

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Oliver W. Hill

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Hill, Oliver W., 1907-2007 |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, |
| Dates: | November 17, 2003 and November 18, 2003 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2003 |
| Physical Description: | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:51:38). |
| Abstract: | Civil rights lawyer Oliver W. Hill (1907 - 2007) took part in the historic Brown vs. the Board of Education Supreme Court case. Hill and his partners in Richmond, Virginia, tried many civil rights cases beginning in 1940; Hill also helped form the Old Dominion Bar Association in 1942, and was elected to the city council of Richmond in 1948. Hill was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 17, 2003 and November 18, 2003, in Richmond, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2003_270 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born Oliver White in Richmond, Virginia, on May 1, 1907, Oliver Hill's legal career helped end the doctrine of "separate but equal." Hill's father left the family when he was still a baby, and when his mother remarried, he took on her new last name. While attending Howard University, his uncle, a lawyer, died, and his aunt gave Hill all of his old legal books. After reading them, Hill decided to become a lawyer and win back the rights that had been denied to so many. He graduated

from Howard Law School in 1933, second in his class only to Thurgood Marshall.

Hill's early legal career did not foreshadow his later successes. At one point, he even gave up his legal practice and worked as a waiter. He returned to Richmond, however, and has been practicing law there since 1939. The following year, he won his first civil rights case when the city of Norfolk, Virginia, was ordered to pay black teachers the same as white teachers. In 1951, Hill heard that the students at R.R. Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, had walked out of their dilapidated school. The subsequent lawsuit, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* later became one of the five cases decided under *Brown v. the Board of Education*. During these years, Hill's home life was under constant threat. He did not allow his son to answer the telephone because so many threats were coming in, and a cross was burned on his lawn. He persevered, however, and today Hill and his partners have filed more civil rights cases in Virginia than were filed in any other Southern state.

Hill also broke the mold when he and several other Virginia lawyers formed the Old Dominion Bar Association in 1942, and when he successfully ran for the city council of Richmond in 1948, becoming the first African American to do so since Reconstruction.

Hill was the recipient of numerous awards over the decades, including being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom on August 11, 1999. Students at the University of Virginia also honored Hill when they founded the Oliver W. Hill Black Pre-Law Association. Hill retired from his legal practice in 1998, and today a bronze bust of him is visible at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.

Hill passed away on Sunday, August 5, 2007, at the age of 100.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Oliver W. Hill was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 17, 2003 and November 18, 2003, in Richmond, Virginia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer Oliver W. Hill (1907 - 2007) took part in the historic *Brown vs. the Board of Education* Supreme Court case. Hill and his partners in Richmond, Virginia, tried many civil rights cases beginning in 1940; Hill also helped form the Old Dominion Bar Association in 1942, and was elected to the city council of Richmond in 1948.

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:

Hill, Oliver W., 1907-2007

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Hill, Oliver W., 1907-2007--Interviews

African American lawyers--Virginia--Richmond--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Old Dominion Bar Association

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 Oliver W. Hill, November 17, 2003 and November 18, 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).

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 Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40 2003/11/17

Oliver W. Hill was born May 1, 1907 in Richmond, Virginia as Oliver White. His father abandoned him and his mother, Olivia Louis Hill, shortly after his birth. Hill changed his last name when his mother remarried in 1911, to Joseph C. Hill, whom she met at the Homestead Hotel in Hot Springs, Virginia, where they both worked. Hill was raised by his maternal great-grandmother in Richmond until he was six years old and then went to live with his mother and step-father in Roanoke, Virginia. There, they shared a home with the Pentecost family. When Virginia became a dry state in 1916, Hill's step-father had to close his pool hall and returned to Hot Springs to work at Homestead. Hill's mother joined him, and Hill was raised by the Pentecost family from the age of eight to sixteen years old. Hill began attending Gainsboro Elementary School in Roanoke when he was seven years old. He had a childhood infatuation with his primer teacher and a college-aged young woman who

practiced the piano at the Pentecost's house.

