

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James D. Montgomery

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Montgomery, James D., 1932-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery,
Dates:	February 25, 2003, July 16, 2002 and June 27, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002 and 2003
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:38:20).
Abstract:	Civil rights lawyer James D. Montgomery (1932 -) founded James D. Montgomery and Associates and was appointed corporation counsel for the City of Chicago under Mayor Harold Washington. In 2000, Montgomery became a managing partner in the law firm of Cochran, Cherry, Givens, Smith and Montgomery. Montgomery was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 25, 2003, July 16, 2002 and June 27, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_163
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

James Douglas Montgomery was born on February 17, 1932 in Louise, Mississippi to Mildred and James Montgomery. A skilled litigator, Montgomery is renowned for his handling of civil rights cases, as well as criminal, personal injury and medical malpractice cases.

In 1949, Montgomery graduated from Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago,

Illinois. After receiving a B.A. from the University of Illinois in Champaign at Urbana, he enrolled in the university's College of Law and earned a J.D. in 1956. Montgomery went to work at the law firm of Rogers, Stayhorn and Harth, becoming a U.S. prosecutor in 1958. Going into private practice, he became a partner in different law firms and founded James D. Montgomery and Associates, Ltd. In the 1960s, his clients included the Blackstone Rangers and the Black Panthers. In 1983, Montgomery made history when he became the corporation counsel for the City of Chicago under Mayor Harold Washington. He was the first and only African American to hold this position. In 2000, Montgomery became a managing partner in the law firm of Cochran, Cherry, Givens, Smith and Montgomery and together with the well-known trial attorney Johnnie L. Cochran, they have successfully handled several high profile cases.

Montgomery has perfected his craft, lecturing throughout the country on trial and litigation techniques. He has spoken before for the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, DePaul University, the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education, Harvard Law School and the University of Chicago. Montgomery has been honored with the Edward H. Wright Award, the Earl Burrus Dickerson Award and the National Bar Association's Hall of Fame Award. In 1999, the Illinois Academy of Lawyers inducted Montgomery as a laureate in the academy, describing him as a man who personifies the "greatness of the legal profession." Montgomery is married to Pauline Montgomery and has six adult children: Linda, James, Michelle, Lisa, Jewel and Jilian. The three oldest are members of the Illinois Bar.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James D. Montgomery was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 25, 2003, July 16, 2002 and June 27, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer James D. Montgomery (1932 -) founded James D. Montgomery and Associates and was appointed corporation counsel for the City of Chicago under Mayor Harold Washington. In 2000, Montgomery became a managing partner in the law firm of Cochran, Cherry, Givens, Smith and Montgomery.

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®.

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.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Montgomery, James D., 1932-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Montgomery, James D., 1932---Interviews

Organizations:

Occupations:

Civil Rights Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 James D. Montgomery, February 25, 2003, July 16, 2002 and June 27, 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).

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.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_001_001, TRT: 0:28:31 2002/06/27

James D. Montgomery was born on February 17, 1932 to Mildred Montgomery and James Livingston Montgomery. Mildred Montgomery was born on December 3, 1907 and was raised by her Aunt Mazie and Uncle Jim in Yazoo, Mississippi. One of her step-sisters raised HistoryMaker William Cousins, Jr. James Livingston Montgomery was born in November of 1907 to Ella and Frank Montgomery. James D. Montgomery was raised on a plantation in Yazoo, Mississippi and he attended Humphreys County Elementary School. Around 1938, Montgomery's father had to flee Mississippi for Chicago, Illinois after being accused of stealing money. He was hired as a butcher at White's Grocery at 55th and State St. and his wife joined him in Chicago, working at W.F. Hall Printing Company, as a seamstress and a homemaker. Around 1939, when he was seven, James D. Montgomery and his two brothers, Leo and Cleon, left Mississippi and joined their father and mother on the South Side of Chicago. Montgomery's father and brothers all struggled with alcoholism.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_001_002, TRT: 0:30:05 2002/06/27

James D. Montgomery moved to Chicago, Illinois with his family at the age of seven in 1939. In Chicago, he and his brothers would routinely get bullied because of their Mississippi accents. At the age of ten, Montgomery was hired as a paperboy for the Chicago Herald-American. He also worked as a butcher in grocery stores from the age of fifteen through college. Montgomery attended Oakland Elementary School, Fuller Elementary School, and

