

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ed Dwight

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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>	Dwight, Edward, Jr., 1933-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 19, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:30:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Sculptor and test pilot Ed Dwight (1933 - ) was the first African American trained as an astronaut. As a sculptor, he was commissioned to develop major monuments. Ed Dwight Studios in Denver was one of the largest privately owned production and marketing facilities in the western United States. Dwight was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 19, 2002, in Denver, Colorado. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_114
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ed Dwight, the first African American to be trained as an astronaut and the sculptor of major monuments, was born on the outskirts of Kansas City, Kansas in 1933. His father, Ed Dwight, Sr., played second base for the Kansas City Monarchs in baseball's Negro League. Child rearing fell primarily on Ed's Catholic mother, Georgia Baker Dwight, who convinced her son that he could accomplish almost anything. Dwight grew up as an avid reader and a talented artist who was mechanically gifted and enjoyed working with his hands.

Dwight joined the United States Air Force in 1953, pursuing his dream of flying jet aircraft. He became a USAF test pilot, and in 1961 earned a degree in Aeronautical Engineering from Arizona State University. At the suggestion of the National Urban League's Whitney M. Young, Jr., the Kennedy administration chose Captain Ed Dwight as the first Negro astronaut trainee in 1962. Catapulted to instant fame, he was featured on the cover of *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Sepia* and in news magazines around the world.

Facing severe discrimination from other astronauts, Dwight persevered until President Kennedy's death, when government officials created a threatening atmosphere. He resigned in 1966, never having gone into space. Dwight's talents then led him to work as an engineer, in real estate, and for IBM. In the mid 1970s, he turned to art and studied at the University of Denver, learning to operate the university's metal casting foundry. He received a Masters of Fine Arts in 1977 and gained a reputation as a sculptor. Ed Dwight Studios in Denver is now one of the largest privately owned production and marketing facilities in the western United States. His engineering background helps him face the problems of creating monumental sculpture and his well-stocked library of African American history and culture informs his work. Dwight is recognized as the innovator of the negative space technique.

Dwight has sculpted great works of celebratory African American art, including International Monuments to the

Underground Railroad in Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario; a Dr. Martin Luther King Memorial in Denver's City Park; a bust of George Washington Williams in the Ohio State Capitol in Columbus, Ohio; the Black Patriots Memorial on the mall in Washington, D.C.; the South Carolina Black History Memorial in Columbia, South Carolina; and the Alex Haley-Kunta Kinte Memorial in Annapolis, Maryland. The Quincy Jones Sculpture Park in Chicago brings his total major works to 35, some of which are on permanent display at the Smithsonian Institute.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ed Dwight was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 19, 2002, in Denver, Colorado, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Sculptor and test pilot Ed Dwight (1933 - ) was the first African American trained as an astronaut. As a sculptor, he was commissioned to develop major monuments. Ed Dwight Studios in Denver was one of the largest privately owned production and marketing facilities in the western United States.

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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:

Dwight, Edward, Jr., 1933-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Dwight, Edward, Jr., 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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United States. Air Force.

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## Occupations:

Sculptor

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Test Pilot

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|MilitaryMakers

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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 Ed Dwight, June 19, 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 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 Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Ed Dwight narrates his photographs and describes his mother's family background. Georgia Baker was born into a bi-racial Catholic family in Iowa in 1909. She attended Catholic school through her childhood, and was enrolled in Cathedral College in Sioux City, Iowa for two and a half years. Though she aspired to become a writer, she married Ed Dwight, Sr. in 1931. Baker was the first of her ten siblings to marry an African American. Georgia Baker and Ed Dwight, Sr. settled on Dwight's family farm in Kansas City, Kansas immediately after they married. A quiet and pious woman, Baker had some difficulty adjusting to farm life. She gave birth to eight children. However, only five of the children survived infancy. Ed Dwight, Jr. was born on September 9, 1933, and was the family's only male child to survive.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Ed Dwight describes his father's family background. Ed Dwight, Sr. was born to sharecroppers in Dalton, Georgia in 1903. The Dwight family later moved to Kansas City, Kansas and settled on a farm. Ed Dwight, Sr. dropped out of school around the age of fifteen, and was offered a professional baseball contract at the age of sixteen. As second baseman nicknamed "Little Grease", Dwight, Sr. played for several Negro League teams including the Gilkerson Union Giants and the Kansas City Monarchs. Upon ending his baseball career, Dwight, Sr. became a bottle washer for Kansas State University grain department's chemistry lab. He retired thirty years later as department head. Ed Dwight, Jr., or "June Bug", loved planes, reading, and art as a child. He was enamored with the nature on his family farm, his mother and grandmother's practice of witchcraft, and Adolf Hitler's Air Force, as well. Dwight, Jr. attended Catholic schools beginning in first grade, and integrated a Catholic high school in 1947.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

