

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Bell, Robert Mack, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell,
Dates:	August 17, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:16:49).
Abstract:	Judge The Honorable Robert Mack Bell (1943 -) was the lead defendant in the 1964 civil rights case, Bell v. Maryland, which was argued before the U.S. Supreme Court and helped end racial segregation in Maryland. Since 1996, Bell has been Chief Judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals. Bell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 17, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_129
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Robert Mack Bell was born on July 6, 1943 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina to Thomas and Rosa Lee Bell. His father was a construction worker while his mother worked as a domestic and care giver. His parents separated when he was a young, and Bell was raised by his mother who moved to Baltimore, Maryland, in search of better jobs. He attended Baltimore public schools and graduated from Dunbar High School in 1961. While finishing his senior year at Dunbar in 1960, he, along with eleven other students, were recruited by Morgan

State College students to participate in a sit-in at Hooper's Restaurant, a segregated business. The students were subsequently arrested and convicted for trespassing. Bell was the lead defendant for an appeal of the verdict in the landmark civil rights case, *Bell v. Maryland*, which was argued before the U.S. Supreme Court and eventually ended racial segregation in Maryland. After high school, Bell enrolled at Morgan State College in 1961 but was forced to take a year off from school after being hospitalized with tuberculosis. In 1963, he returned to Morgan where he was active in student government, and a member of the honor society and of the Alpha Phi Omega Fraternity. After he graduated second in his class with his A.B. degree in history and political science in 1966, he enrolled at Harvard Law School. The first student from Morgan to attend Harvard's prestigious law school, Bell received his J.D. degree from there in 1969.

After passing the Maryland State Bar Examination in 1969, Bell was hired by Piper & Marbury, where he became the Baltimore law firm's first black associate. In 1975, he became a judge on the District Court of Maryland for Baltimore City in his first judgeship. In 1980, Bell served as a judge for the Circuit Court for Baltimore, remaining until 1984. He was then appointed to the bench of the Court of Special Appeals in Maryland, serving in that post until 1991 when he was elected Judge of the Court of Appeals of Maryland. In 1996, Bell was appointed by Maryland Governor Parris Glendening as Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, the state's highest court. With that appointment he became the only active judge in Maryland to have served at least four years on all four levels of Maryland's judiciary and the first African American to be named the state's chief jurist.

Bell is a member of several legal organizations including the National, American and Maryland State Bar Associations. He has received numerous awards and recognition for his work in the legal field and lectures often at schools and at community functions.

Appellate Court Judge Robert Mack Bell was interviewed by *TheHistoryMakers* on August 17, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on August 17, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Judge The Honorable Robert Mack Bell (1943 -) was the lead defendant in the 1964 civil rights case, *Bell v. Maryland*, which was argued before the U.S. Supreme Court

and helped end racial segregation in Maryland. Since 1996, Bell has been Chief Judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals.

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:

Bell, Robert Mack, 1943-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Bell, Robert Mack, 1943---Interviews

African American lawyers--Maryland--Baltimore--Interviews.

African American judges--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Judge

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 The Honorable

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 The Honorable Robert Mack Bell, Section A2004_129_001_001, TRT: 0:30:53 2004/08/17

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell was born on July 6, 1943, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. His mother, Rosa Lee Jordan Bell, was born in 1918 in Halifax County, North Carolina to a large family of sharecroppers. His father, Thomas Bell, was born in the early 1900s in Robeson County, North Carolina. Early in his life, Bell's parents moved to Baltimore, Maryland and subsequently separated. Bell was primarily raised by his mother who was a domestic, and did not spend much time with his father, a construction laborer. His mother was very determined and emphasized education, often teaching Bell his letters during the day while his two older brothers were in school. Bell attended P.S. 101-A for elementary school, which later became Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Bell was raised in a three-story apartment building on Gay Street in Baltimore; his neighborhood had several bars and a penny candy store. He recalls playing with neighbors,

holiday traditions and visiting his grandfathers in the South.

African American families--North Carolina.