African American lawyers--Virginia--Richmond--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_001_002, TRT: 0:31:18 2003/11/17

Oliver W. Hill grew up in Roanoke, Virginia and attended Gainsboro Elementary School where he questioned how black history was presented in his textbooks. As a child, Hill read newspapers from across the U.S. that his guardian Mr. Pentecost collected from his job on the train. Hill also had a newspaper route and was in Oscar Micheaux's 1927 film, 'The House Behind the Cedars,' which was filmed near his house. During World War I, Hill moved Washington, D.C. to live with his parents; his stepfather worked at the Washington Naval Base. After having a disappointing Christmas, he moved back to Roanoke where he attended the Harrison School for seventh and eighth grade. Hill realized the extent of Roanoke's racial segregation when he observed the unequal athletic facilities of the segregated schools. He talks about Bert Wade, a black man in Roanoke who was rumored to be a Pinkerton agent. Hill moved back to D.C. to attend the well-regarded Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, and played on the school's football team.

Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_002_003, TRT: 0:30:30 2003/11/18

Oliver W. Hill attended Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., where he and Thurgood Marshall were protégés of Charles Hamilton Houston, who was developing a legal strategy to overturn legal segregation. Hill graduated from law school in 1933 and began practicing law in Roanoke, Virginia in 1934. He struggled to find clients and returned to D.C. to work as a waiter. In 1936, Marshall and Houston successfully argued *Murray v. Pearson* in Maryland in 1936, which integrated Maryland's graduate schools. In 1939, Hill moved to Richmond, Virginia to join the law practice of J. Byron Hopkins and J. Thomas Hewin, Jr. In 1939, Hill, Marshall and William H. Hastie lost *Alston v. School Board of City*

of Norfolk; the suit challenged the City of Norfolk's practice of maintaining unequal teacher pay scales. In 1940, Hill successfully convinced the Fourth Circuit appellate court to hold a special term to hear the case. Hill also describes the *New Negro Alliance v. Sanitary Grocery Co.* case of 1938.

Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_002_004, TRT: 0:30:10 2003/11/18

Oliver W. Hill, Thurgood Marshall and William H. Hastie won their appeal to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in *Alston v. School Board of the City of Norfolk, Virginia* (1940). The case ruled African American teachers had the right to equal pay and set a precedent for future civil rights cases. Before joining the U.S. Army in 1943, Hill formed Hill, Martin and Robinson law firm and became a cooperating attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (Ink Fund). Hastie and Marshall won *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946) in which the court ruled segregation on interstate transportation unconstitutional. Morgan refused to give up her seat on a bus a decade before Rosa Parks' famous protest and the case set a precedent for *Chance v. Lambeth* (1951) argued by Martin A. Martin. Hill describes *Corbin v. County School Board of Pulaski County* (1949), which was a precursor to *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (1952); both cases challenged discriminatory environments in Virginia schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_002_005, TRT: 0:30:10 2003/11/18

Oliver W. Hill remembers black parents filling a courtroom in support of school desegregation and talks about *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950). In 1951, Hill received a call from one of the students in Prince Edward County, Virginia who had gone on strike to protest school segregation. He agreed to take the students' case, which was filed as *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (1952) and was one of the cases which formed *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). The other cases were: *Belton v. Gebhart and Bulah v. Gebhart* (1952) in Delaware; *Bolling v. Sharpe* (1954) in Washington, D.C., which was led by James Nabrit, Jr.

after Charles Hamilton Houston's death; and Briggs v. Elliott (1952) in South Carolina, where Kenneth and Mamie Clark presented evidence from their Doll Test which would eventually impact the Brown v. Board decision. Following the victory in Brown v. Board, the South resisted desegregation. Hill mentions a school in Richmond, Virginia which was still segregated in the 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Oliver W. Hill, Section
A2003_270_002_006, TRT: 0:19:50 2003/11/18

Oliver W. Hill rejects the notion that the fight for civil rights began with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Hill explains that Dr. King could not have protested segregation if Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) had not been ruled unconstitutional. Hill also explains that African Americans have been fighting for their civil rights in the U.S., since they were first enslaved by Europeans and brought to this country in the 1600s. Hill talks about the importance of history and the importance of equality. He reflects upon his legacy, describes how he would like to be remembered and talks about his plans to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954).