

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Leftwich

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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>	Leftwich, Willie, 1937-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 14, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:29:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer Willie Leftwich (1937 - ) was a former engineer on government aerospace projects for NASA, and served as a patent attorney for the Federal Aviation Administration. He later became a founding partner of the commercial law firm Hudson Leftwich & Davenport in 1970, and helped found the firm of Leftwich & Douglas. Leftwich was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 14, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_045
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former engineer and lawyer Willie L. Leftwich was born on June 28, 1937, in Washington, D.C., to Maude Leftwich, a government employee, and Willie L. Leftwich, a railroad worker. He earned a B.S. in electrical engineering from Howard University and his J.D. and LL.D. from George Washington University.

Early in his career, Leftwich used his skills as an engineer in several high-profile

government aerospace projects. From 1960 to 1963, Leftwich worked as a research aeronautical instrumentation engineer for NASA, helping to design a gantry-timing device for the Blue Scout Rocket and helping develop missile trajectory systems. He worked from 1963 to 1968 with the Naval Air Systems Command as a research electro-optical engineer, developing air-to-surface sensors for Navy and Marine Corps aircraft.

After 1968, Leftwich began his legal career. He started as a patent attorney for the Federal Aviation Administration before spending a year as vice president and general counsel for Technical Media Systems. While working as a professor at both the University of the District of Columbia and George Washington University School of Law, Leftwich became a founding partner in Hudson Leftwich & Davenport, a commercial law firm that represented corporations in litigation for construction, real estate, employment discrimination and public utility cases. In 1985, Leftwich became counsel and founding partner of Leftwich & Douglas, where he engaged in general commercial practice. Following his retirement from practice law in December 1996, Leftwich became a private investor.

Leftwich is a life member of the NAACP and the American Bar Association. He has served as director of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, the D.C. Redevelopment Land Agency and the Neighborhood Legal Services Program. He and his wife, Norma, have been married since 1978 and have an adult son, Curtis.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie Leftwich was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 14, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lawyer Willie Leftwich (1937 - ) was a former engineer on government aerospace projects for NASA, and served as a patent attorney for the Federal Aviation Administration. He later became a founding partner of the commercial law firm Hudson Leftwich & Davenport in 1970, and helped found the firm of Leftwich & Douglas.

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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:**

Leftwich, Willie, 1937-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Leftwich, Willie, 1937---Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

## **Occupations:**

Lawyer

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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 Willie Leftwich, March 14, 2003. 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 Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:25 2003/03/16

Willie Leftwich was born on June 28, 1937, in Washington, D.C., to Maude Leftwich and Willie L. Leftwich. Leftwich's paternal grandfather, James Edward Leftwich was born a slave in Bedford, Virginia in 1858 and worked as a brakeman for the railroad. His father grew up in Bloomfield, West Virginia, was a hobo during the Great Depression and attended Robert Terrell Law School but did not complete his degree. Leftwich's maternal great-grandfather was a former slave and well-digger, and his maternal grandfather worked as a bricklayer in Washington, D.C. His mother, a serious, tall woman, was born in Orange, Virginia and met his father at Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C. Leftwich lived with his grandmother during World War II until he was six years old and then returned to Washington, D.C. with his family. Leftwich shares childhood memories of hopping freight trains in West Virginia and meeting notable people like Ralph Bunche, Mary McLeod Bethune, and General Benjamin O. Davis in elementary school.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:50 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich talks about his education and early career. In 1949, Leftwich's father lost his job as a messenger for the F.B.I. after his name appeared on a list connecting him to Shiloh Baptist Church as part of an investigation by Joseph McCarthy. Leftwich describes his father's self-discipline and stoicism and his mother's entrepreneurship. He talks about past and present-day racism in Washington, D.C. and skin color discrimination within the black

