

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson

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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>	Henderson, Thelton E., 1933-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 7, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:29:35).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Federal district court judge The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson (1933 - ) was the first African American Chief Judge of the United States District of Northern California, and has served as the Assistant Dean of the Stanford University School of Law. Henderson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 7, 2004, in San Francisco, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_044
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Federal district court judge Thelton Eugene Henderson was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on November 28, 1933 to Wanzie and Eugene Marion Henderson. Henderson grew-up in the South central area of Los Angeles, California in an all-black neighborhood. He graduated from Jefferson High School in Los Angeles and was the recipient of a football scholarship to attend the University of California at Berkeley. In 1956, Henderson graduated with his B.A. degree in political science. Later, in 1962, Henderson earned his J.D. degree from Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley and was admitted to the California Bar in January of 1963.

Both his high school counselor and football coach was alumnus of the University of California at Berkeley and encouraged him to attend their alma mater. While there, he became interested in African American history and helped to form an organization that catered to African American students. After graduating from college, he was drafted into the United States Army, where he served as a clinical psychology technician. Thereafter, he earned his law degree and was hired as an attorney with the civil rights division of the United States Department of Justice, where he served from 1962 to 1963. During his tenure with the Justice Department, Henderson investigated patterns of discriminatory practices in the South. Returning to Northern California, he practiced general law in private practice and was the directing attorney of the East Bayshore Neighborhood Legal Center in Palo Alto. From 1968 to 1976, Henderson was the assistant dean of the Stanford University School of Law. There, he helped increase minority enrollment to twenty percent of the student body and taught law classes.

In 1977, Henderson became a founding partner of Rosen, Remcho and Henderson in San Francisco, where he remained until 1980. He also taught administrative law and civil procedure at Golden State University of Law in San Francisco. In 1980, Henderson was appointed to the United States Federal Court and became the Chief Judge of the United States District of Northern California in 1990, thus becoming the first African American to reach that position. In 1998, he became Senior U.S. District Judge. Henderson was the recipient of the 2003 American Inns of

Court Circuit Professionalism Award for the Ninth Circuit in recognition of a senior practicing lawyer or judge whose life and practice serves as an example for others.

He is divorced and has one son. He resides in Berkeley, California and enjoys fly-fishing.

Thelton Henderson was interviewed by *The HistoryMaker* on April 7, 2004.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson was conducted by Loretta Henry on April 7, 2004, in San Francisco, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal district court judge The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson (1933 - ) was the first African American Chief Judge of the United States District of Northern California, and has served as the Assistant Dean of the Stanford University School of Law.

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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:

Henderson, Thelton E., 1933-

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Henderson, Thelton E., 1933---Interviews

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African American judges--Interviews.

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African American lawyers--California--Los Angeles--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. District Court (California : Northern District)

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## Occupations:

Federal District Court Judge

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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 The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, April 7, 2004. 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 The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, Section A2004\_044\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson was born on November 28, 1933 in Shreveport, Louisiana. His father, Eugene Marion Henderson, was born in Tyler, Texas and worked as a janitor. Henderson's mother, Wanzie Henderson, was born in Bude, Mississippi. When Henderson was three years old, his extended maternal family moved to Los Angeles, California. His earliest childhood memories are of living at his maternal grandmother's house with his aunts and uncles while his mother worked as a live-in domestic. His mother aspired for him to become a doctor or a lawyer and made him attend Sunday school. Henderson grew up in a black working-class neighborhood in South Central L.A. where he attended Trinity Street Elementary School. His mother sent him across town to the majority white John Adams Junior High School. Henderson returned to his neighborhood high school, Thomas Jefferson High School, to play football. There, his counselor helped him earn an athletic scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley.

African American families--California--Los Angeles.

African American mothers--United States.

African American fathers--United States.

African American household employees--United States.

African American grandparents--United States.

African Americans--Employment--United States.

World War, 1939-1945.

African Americans--Divorce--California--Los Angeles.

African American neighborhoods--California--Los Angeles.

African American children--Education (Elementary)--California.

African Americans--Education (Primary)--California.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--California.

