

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James W. Compton

PERSON

Compton, James, 1938-

**Alternative Names:** James W. Compton;

**Life Dates:** April 7, 1938-

**Place of Birth:** Aurora, Illinois, USA

**Residence:** Chicago, IL

**Occupations:** Nonprofit Chief Executive

## Biographical Note

Civic leader James Compton was born on April 7, 1938, in Aurora, Illinois. After finishing high school, he went on to Morehouse College where he worked for the legendary educator Dr. Benjamin Mays, then president of the college. Mays inspired young Compton's interest in civil rights and equality and played a major role in Compton's decision to major in political science. While at Morehouse, Compton broadened his horizons by spending a summer in Soviet block countries and later, with the prestigious Merrill Fellowship, studying at the University of Grenoble in France. There, he received a diploma in French literature before graduating from Morehouse in 1961.

After college, Compton worked in the Chicago public school system for a number of years before beginning his long career with the Chicago Urban League. In 1965, Compton started as a counselor and employment representative for the Urban League's job training program. A few years later, he moved to upstate New York to run the Urban League's office in Binghamton before returning to Chicago in 1972 as the Executive Director of the Chicago Urban League. Though the Urban League was operating under a huge deficit, Compton was able to garner tremendous community support, turning the organization around in a relatively short period of time. In 1978, Compton became President and CEO of the League's Board of Directors. Under his guidance, the Chicago Urban League was restructured to better provide direct care, advocacy, and research in the areas of community empowerment, education, employment, and social services. Compton has been especially active regarding the issues of education, employment, and voter registration, and with his leadership, the League in 1975, became the first non-governmental agency authorized by the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners to register voters. Additionally, Compton is recognized as an expert in the area of community empowerment. He is consistently

called upon to speak on everything from racial profiling to the demise of public housing. Compton is also President and CEO of the Chicago Urban League Development Corporation, an independent, not-for-profit organization created in 1983 to engage in economic development activities.

Compton sits on several boards and committees including: Ariel Mutual Funds, ComEd, the Field Museum of Natural History and the Northwestern University Board of Community Associates. He has also been honored with numerous awards and an honorary doctorate degree.

## Related Entries

**Morehouse College** [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

**B.A.**

**University of Grenoble** [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

**Morehouse College** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

**Assistant to Dr. Benjamin Mays**

**Chicago Public Schools** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

**Broome County Urban League** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

**Chicago Urban League** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

**President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO)**

**Chicago Urban League** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1965 to ?]

**Employment Representative**

**Chicago Urban League** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1972 to ?]

**Executive Director**

[MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

**Ariel Capital Management** [MEMBEROF]

[from 1985 to ?]

**Director**

**IndeCorp** [MEMBEROF]

[from 1985 to ?]

**Director**

**Unicom Corporation** [MEMBEROF]  
[from 1989 to 2000]

**Director**