Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Dobson, Vernon, 1923-2013

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson,

Dates: March 6, 2004 and November 15, 2003

Bulk Dates: 2003 and 2004

Physical Description: 9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:32:09).

Abstract: Civil rights activist and pastor Reverend Vernon Dobson (1923 - 2013 ) was the pastor of Union Baptist Church, an organizer for the March on Washington, and founded the Food Bank of Maryland. He, with others, fought racism as the “Goon Squad” in the 1960s, and co-founded Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development. Dobson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 6, 2004 and November 15, 2003, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2003_274

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Vernon Nathaniel Dobson was born October 29, 1923, into a committed, philosophical family headed by his father, the Reverend Spencer Dobson. Dobson attended grade school at Baltimore Public School 100 and at Booker T. Washington. He earned a diploma from Frederick Douglass High School and joined the United States Navy in 1940 where he played on intramural sports teams with future baseball Hall of Fame inductee Larry Doby. Qualified for Officers
Candidate School, Dobson would not be allowed to participate. He and his squadron were vindicated when their squadron was chosen to march at Truman’s inauguration.

From 1946 to 1949, Dobson attended Howard University where he came under the tutelage of Dr. Mordecai Johnson, Dr. Benjamin Mays, Reverend Howard Thurman, Ralph Bunche, William Leo Hansberry, Thurgood Marshall and others. He received his B.D. in 1949 and went on to Harvard University to pursue graduate studies. He joined the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance in 1953 and was twice named president.

Following his graduation, Dobson worked as a probation officer and as recreation manager at Knox Presbyterian Church. In 1963, Dobson was installed as pastor of Union Baptist Church in Baltimore where he organized buses for the March On Washington and founded the Food Bank of Maryland. He, with Parren Mitchell, Joseph Howard, Marion Bascomb, Harold Dobson and others founded the “Goon Squad” in 1967 to stop Baltimore’s racially segregated system. With Monsignor Clare and Rev. Wendell Phillips, Dobson founded Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development (BUILD) in 1968, which still serves as a powerful grass roots organization.

Dobson is a central figure to Union Baptist Church’s legacy of social change, which includes Reverend Harvey Johnson and the founding of the NAACP. In 2002, Union Baptist Church celebrated its 150th anniversary with presentations by Reverend Gardner Taylor, Dr. Richard McKinney, Dr. Cheryl Sanders, Freeman Hrabowski and others.

Rev. Dobson passed away on January 26, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson was conducted by Larry Crowe and Racine Tucker Hamilton on March 6, 2004 and November 15, 2003, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and pastor Reverend Vernon Dobson (1923 - 2013 ) was the pastor of Union Baptist Church, an organizer for the March on Washington, and founded the Food Bank of Maryland. He, with others, fought racism as the “Goon Squad” in the 1960s, and co-founded Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development.
Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

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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.

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

Dobson, Vernon, 1923-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)
Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Dobson, Vernon, 1923-2013--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist
Pastor

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|ReligionMakers

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 Reverend Vernon Dobson, March 6, 2004 and November 15, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue,
Reverend Vernon Dobson was born on October 29, 1923 in Baltimore, Maryland. His mother, Estelle Irene Cook-Dobson, was born in Cooksville, Maryland, likely around 1901. Dobson’s maternal grandfather, Moses Cook, had Native American and African American ancestry, and acquired a lot of property in Howard County, Maryland. Dobson’s father, Spencer Griffith Dobson, who was a pastor at Unity United Methodist Church in Pimlico, Maryland, was born around 1901. Dobson’s father’s family was from Eastern Shore, Maryland. Dobson’s paternal grandfather, Isaac Dobson was born during slavery and remembered its abuses. He shared with Dobson survival tactics he used when dealing with white people and, encouraged Dobson and his brother to pursue the ministry. Both of Dobson’s parents attended Morgan State University when it was a high school. Dobson talks about the work of local Civil Rights leader Harvey Johnson, and remembers the sights, sounds, and smells of
growing up in Baltimore.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson, Section A2003_274_001_002, TRT: 0:30:51 2003/11/15

Reverend Vernon Dobson attended Franklin Square School 100 elementary school, Booker T. Washington High School and Frederick Douglass Senior High School in Baltimore, Maryland. At Douglass, Dobson was taught by many graduates of renowned institutions who were often better qualified than their white counterparts because the state of Maryland, rather than allowing its university system to be integrated, instead paid for African Americans to attend any other college in the country. Dobson remembers his shop teacher who challenged him to excel academically in ninth grade. Dobson was on the school boxing team, but did not make the school’s basketball or football team. Dobson decries the persistent myths that continue to limit African Americans’ access to quality education and explains the different mindsets which accompanied the term “Negro” versus “colored.” He lists his five siblings and remembers playing baseball with legend Larry Doby during their training at the Naval Station Great Lakes in 1945.