African American children--California--Los Angeles--Social life and customs.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, Section A2004\_044\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson played baseball and football for Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, California where he received a poor education. Henderson earned a football scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley in Berkeley, California. He played football his freshman year, but after injuring his knee decided to focus on his studies. Henderson was unprepared for college; he failed a pre-college course because he did not know how to answer a free response question and was unaware of the options for college majors. He feared failure and spent most of his time studying. He graduated in 1956 with a B.A. in political science and was drafted by the U.S. Army for two years of service. He then worked for a development corporation before he matriculated at Boalt Hall law school at the University of California, Berkeley where he was one of two African Americans in his class. He passed the California bar exam

while working for the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department in Washington, D.C.

African American high school students--California--San Francisco.

African Americans--High school athletes--California--San Francisco.

African Americans--Middle school athletes--California--San Francisco.

African Americans--College athletes--California--San Francisco.

Robinson, Jackie, 1919-1972.

Semi-professional baseball--United States.

University of California, Berkeley.

University of California, Berkeley. School of Law.

African American law students--Race relations--United States.

King, Martin Luther Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

United States. Dept. of Justice. Civil Rights Division.

Bar examinations--California.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, Section A2004\_044\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson graduated from Boalt Hall, the University of California, Berkeley School of Law in 1963. At the time, black law students had few employment options. Henderson was hired by Assistant U.S. Attorney General John Doar who was interested in integrating the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department and was an alumni of Boalt Hall. Though he was based in Washington, D.C., during Henderson's two-year experience in the Civil Rights Division he spent a significant amount of time on field assignments in the South where he interacted frequently with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and experienced racial discrimination by white police officers. He explains how the Division built a case for voter discrimination and describes how the F.B.I. undermined the Division's efforts. Henderson was forced to resign his position with the Division because he lent a car to Dr. King in Selma, Alabama. Henderson's experiences in the South influenced his outlook on race and segregation.

African American lawyers--United States.

Discrimination in employment--United States.

United States Dept. of Justice. Civil Rights Division.

Doar, John, 1921-.

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963.

Segregation--Washington (D.C.).

African Americans--Social life and customs--Washington (D.C.).

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968.

Discrimination--Southern States.

Civil rights movements.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, Section A2004\_044\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson was sent to Birmingham, Alabama to meet with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department following the 16th Street Baptist church bombing. He remembers the fear he felt as he drove to meet Dr. King. Henderson met Medgar Evers in 1963 in Jackson, Mississippi and was with Evers the night before he was assassinated. Henderson drove James Baldwin from Selma, Alabama to

safety in Birmingham after overhearing a radio conversation between federal agents threatening Baldwin. Henderson's experience in the Civil Rights Division reinforced his commitment to using his law degree in service of civil rights. When he resigned from the Division, in 1964, he felt like a failure, only later did he view his departure as a necessary step in his career. After resigning, he began writing a book about his experience, but abandoned the project and returned to California where he joined the practice of his law school classmate Donald Warden.

African American lawyers--United States.

United States Dept. of Justice. Civil Rights Division.

Discrimination--Southern States.

Civil rights workers--United States.

Civil rights movements.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968.

Congress of Racial Equality.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, Birmingham, Ala., 1963.

Evers, Medgar Wiley, 1925-1963.

Baldwin, James, 1924-1987.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson, Section A2004\_044\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Thelton E. Henderson left Donald Warden's law firm and joined the firm of FitzSimmons and Petris in Oakland, California. In 1966, Henderson opened the East Bayshore Neighborhood Legal Center in East Palo Alto, California, a legal aid clinic which served the majority black East Palo Alto community. In 1968, he became an assistant dean of Stanford Law School where he started a minority law student recruitment program which significantly increased minority student enrollment. In 1976, he left Stanford and became a founding partner of Rosen, Remcho and Henderson with Joe Remcho and Sandy Rosen. The firm focused on civil rights and criminal law and was not driven by finances. Henderson describes two significant federal appeals he worked on, Krause v. Rhodes and United States v. Banks and Means (Wounded Knee). In 1980, Henderson was appointed to the United States District Court, Northern District of California. He describes his application and interview process for the judgeship.

African American lawyers--California--Palo Alto.

Stanford University.

Minority students--California.

African American judges--California.