

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable James R. Spencer

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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>	Spencer, James R., 1949-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 8, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:05:36).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Judge James R. Spencer (1949 - ) worked for civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman at the Washington Research Project, and was the first African American federal district court judge in the Eastern District of Virginia. Spencer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 8, 2016, in Richmond, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_132
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge James R. Spencer was born on March 25, 1949 in Florence, South Carolina. He was among the first in his family to attend college, enrolling at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia in 1967. He graduated magna cum laude in 1971, and went on to study at Harvard Law School, where he obtained his J.D. degree in 1974. The following year, Spencer graduated in the top five percent of his class at the Judge Advocate General's School at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. Spencer later studied at the Howard University School of Divinity, graduating in 1985.

Spencer's interest in law began in 1967, while working under civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman at her public interest law firm, the Washington Research Project. Upon graduating from Harvard Law School, he worked as a staff attorney with the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. He went on to serve as a prosecutor, and then as chief of justice, with the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps from 1975 to 1978. From there, Spencer became an assistant attorney general, serving the U.S. Attorney's Office of District of Columbia. He was the first African American attorney assigned to the office's Major Crimes Division. In 1983, he moved to the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Eastern District of Virginia, where he remained until 1986 when he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan as the first African American district court judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. From 1987 to 1996, Spencer also served as an adjunct professor of law at the University of Virginia. In 2004, Spencer was appointed as chief justice of the district, serving until 2011. In 2014, Spencer assumed the rank of senior judge. He presided over a number of high-profile cases over the course of his career, including the 2006 patent infringement suit between Research In Motion, the maker of BlackBerry devices, and the patent holding company NTP, Inc.; and the 2014 corruption trial of Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell.

Spencer was a member of numerous professional, civic and fraternal organizations, including the State Bar of Georgia, the District of Columbia Bar, the Virginia State Bar, the National Bar Association, the Old Dominion Bar

Association, and the Federal Bar Association, Big Brothers of America, the NAACP, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Mu, Sigma Pi Phi, and Phi Beta Kappa. Spencer also earned a black belt and was a member of the U.S. Karate Association. He served as associate pastor of the 3rd Union Baptist Church in King William, Virginia.

Judge James R. Spencer was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 8, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 8, 2016, in Richmond, Virginia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Judge James R. Spencer (1949 - ) worked for civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman at the Washington Research Project, and was the first African American federal district court judge in the Eastern District of Virginia.

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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:

Spencer, James R., 1949-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Spencer, James R., 1949- --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:

Federal District Court Judge

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

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 The Honorable James R. Spencer, December 8, 2016. 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 James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:11 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer was born on March 25, 1949 in Florence, South Carolina to Hannah Ellerbe Spencer and Benjamin Spencer. His maternal grandparents worked as farmers in Savannah Grove, South Carolina, where Spencer's mother was born. She later excelled in her classes at Brockington High School in Timmonsville, South Carolina, and went on to work as a cook, housekeeper and cosmetic salesperson. Spencer's father was born in Darlington, South Carolina to Essie Spencer and Levi Spencer, who was a farmer and deacon. Spencer's father completed five grades of formal education, and later joined the U.S. Army as a master mechanic. He also served in World War II, and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for valor. After meeting in church, Spencer's parents married, and settled in the predominantly black neighborhood of Florence. There, Spencer began his education at Carver Elementary School. Both of his parents emphasized the importance of education, and his mother taught him to read at a young age.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:30 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer grew up in a deeply segregated environment in Florence, South Carolina, where he caddied for the exclusively white Florence Country Club. At Carver Elementary School, Spencer was placed in advanced reading groups, and became an avid reader of Jet magazine. Although he was encouraged by most of his early teachers, Spencer's fifth grade teacher mocked his aspirations to become an educator and sports coach. His mother later took him to observe Matthew J. Perry, a local prominent African American attorney, who ultimately inspired him to pursue a career in law. Each Sunday, Spencer attended Center Baptist Church in Florence. There, members of his family served on the deacon board, while he participated in missionary work and sang in the choir. He attended Wilson Junior High School and Wilson High School, where he joined the basketball team, and learned to play the saxophone. He formed a musical group with his brother and cousin, and performed around the city as well as at church.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:46 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer worked part time summer jobs to help support his family after his father's death in 1964. He graduated as valedictorian of his class at Wilson High School in Florence, South Carolina, and was awarded a full scholarship to attend Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia. He also received tremendous support from his family and the congregation at Central Baptist Church in Florence. At Clark College, Spencer was mentored by professors like Edward F. Sweat and Paul McGirt, as well as the school president Vivian Wilson Henderson, who encouraged him to apply to Ivy League law programs. Expanding upon his high school African American history lessons, Spencer was influenced by the Black Power Movement, which spurred his participation in civil rights demonstrations. In 1968, he met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Benjamin Mays on the campus of Morehouse College in Atlanta. The following summer, he interned for Marian Wright Edelman at the Washington Research Project in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:23 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer attended Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he joined the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He was also mentored by Professor James A. Hefner and university president Vivian Wilson Henderson. After graduating in 1971, Spencer was

admitted to Harvard Law School. There, he was taught by Charles Alan Wright and Paul A. Freund. In his first year, he developed a strict schedule for studying and class preparation. During the summers, Spencer worked as a counselor, and interned at the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, Inc. After graduation, he passed the bar exam, and fulfilled his military service obligation in the Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG). During his six year tenure, he was sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, which was followed by a stint in Wurzburg, Germany. Returning in 1978, he worked as an assistant United States attorney in Washington, D.C., where he was the first African American assigned to the major crime division.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:29 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1983, where he was hired as an assistant attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. During this period, he also attended Howard University School of Divinity, where he studied the New Testament in Greek under Professor Cain Hope Felder. In 1985, he was appointed federal judge for the United States District Court in the Eastern District of Virginia by President Ronald Wilson Reagan, after receiving a nomination from Virginia Senator John Warner. As the district's first African American federal judge, Spencer played an integral role in implementing diverse hiring practices in Richmond government. Two years after his promotion to chief judge in 2004, he presided over the major patent case, NTP, Inc. v. Research in Motion, Ltd., who was the developer of the Blackberry phone. Spencer was tasked with determining the damages awarded to NTP, Inc. after the jury ruled in their favor. Ultimately, the case was settled out of court.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:00 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer became a senior judge with the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in 2014, and progressively reduced his case load until retirement. Spencer shares his judicial philosophy as well as his views on police brutality and discriminatory drug sentencing, specifically highlighting the case of Kemba Smith who was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison because of her involvement in her boyfriend's drug dealing activities. He also reflects upon his life, and talks about his family, including his three children: Kristi Spencer Lee, A. Benjamin Spencer and Stephen Spencer. Spencer concludes this part of the interview by describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable James R. Spencer, Section A2016\_132\_001\_007, TRT: 7:04:17 ?

The Honorable James R. Spencer narrates his photographs.