Reverend Vernon Dobson witnessed an incident of police brutality and other injustices during his childhood, which later propelled him into the Civil Rights Movement. Dobson entered the U.S. Navy after graduating from high school and was stationed in Corpus Crispi, Texas. Dobson passed the test to enter Officer Training School but was denied admission because of his race. Despite President Harry S. Truman’s order to integrate the military, Dobson recalls entrenched racism during his time in the service. Upon leaving the Navy in 1946, Dobson entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. where he studied under William Leo Hansberry, E. Franklin Frazier, Benjamin Mays, Ralph Bunche and Howard Thurman. Dobson talks about Thurman’s belief in nonviolent resistance to racism, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson’s influence as president of Howard, the influence of African American churches on the Civil Rights Movement, and the persistence of racism
and colonialism throughout the world.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson, Section A2003_274_001_004, TRT: 0:30:20 2003/11/15

Reverend Vernon Dobson studied psychology, philosophy and religion at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and graduated in 1949. Dobson reflects upon the impact that Howard professors Mordecai Johnson and Howard Thurman had on the Civil Rights Movement and connects Thurman’s concept of reconciliation to a later talk given by Bishop Desmond Tutu. He recalls ministers such as Vernon Jones from Farmville, Virginia and HistoryMaker Reverend Marion Curtis Bascom from Baltimore, Maryland who were also leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Dobson fears that the African American community has lost the unity that religion brought during the Civil Rights Movement and explains the difference between megachurches and more traditional ones like Union Baptist Church. Dobson’s brother, Harold Dobson, was also a preacher and eventually became pastor of their father’s church, St. Mark’s Institutional Baptist Church in Baltimore. Dobson describes his brother’s profane preaching style.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson, Section A2003_274_001_005, TRT: 0:31:18 2003/11/15

Reverend Vernon Dobson’s first church assignment was a Baptist Church in Overlea, Maryland. After serving there for three years, he left to run Union Baptist Church’s community center in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1950, Dobson helped formed the Black United Front, a group of Baltimore activists that met on Saturdays. At the same time, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Baltimore, which was a collective of interracial and denominational ministers, was formed to address racial discrimination in the city. Dobson lists some of the people active in the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore including, HistoryMaker Parren J. Mitchell III, Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson, Carl J. Murphy, and Enolia McMillan. Dobson reflects upon the relationship between the black Christian church and the Nation of Islam; talks about the corruption of some African American preachers by the religious right; and concludes with a message for his
congregation at Union Baptist Church.

Reverend Vernon Dobson became involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore, Maryland when he and HistoryMaker Parren J. Mitchell III fought for African Americans to be hired in supervisory positions at the Probation Department. This initiative led to the appointment of Joseph Howard, Sr. as Maryland’s first black judge. In 1967, Dobson helped form the “Goon Squad,” a group of civil rights leaders fighting for desegregation, especially in housing, which included Dr. Homer Favor, founder of the Urban Studies Institute at Morgan State University, Augustus “Gus” Adair, economist Lalit Gadhia, and Dobson’s brother, the Reverend Harold Dobson. During this period, white residents of Baltimore began to flee to the suburbs and James Rouse petitioned the city council to adopt a plan to preserve the diversity of the city. When the city refused to act, Rouse developed a racially and economically diverse planned community in Columbia, Maryland. Dobson reflects upon the current gentrification in the region.

Vernon Dobson attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. He remembers a near-altercation between Martin Luther King, Sr. and HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference meeting of ministers in 1968. Dobson recalls how a trip to Washington, D.C. following the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Goon Squad’s organizing in Baltimore, Maryland laid the foundation for HistoryMaker Parren J. Mitchell’s election to the U.S. Congress in 1970. Dobson helped form BUILD (Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development) a community organizing effort based on the principles of Saul Alinsky. The organization’s first project was building 650 houses in the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore. Dobson talks about Harbor Place development in Baltimore and predicts that African Americans will soon be priced out of the nearby Sugar Hill neighborhood.
where his, and other historic black churches, are located.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson, Section A2003_274_002_008, TRT: 0:31:11 2004/03/06

Reverend Vernon Dobson is happy with his life and has no regrets. Dobson talks about the progress of the African American community, the challenges facing the African American community, and his hopes for the African American community. He also critiques HistoryMaker Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, the president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, for not having enough African American students from Baltimore at the school. Finally, he shares what he loves about his congregation at Union Baptist Church and describes how the surrounding neighborhood has changed over the past forty years.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Vernon Dobson, Section A2003_274_002_009, TRT: 0:26:33 2004/03/06

Reverend Vernon Dobson reflects upon his mother’s legacy, his father’s legacy and his own legacy. Dobson concludes by narrating his photographs.