

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable George N. Leighton

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Leighton, George N., 1912-2018   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | May 30, 2002   |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2002   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 8 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:07:02).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Federal district court judge The Honorable George N. Leighton (1912 - 2018 ) served as a Federal judge for over twenty years. Leighton is a leader in government groups such as the Character and Fitness Committee for the First Appellate District of Illinois and the Illinois Advisory Committee for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Leighton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 30, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2002_042  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge George Leighton was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts on October 22, 1912. His parents, Anna Silva Garcia and Antonio Neves Leitao, were from Cape Verde. Because of his family's need for money, Leighton was unable to attend high school. However, he spent his free time reading and won a \$200 scholarship to college in an essay contest. Leighton gained conditional admittance to Howard University in 1936 and graduated magna cum laude four years later, going on to

study at Harvard Law School.

Drafted into military service in 1940, Leighton became a Captain of Infantry before being relieved of active duty in 1945. He returned to his Harvard education, earned an L.L.B. in 1946, and passed the Illinois bar exam the following year. Leighton served as a member and chairman of the Legal Redress Committee of the Chicago NAACP. Between 1947 and 1952, Leighton also served as president of the Third Ward Regular Democratic Organization. Appointed Assistant Attorney General of Illinois in 1949, Leighton served two years in this post. In 1951, he co-founded one of the largest predominately African American law firms in the country and the next year, he served as Chicago Branch NAACP president. Leighton was elected a Cook County Circuit Court judge in 1964 and began teaching at the John Marshall Law School the next year. In 1969, Leighton was assigned to sit as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals in Illinois' First District. After six years, President Gerald Ford nominated Leighton to serve as a U.S. District Court judge. He was confirmed February 2, 1976 and began serving office one month later.

Leighton retired from the U.S. District Court at the age of 75 but began serving of counsel to Earl L. Neal & Associates. Leighton has played a leadership role in governmental groups, serving as chairman of the Character and Fitness Committee for the First Appellate District of Illinois and chairman of the Illinois Advisory Committee for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Leighton has also participated in civic groups, serving on the board of directors of the United Church of Christ and Grant Hospital. He and his late wife, Virginia Berry Quivers, have two adult daughters: Virginia Anne and Barbara Elaine.

Leighton passed away on June 6, 2018.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 30, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal district court judge The Honorable George N. Leighton (1912 - 2018 ) served as a Federal judge for over twenty years. Leighton is a leader in government groups such as the Character and Fitness Committee for the First Appellate District of Illinois and the Illinois Advisory Committee for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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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:

Leighton, George N., 1912-2018

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Leighton, George N., 1912-2018--Interviews

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African American judges--Interviews

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African American civic leaders--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 George N. Leighton, May 30, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 George N. Leighton,  
Section A2002\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:29 2002/05/30

George Leighton reflects on his family background. His mother, Anna Silva Garcia was born on the island of Brava in the Cape Verde Archipelago in an upper class family that made a living transporting captured Africans to South America, North American and the Caribbean Islands. Leighton's father, Antonio Neves Leitao, also from Brava, was one of seven children born to a white Portuguese man and an Angolan woman in 1875. George Leighton was born on October 22, 1922 in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a popular destination for Cape Verdean immigrants. Though his father lacked formal education, Leighton noted that his father was an avid reader who influenced Leighton's love for learning at an early age. Leighton talks about the history of Cape Verde and the culture of its people. He describes the self-isolating nature of the Cape Verdean culture and explains his lack of interaction with African Americans during his childhood African American judges--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton,

Section A2002\_042\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:29 2002/05/30

George Leighton shares memories of his childhood and teen years in the Cape Verdean community of New Bedford, Massachusetts. The Leighton family labored in cranberry bogs and strawberry patches for most of the year. When he was not working with his family, Leighton periodically attended Roosevelt Junior High School until he reached the age of sixteen, at which time he dropped out of school to work on an oil tanker. For several years, Leighton held various jobs before deciding to pursue his intellectual interests. After learning about the history of Howard University, Leighton applied for admission. Though he lacked a high school education, the registrar from Howard, F.D. Wilkinson granted Leighton conditional acceptance. Leighton shares his classroom experiences at Howard University, where he learned African American History from noted historian, William Leo Hansberry. After excelling academically, Leighton earned several academic awards including a scholarship to attend the Harvard Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:23 2002/05/30