community. He recalls that a teacher contested his I.Q. test results because she did not believe that a black child could score so highly. After graduating from Cordozo High School, Leftwich's father made him enroll at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Leftwich thought that the engineering professors overtaught, and he gravitated toward the economic theories of sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and political scientist Emmett Dorsey. After earning his B.S. degree in electrical engineering, Leftwich accepted his first job at NASA in Wallops Island, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:55 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich describes his career as an engineer in several high-profile government aerospace projects. From 1960 to 1963, Leftwich worked as a research aeronautical instrumentation engineer for NASA, helping to design a gantry-timing device for the Blue Scout Rocket and helping to develop missile trajectory systems. He worked from 1963 to 1968 with the Naval Air Systems Command as a research electro-optical engineer, developing air-to-surface sensors for Navy and Marine Corps aircraft. Leftwich then earned his J.D. and LL.D. degrees from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. where he enjoyed his courses on contracts and constitutional law. Leftwich comments on his political involvement, joining the Republican party, and his regard for President Richard Nixon. After 1968, Leftwich began his legal career. He started as a patent attorney for the Federal Aviation Administration before spending a year as vice president and general counsel for Technical Media Systems.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:55 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich describes his legal career. At Technical Media Systems, Leftwich's efficiency left him without a job a year later. While working as a professor at both the University of the District of Columbia and George Washington University School of Law, Leftwich became a founding partner in Hudson Leftwich & Davenport, a commercial law firm that represented corporations in litigation for construction, real estate, employment discrimination and public utility cases. His clientele was

primarily white, and he recalls a racist judge asking how a black man was representing white clients. Leftwich credits his law firm's success in the mid-1970s to treating the practice like a business, investing in profitable real estate, and taking advice from other black lawyers including HistoryMaker William Thaddeus Coleman, Jr. who helped his firm land a five year Northeast Railroad Corridor project. Leftwich also describes being a black Republican and his firm's famous discrimination case, *Kinsey v. Legg Mason, Inc.*

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:10 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich talks about handling two significant legal cases. In *Kinsey v. Legg, Mason & Co.*, Leftwich's firm represented Edward Kinsey who filed a discrimination suit against the brokerage firm Legg, Mason & Co. In preparation, Leftwich learned about the stock market, took a NEDA course, and prepared his witnesses months in advance. Despite the racist federal court system, Leftwich won the case which helped to integrate the stock exchange. Leftwich also worked on the *Love v. Pullman Company*, a case which argued that discrimination experienced by Pullman Porters on the railroad was illegal under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Leftwich prevailed despite Judge Alfred Arraj and lacking union support from C.L. Dellums, HistoryMaker and U.S. Congressman Ron Dellums' uncle. Leftwich also was counsel for a number of black mayors including Ernest "Dutch" Morial. After taking a break from practicing law for two years, Leftwich became counsel and founding partner of Leftwich & Douglas in 1985.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section  
A2003\_045\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:27 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich describes the success of his law firm, Leftwich and Douglas during the 1980s. His firm grew to eighty-five lawyers and they handled cases involving South Africa, utilities, and the Washington D.C. convention center construction. In January 1995, Leftwich was diagnosed with colon cancer, underwent chemotherapy, and retired from his law firm. In 1999, Leftwich was diagnosed with lung cancer and had surgery

to remove the benign growths. Leftwich then discovered his passion for making pottery. He reflects upon his careers as an engineer and a lawyer and how he learned to prioritize creativity since battling cancer. Leftwich talks about supporting his friend Clarence Thomas during his U.S. Supreme Court Justice hearings, but regrets his support and disagrees with his judicial philosophy and decisions on the U.S. Supreme Court. Leftwich believes that black people should be represented in every political party and describes his hope and concerns for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section A2003\_045\_001\_007, TRT: 0:16:45 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich talks about social problems facing the black community stemming from consumerism and lack of education. He believes that black leaders from the past, like Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be disappointed by the number of black youth incarcerated and using drugs. Leftwich also shares his view on black mayors who were unable to leave a successor behind. Although he is friends with HistoryMaker and former mayor of Washington D.C. Marion Barry, he comments on his inability to effectively control his personal life toward the end of his political career. Leftwich concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Leftwich, Section A2003\_045\_001\_008, TRT: 0:11:50 2003/03/14

Willie Leftwich narrates his photographs and talks about the importance of The HistoryMakers project.