Wendell Phillips High School, where he graduated in 1949. Montgomery was driven to succeed in school due to competition with his brothers, Leo and Cleon. Montgomery enrolled at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier in Chicago in 1949, where he was told by an examiner named Dr. Bild that he was unfit to study law. Montgomery obtained his B.A degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1953 and enrolled in their College of Law, where he was the first black student admitted. At the time of his admission, the law school dean was Albert J. Harno.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_001_003, TRT: 0:15:23 2002/06/27

James D. Montgomery graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Law in 1956. He quickly gained a reputation for not accepting racist remarks from the attending judges. He comments upon watching a respected older lawyer make a clown of himself in order to appease a judge. Montgomery reflects upon his childhood career aspirations, he wanted to be a “social engineer” lawyer like Thurgood Marshall. He also comments on the lack of career options he saw available for African Americans. Some of his mentors included John Greene and John Griffin at the Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago, Illinois and his speech professor at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier, Dr. Wayne Thompson.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_002_004, TRT: 0:29:36 2002/07/16

James D. Montgomery narrates his photographs and talks about the environment for black lawyers in Chicago, Illinois after he obtained his J.D. degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Law in 1956. He started his career at the law firm of Rogers, Rogers, Strayhorn and Harth, which consisted of HistoryMaker John Rogers, Sr.; HistoryMaker Jewel Lafontant-MANkarious; HistoryMaker Earl Strayhorn; and Raymond Harth. At the time, the other major black law firms in Chicago, Illinois were Moore, Ming and Leighton, where HistoryMaker George N. Leighton was a partner, and Washington, Durham, Kennon, Bryant and Hunter. Montgomery describes the scarcity of office space,

jobs, and cases for black lawyers in the Chicago Loop. At that time, the black law offices were located at 64 West Randolph Street, 188 West Randolph Street, and 100 North LaSalle, where Montgomery later practiced with Sidney Jones, Cecil Partee, and Otis Nicholson.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_002_005, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/07/16

James D. Montgomery was hired by the law firm of Rogers, Rogers, Strayhorn and Harth in 1956 where he began practicing criminal law. There, he was mentored by HistoryMaker John Rogers, Sr.; HistoryMaker Earl Strayhorn; and Raymond Harth. In 1958, HistoryMaker Jewel Lafontant-MANKarious recommended him for a position as a prosecutor in the office of United States Attorney Robert Tieken. Two other African Americans worked in the office including Judge James Benton Parsons. Montgomery left the U.S. Attorney's Office in 1960 and founded the firm of Montgomery and Associates. In 1961, Montgomery and Paul Zuber sued the Chicago Board of Education to end de facto segregation and to provide benefits to full time substitute teachers. Montgomery became a partner in Montgomery, Holt, and Bolden in 1964 and Newman, Kipnis, and Montgomery in 1966, where he worked on cases for the Black Panthers and Blackstone Rangers. Montgomery also describes his involvement with the Cook County Bar Association in the 1950s and 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_002_006, TRT: 0:31:09 2002/07/16

James D. Montgomery describes his organizational involvement, civil rights activism, and high profile cases for the Blackstone Rangers and Black Panthers. In 1974 and 1975, Montgomery was president of the Cook County Bar Association, a group of black lawyers that started in 1914 as an alternative to the Chicago Bar Association, which did not allow African Americans to join until 1947. In 1975, he chaired the national convention for the National Bar Association and was offered the chance to become president of that organization, but declined. In the 1960s, Montgomery defended civil rights activists in Chicago, Illinois like HistoryMaker Lu Palmer, Al Raby,

and HistoryMaker Dick Gregory. He was also active fighting the “Silent Six” black aldermen in Chicago with HistoryMaker Bennett Johnson. In the late 1960s, Montgomery started defending members of the Blackstone Rangers and Black Panthers in criminal cases, including the case of Fred Hampton’s murder and a gun possession case for HistoryMaker Bobby Rush.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_002_007, TRT: 0:21:17 2002/07/16

James D. Montgomery continues his story about the arrest and trial of HistoryMaker Bobby Rush. Rush had participated in a shootout in Robbins, Illinois that had been set up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to pit Black Panthers against other Black Panthers. After Rush and Fred Hampton realized that they had been set up, Rush attempted to get a ride back to Chicago, Illinois and flashed his gun to a driver. The driver took Rush to the Harvey Police Department, where he was arrested and charged with possession of a weapon. Montgomery defended Rush in court and lost the case.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_003_008, TRT: 0:30:01 2003/02/25