George Leighton reflects on his life as a Harvard Law student and the impact of World War II on his studies and his family. Prior to graduation from Howard University in 1940, Leighton met with William H. Hastie, Dean of the Howard Law School, to express interest in attending law school at Harvard. Unbeknownst to Leighton, Hastie informed former Harvard Law classmate James McCauley Landis, then-dean of the Harvard Law School, of Leighton's academic qualifications and interest in Harvard Law School. After earning a place in the 1940 incoming class and a scholarship, Leighton successfully completed his first year. The start of World War II abruptly halted Leighton's studies; he was called into active duty in 1942 and joined the 93rd Infantry Division of the United States Army at Fort Huachuca in Tucson, Arizona. In 1945, Leighton was granted release from active duty and returned to Harvard Law School to complete his studies.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:26 2002/05/30

George Leighton talks about other African Americans in his class at Harvard Law School, including Julian and John Wilkins. After being admitted to the bar in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Leighton moved to Chicago, Illinois to begin his legal career. In Chicago, Leighton came under the tutelage of prominent African American attorneys such as Earl B. Dickerson and in 1946, Leighton joined the law firm of Temple and Wimbish where he began his career as a defense attorney. After being invited by Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to join a meeting of prominent African American lawyers including William H. Hastie and Thurgood Marshall, Leighton decided to join the NAACP in Chicago. During his early career, Leighton argued several cases before the United States Supreme Court including *Townsend v. Sain*, *Napue v. Illinois*, and *Ciucci v. Illinois*.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:23 2002/05/30

George Leighton talks about his involvement in the Harvey E. Clark housing discrimination case that led to race riots in Cicero, Illinois in 1951. In the wake of the Clark case, Leighton was charged with inciting a riot and was represented in court by Thurgood Marshall; the indictment was later dismissed. Leighton also discusses the relationship between Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and prominent African American lawyers such as William L. Dawson and C.C. Wimbish. In 1949, Leighton was appointed by Daley to the patronage position of Assistant Illinois Attorney General by Daley without applying for the position. Leighton resigned to return to private practice, but he was criticized for doing so because the promotion had been initiated by Congressman William L. Dawson. Leighton also reflects on the role of lawyers in the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), changes among African American lawyers through the years, and lessons learned early in his career as a defense attorney.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:22 2002/05/30

George Leighton discusses significant cases in which he was involved and his career as a judge. He describes how he came to be involved in one of his most memorable cases, that of notorious mob leader, Sam Giancana who brought suit against J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Investigations Bureau (FBI) in 1963. By the conclusion of the case in 1964, FBI agent, Marlin Johnson had been charged with contempt and Giancana won his freedom from unconstitutional surveillance. Later, Leighton, along with James Benton Parsons, was considered by President John Fitzgerald Kennedy to become the first African American appointed as a United States District Court judge. After being passed over for the position, Leighton was appointed as a Cook County Circuit Court judge in 1964 where he presided over cases in the Criminal, Law-Jury, and Chancery divisions. In 1969, Leighton accepted an opportunity to serve as a justice of the Illinois Appellate Court, becoming the first African American to hold the position.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:04 2002/05/30

George Leighton reflects on memorable cases he has been involved with as an attorney and as a judge. In 1960, he was retained by the family of Robert Lee Goldsby to challenge the death penalty he was given after being unjustly charged with the murder of a white man in Mississippi in the case of Goldsby v. State. Leighton sought to prove that African Americans had been systematically excluded from participating on juries. During the case, Leighton ran into a problem when he was informed that subpoenas would not be served to the African American witnesses he had called to testify. Despite the lack of witnesses, he was able to stay Goldsby's execution. Leighton also talks about the increase in women as federal judges, his experiences as a judge, disappointments on the bench, and why he is a good lawyer.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George N. Leighton, Section A2002\_042\_001\_008, TRT: 0:31:26 2002/05/30

George Leighton discusses memorable cases over which

he presided as a judge, including the 1985 case against Puerto Rican nationalist group, Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) who planned to plant bombs in the United States to secure the liberation of Puerto Rico. Although Leighton ruled that the FBI unconstitutionally planted cameras in the apartment of the FALN members, his decision was later overturned. Leighton discusses contemporary legal issues the case against O.J. Simpson in 1994 and his thoughts on U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. He also talks about courtroom media, DNA testing, his legacy, and his parents.