As a youth, Ed Dwight was bullied because of his small stature. He took up boxing to learn how to defend himself, and became a boxing champion. Dwight also delivered food from his family's restaurant in hot rods that he built, and ran a sign shop out of their home. After graduating from high school around 1951, Dwight sought work as a professional sign painter, but could not find a job in any of Kansas City, Kansas' white-owned sign businesses. He was offered a one year scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri, but declined it in order to pursue his dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. He enrolled in Donnelly College in Kansas City, Kansas to take the coursework required for flight school. In 1953, he entered flight school at Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado. Dwight did not meet the height requirement, and his attempt hide this fact resulted in his almost being discharged from flight school. Since the budding U.S. Air Force needed black pilots, Dwight's misconduct was overlooked.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Ed Dwight excelled in flight school, but despite his skill, a rookie mistake caused him to have a near-fatal plane crash. After flight school, Dwight excelled as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force. He flew many missions, and became a flight instructor in 1955. Dwight received his B.A. degree in aeronautical engineering from Arizona State University in the late 1950s. He also attended B-52 and C-135 school, Squadron Officer School, and trained to be an aircraft commander

and air traffic controller. The U.S. government kept record of Dwight's progress, and in 1961, invited him to train as the first African American astronaut. Despite warnings, he accepted the invitation, and faced tremendous discrimination as an astronaut trainee, and was subjected to an anthropological study aimed to demonstrate why he was incapable of being an astronaut. Dwight talks about what he describes as the supposed government conspiracy behind his selection as an astronaut trainee.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Ed Dwight entered NASA's astronaut training program in 1962. Despite having President John F. Kennedy's support, government officials attempted to push Dwight out of the program. Pentagon officials tried to set him up with prostitutes; paid to have him assaulted; and interrogated him against his will. Ultimately, the assassination of President Kennedy led to the end of Dwight's career as an astronaut trainee. Less than a week after the assassination, Dwight received orders to exit NASA's astronaut training program and move to Germany. Dwight resisted in order to officially graduate from the astronaut training program. Afterwards, he was stationed at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, where he was harassed by the Ku Klux Klan. Government officials continued to conspire against Dwight, and went so far as to make him appear homosexual. On a test mission to California, Dwight married a woman who later blackmailed and attempted to murder him. This incident forced him to leave Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Ed Dwight moved to Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico in the mid-1960s. After witnessing a classmate die in a plane explosion, Dwight resigned from the U.S. Air Force. Although the Air Force tried to force him to attend graduate school, and threatened to discharge him with bad conduct due to his refusal to attend Dwight was ultimately discharged with good conduct in 1966. He moved to Denver, Colorado, where tested Learjets. After he was forced to quit by government officials, Dwight petitioned the U.S. Government for records related to his military service under the Freedom of Information Act. The falsified intelligence records contained information that ensured Dwight would never fly or work for the government again. Dwight received his M.F.A. degree in sculpture from the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado in 1977. In addition to working as a professional artist, Dwight negotiated book and movie deals, and built relationships with astronauts like HistoryMaker Guion Bluford and Frederick Gregory.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

After being discharged from the U.S. Air Force in 1966, Ed Dwight settled in Denver, Colorado, where he worked as a salesman for IBM. At IBM, Dwight dressed in colorful clothes with unique patterns. Given his sense of style, Dwight's boss commissioned him to decorate IBM's offices. He created a series of collages made from the corporation's old publications, which were a hit with his bosses. Dwight painted and taught himself to sculpt, but did not turn to art full-time for fear of being branded homosexual. In 1975, Dwight enrolled in an M.F.A. sculpting program at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado. Dwight describes the challenges he faced as a sculptor, including a lack of support from the black community and having his artwork stolen.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

After a foundry refused to cast his "nigger art," Dwight was motivated to open his own foundry. He enrolled in graduate school at the University of Denver, as it was the only art school nearby that had a foundry on-site. Dwight graduated

with his M.F.A. degree in sculpting in 1977. Dwight had difficulty finding his identity as an artist, as well financial backing. Nevertheless, his usage of the “negative space” technique in the late 1970s catapulted his sculptures to commercial success. Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis became Dwight’s favorite subject to sculpt. He was commissioned to sculpt the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to be his legacy piece. However, the project ran out of funding. Dwight talks about the controversy surrounding the African American History Monument in Charleston, South Carolina, as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Ed Dwight, Section A2002\_114\_001\_009, TRT: 0:30:32 ?

Ed Dwight describes his creative process, which includes him embodying the persona of the subject he is sculpting. By pretending he is not the creator, Dwight is able to assess and critique his work in a generally unbiased manner. Dwight did not develop his black identity until well into his adult life when he began his art career. “Blackness” is heavily emphasized in his work, and he is often criticized by members of the black community about this. Dwight talks about blacks’ failure to create positive cultural representations of themselves with art, psychological racism, and how he would like to be remembered. Dwight shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community and African American youth, as well.