James D. Montgomery describes defending the Blackstone Rangers (also known as the Black P. Stone Nation) and the Black Panthers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1971, he defended the Blackstone Rangers for the murder of Chicago police officer James Alfano. He also successfully defended seventeen of their Main 21 leadership in cases of mismanaging the government grants to them for start job training programs. Many of the cases Montgomery tried during this time were the results of FBI operations within the Blackstone Rangers and Black Panthers. Montgomery remembers working with the People’s Law Office and the American Civil Liberties Union on these cases. As a member of the Cook County Bar Association, Montgomery argued for the appointment of a black federal judge in Chicago, Illinois. Montgomery describes how he prepares for a case and his approach to practicing criminal law.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section

A2002_163_003_009, TRT: 0:31:19 2003/02/25

James D. Montgomery describes his criminal and civil cases of the 1970s. In the late 1970s, he defended Amtrak and Conrail in civil defense cases as well as a man who was accused of taking a stolen tractor across state lines. In 1976 and 1977, Montgomery tried the civil case of Hampton v. Hanrahan, regarding the murder of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. In 1979, he started working on personal injury cases, which was more profitable than criminal law. Montgomery was a partner at the law firm of Montgomery and Holland from 1977 until 1980. In 1983, he was appointed as the first black corporation counsel for the City of Chicago by newly elected Mayor Harold Washington. Montgomery had previously met Washington in the 1950s and was vice chairman of The Committee to Elect a Black Mayor in the late 1970s. As corporation counsel, Montgomery advised Washington during the “Council Wars” of his first term.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section A2002_163_003_010, TRT: 0:31:15 2003/02/25

James D. Montgomery describes his tenure as Corporation Counsel of the City of Chicago from 1983 until 1986. Montgomery was responsible for reforming hiring practices in Chicago’s Department of Law and creating a Hiring Committee to combat the City’s practice of patronage. The Hiring Committee played an active role in promoting affirmative action hiring in the Department of Law. As Corporation Counsel, Montgomery defended Mayor Harold Washington against ethics lawsuits, including allegations of political hiring and firing under the Shakman decree. Montgomery remembers political battles against aldermen Edward Vrdolyak and Edward Burke during Washington’s first term as mayor. In 1985, the voting districts were redrawn in Chicago, removing the council gridlock of Washington’s first term. Montgomery oversaw the development of Harold Washington’s affirmative action ordinance for municipal contracts in 1985. Montgomery was also part of the committee to implement the “people mover” at O’Hare International Airport.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section

A2002_163_003_011, TRT: 0:31:14 2003/02/25

James D. Montgomery resigned from his position as Corporation Counsel for the City of Chicago in 1986 to prepare for a legal case in Las Vegas, Nevada. He reflects on the legal and political controversies that occurred under Mayor Harold Washington, especially with the twenty nine aldermen led by Edward Vrdolyak who opposed Mayor Washington. In 1985, Montgomery was on the committee to award a contract to build a people mover in O'Hare International Airport and made the controversial recommendation to give the contract to the French company Matra, a decision which also contributed to Montgomery's resignation. Montgomery reflects upon the budgetary constriction of working for the City of Chicago and on how he reformed the Corporation Counsel's Office to include more women and minorities during his tenure. After resigning in 1986, Montgomery returned to James D. Montgomery and Associates and learned of the existence of an FBI mole who exposed several black aldermen and members of Washington's administration.

Video Oral History Interview with James D. Montgomery, Section
A2002_163_003_012, TRT: 0:28:30 2003/02/25

James D. Montgomery reflects on the legacy of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington and on his own career as Corporation Counsel as well. Montgomery remembers Washington as politician who was warm to people, fought corruption within the city government, and treated all of its wards equally. He reflects upon hearing the news of Washington's death and on the election of Mayor and HistoryMaker Eugene Sawyer. After working as a civil defense lawyer at James D. Montgomery and Associates from 1986 until 2001, Montgomery joined Johnnie Cochran at the firm of Cochran, Cherry, Givens, Smith and Montgomery. His first major case with the firm was the trial for the murder of LaTanya Haggerty by a Chicago police officer in June 1999, which resulted in one of the largest settlements in the history of the State of Illinois. Montgomery reflects upon his plans for future cases, his success as a litigator, his advice for young African American lawyers, and his legacy.