wanted to be a writer. Not able to afford tuition, Fountain left the University of Illinois and enrolled in Wright College in Chicago in 1979. In 1980, he left Wilbur Wright College to wed Robin and take care of his family. After searching for jobs, Fountain re-enrolled in Wright College in 1983 and then transferred to the University of Illinois in 1984. While at the University of Illinois, Fountain focused on writing public affairs stories about housing discrimination and the University of Illinois athletics department. He remembers the University as a welcoming environment compared to his childhood home, but also recalls facing racism on campus.

University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign campus).  
Wilbur Wright College.  
African American families.  
Journalism--Illinois.  
Racism--Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_006, TRT: 6:31:56 ?

John Fountain received his B.S. degree in journalism in 1986 and his M.S. degree in 1988 from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. His

Masters' thesis focused on housing segregation in Champaign. Before starting at the Chicago Tribune, Fountain held a series of press internships at various publications including the Champaign News Gazette, the Pioneer Press, the Chicago Sun-Times, the Modesto Bee, and the Wall Street Journal. He started working at the Chicago Tribune in 1989 as an intern, and became a staff writer covering crime stories that December. In 1995, Fountain left Chicago to work for the Washington Post, where he started as a County Police Reporter for Fairfax County, Virginia. He describes the most memorable story he wrote for the Washington Post.

University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign campus).

Internship programs--Illinois.

Chicago Tribune (Firm).

Washington Post Company.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_007, TRT: 7:30:57 ?

John Fountain recalls his career at the Washington Post and the New York Times. He married his wife, Monica Fountain, in 1992, before moving with her to Lewes, England. He returned from England with a new perspective on writing and a heightened sensitivity to urban American violence. In 1998, Fountain wrote a series of front-page stories depicting the Anacostia High School football team for the Washington Post. He talks about the importance of fighting for positive stories about black lives. In 1999, he accepted a journalism fellowship at the University of Michigan, and in 2000, he began his dream job as a National Correspondent in the Midwest Bureau of the New York Times. At the New York Times, Fountain lived in Chicago and wrote articles about twelve states across the Midwest. Fountain describes the effect of September 11th on both the big cities and small towns he covered. He also reflects on the process of writing his book 'True Vine,' which was published in 2003.

Washington Post Company.

New York times.

University of Michigan.

Journalism.

September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001.

African American authors--Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:25 ?

John Fountain talks about his career as a teacher and minister. He was ordained as a minister in 1985, and was a deacon and minister at his childhood church, the True Vine Church of God in Christ, in Chicago. In 2003, Fountain left the New York Times and began teaching at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism as a guest lecturer. The following year, he became a professor at his alma mater, the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. Fountain details the importance of perspective in journalism and his hopes for more black newspaper editors. He also shares his criticisms of the black church, and his hope that the church will become a vehicle for social change in the community.

African American college teachers.

African American ministers--Illinois--Chicago.

Northwestern University (Evanston, Ill.).

University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign campus).

African American churches.

Video Oral History Interview with John Wesley Fountain, Section A2012\_114\_001\_009, TRT:  
9:28:05 ?

John Fountain shares his hopes and concerns for the black community. He also reflects on his legacy and on the importance of family. He remembers his calling to become a Christian when he was nineteen. Fountain describes a collection of his photographs.

African Americans--Religion.

Photographs.