African American families--Maryland--Baltimore.

Single parents--Maryland--Baltimore.

African Americans--Maryland--Baltimore--Social life and customs.

African American children.

Bullies.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell, Section A2004_129_001_002, TRT: 0:31:14 2004/08/17

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell attended P.S. 101-A and P.S. 139 for elementary school in Baltimore, Maryland. He enjoyed studying history and aspired to be a lawyer after reading Perry Mason books. Bell attended Paul Laurence Dunbar Junior High School where he was involved in athletics and student government, and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School where he met Reginald F. Lewis, who motivated him to be more entrepreneurial. Bell was valedictorian and student council president; Lewis was vice-president. In 1960, Bell and his classmates were persuaded by Morgan State College students to join a sit-in protest to desegregate Hooper's Restaurant in Baltimore. They were arrested and convicted for trespassing. At his trial, Bell was represented by Juanita Elizabeth Jackson Mitchell, Robert B. Watts and Tucker Dearing. The Maryland Court of Appeals upheld his conviction and the case was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court as Bell v. Maryland (1964). The outcome of the court case ultimately led to desegregation in Maryland.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Maryland--Baltimore.

African Americans--Civil rights.

Civil rights movements--Maryland--Baltimore.

Segregation--Law and legislation.

United States. Supreme Court.

Segregation--Maryland--Baltimore.

Morgan State College.

African American college students--Maryland--Baltimore.

African American universities and colleges--Maryland--Baltimore.

Lewis, Reginald F., 1942-1993.

Mitchell, Juanita Jackson, 1913-.

Watts, Robert B., 1922-.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell,
Section A2004_129_001_003, TRT: 0:30:19 2004/08/17

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell graduated from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Baltimore, Maryland in 1961. He received a scholarship to Morgan State College and graduated second in his class with a B.A. degree in history. Recovering from tuberculosis delayed his graduation until 1966. Upon advice from Paul Sarbanes, he attended Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While there, he began a chapter of the Black Law Students Association, founded by former college classmate and HistoryMaker Algernon Johnson Cooper, Jr. After being one of the five African Americans to pass the Maryland bar exam in 1969, Bell became the first African American associate hired by Piper & Marbury where he worked on public interest, municipal finance and real estate cases rather than the firm's community legal service program. Bell notes the irony that his later appointment as chief judge for the State of Maryland meant he replaced Robert Murphy, who prosecuted him in the circuit court trial of Bell v. Maryland (1964).

African American college students--Maryland--Baltimore.

African American universities and colleges--Maryland--Baltimore.

Morgan State College.

Sarbanes, Paul.

Lewis, Reginald F., 1942-1993.

African American lawyers--Maryland--Baltimore.

Harvard University. Law School.

African American law students.

Dershowitz, Alan M.

Piper & Marbury.

Alpha Phi Omega.

Tuberculosis.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell,
Section A2004_129_001_004, TRT: 0:30:03 2004/08/17

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell left the law firm of Piper & Marbury in 1975 when he was appointed to the District Court of Maryland for Baltimore City. He was initially reluctant to be a judge, but understood the positive impact he could have. From 1980 to 1984, he served on the Circuit Court for Baltimore City. He recalls presiding over the murder trial of three youths who killed another for a Georgetown jacket and the trial of businessman William Lloyd "Little Willie" Adams who was accused of running an illegal gambling operation. In 1984, Bell was appointed to the Maryland Court of Special Appeals where he became interested in assessing the fairness of the criminal justice system. He was appointed to the Court of Appeals of Maryland in 1991. In 1996, he made history as the first African American to be named chief judge of the State of Maryland. Bell talks about the different responsibilities of each judgeship and changes he has observed in crimes. He reflects upon his achievements, his legacy and his life.

African American lawyers--Maryland--Baltimore.

African American judges--Maryland.

Circuit courts--Maryland.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Robert Mack Bell,
Section A2004_129_001_005, TRT: 0:14:20 2004/08/17

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell narrates his
photographs.