

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Theophilus Caviness

---

## 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>	Caviness, Theophilus, 1928-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 16, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:19:28).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Pastor Reverend Theophilus Caviness (1928 - ) is the President of the Cleveland Branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and is a former member of the Board of Directors for the NAACP, CORE, and the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. He has also served as senior pastor of the Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Caviness was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 16, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_080
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Renowned pastor and civic leader the Reverend Emmitt Theophilus Caviness was born on May 23, 1928 in Marshall Texas. His parents were Lula Page and Will Stone Caviness. Reverend Caviness earned a bachelor's of arts degree from Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. He also holds a bachelor's of divinity from Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Grove, Missouri; an honorary doctorate of divinity from Virginia Seminary and College, and an honorary doctorate in law

from Central State University in Ohio.

Caviness has served as the spiritual leader of several congregations, including St. Mark's Baptist Church in Picton, Texas; Mount Nebo Baptist Church in Madison, Illinois; and St. Paul Baptist Church in East St. Louis, Illinois. Since 1961, he has served as senior pastor of the Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio's Glenville Community. He has also been a both a member and officer in the Baptist Minister's Conference of Cleveland and Vicinity, the Baptist Pastor's Council, the Planning Board of the Inter-Church Council, the Ohio Baptist General Convention, and the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.

Caviness has a long history of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He currently serves as the president of the Cleveland Branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and is a former member of the Board of Directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Ohio Civil Rights Commission.

In addition to his work in the religious community, he served on the Executive Board of the Greater Cleveland Growth Association, the Zoning Board of Appeals for the City of Cleveland, the Planning Board of the Glenville Area Council, and the Sewer Board of Cleveland. He also worked as the executive assistant to George V. Voinovich, former mayor of Cleveland.

Reverend Caviness was married for forty-one years to concert recording artist and minister of music, James ("Jamie") Pitts Caviness. He currently resides in Bratenahl, Ohio.

---

## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness was conducted by Regennia Williams on June 16, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Pastor Reverend Theophilus Caviness (1928 - ) is the President of the Cleveland Branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and is a former member of the Board of Directors for the NAACP, CORE, and the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. He has also served as senior pastor of the Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio.

---

## **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:**

Caviness, Theophilus, 1928-

Williams, Regennia (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Caviness, Theophilus, 1928---Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Baptists.

---

## **Occupations:**

Pastor

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

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 Theophilus Caviness, June 16, 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 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

## 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 Reverend Theophilus Caviness,  
Section A2004\_080\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:19 2004/06/16

Reverend Theophilus Caviness was born on May 23, 1928 in Marshall, Texas. His mother, Lula Page Caviness, was born in Redwater, Texas and stressed education for her children. His father, Will Stone Caviness, was born near Marshall and worked three jobs to support his six sons. Caviness was raised in Marshall, an agricultural community with three colleges. He attended Hillside and Dunbar Elementary Schools and was baptized at Galilee Baptist Church where he preached his first sermon in 1946, shortly after graduating from Pemberton High School. He had an interest in the ministry since an early age and began to seriously pursue the profession at Bishop College in Marshall where he also met his future wife and was mentored by the dean of the college. Caviness pastored a church in Texarkana, Arkansas before pursuing his bachelor's of divinity at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri and pastoring at Mount Nebo Missionary Baptist Church in Madison, Illinois where he voted for the first time in 1955

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness,  
Section A2004\_080\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:37 2004/06/16

Reverend Theophilus Caviness attended Galilee Baptist Church as a child in Marshall, Texas and attended Bishop College, which has produced many Baptist church leaders. In 1961, Caviness left St. Paul Baptist Church in East St.

Louis, Illinois to pastor Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church in the Glenville neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio. In 1967, during Carl B. Stokes's mayoral election, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Caviness's church after a nearby church became overcrowded. Following Stokes' election, Caviness was appointed head of the zoning board and later, held various positions in Cleveland's local government and served on the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. He was also the historian of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. and president of the Ohio Baptist General Convention. Caviness talks about the Baptist churches' autonomous structure, its convening organizations and its leaders, the decline of Cleveland and East St. Louis since the 1950s and '60s and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness,  
Section A2004\_080\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:42 2004/06/16

Reverend Theophilus Caviness admired the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work and philosophy and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s nonpartisan approach to politics. When riots broke out following the Glenville Shootout in Cleveland, Ohio, Caviness and Mayor Carl B. Stokes decided not to call in the police but rather let citizens patrol the neighborhood. The riots resulted in a loss of business in the area. Caviness was executive assistant to Cleveland mayor George Voinovich and served as liaison between him and HistoryMaker The Honorable George Forbes, who was president of the city council. He once paid Forbes's water bill to settle a dispute between the two politicians. During Cleveland Mayor Michael R. White's tenure, Caviness served on the Northeast Ohio Sewer Board of Trustees and the Ohio Civil Rights Commission from 1991 to 2000. Caviness became infamous for his flamboyant style and was sought out for endorsements by politicians running for HistoryMaker The Honorable Louis Stokes's Congressional seat.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness,  
Section A2004\_080\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:13 2004/06/16

Reverend Theophilus Caviness first became involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1950s when he sought its support desegregating the

Walgreens in downtown East St. Louis. The Easter Sunday boycott was ultimately successful and Coretta Scott King sang at the event. Caviness was persuaded by HistoryMaker Reverend Raleigh Trammell to revitalize the Cleveland Branch of the SCLC and recalls the leadership of Carole Hoover and other women in the SCLC. Caviness presided over the Baptist Ministers Council of Cleveland and Vicinity for twenty-five years. In 1998, he supported Stephanie Tubbs Jones's campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives. He details his family members' contributions to Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church, including a scholarship created in his wife's memory. Caviness talks about the importance of human rights in the 21st century and his position on gay marriage. He explains the Baptist churches' philosophy towards Biblical interpretation and his philosophy of service.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Theophilus Caviness,  
Section A2004\_080\_001\_005, TRT: 0:21:37 2004/06/16

Reverend Theophilus Caviness organized a Children's Choir as part of his efforts to revitalize the Cleveland Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC Children's Choir offers children the opportunity to travel and meet important figures in the Civil Rights Movement. Caviness has raised funds from local businesses to sponsor both the Children's Choir and various scholarships given to students by the Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church of Cleveland, Ohio. At the time of the interview, Caviness was still pastoring his church. Caviness reflects upon his legacy and narrates his photographs.