

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson

---

## 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>	Wilkerson, Dianne
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 27, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:09).
<b>Abstract:</b>	State senator The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson (1955 - ) was the first African American woman elected to the Massachusetts State Senate. In January, 2005, she was serving her sixth term representing the Second Suffolk District and the only African American in the Massachusetts Senate. Wilkerson sponsored a number of bills to protect low-income, black and other minority residents. Wilkerson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 27, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_026
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dianne Wilkerson, the first African American woman elected to the Massachusetts State Senate, was born on May 2, 1955, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. She was born in her maternal grandmother's shotgun shack on a farm, because the local hospital did not allow black women entry to deliver children. Wilkerson and her family later followed an uncle who fled Arkansas to Springfield, Massachusetts, to escape harassment from the Ku Klux Klan. After graduating from Springfield's High

School of Commerce in 1973, Wilkerson attended the American International College, earning her B.S. degree in public administration in 1978. After completing her B.S., Wilkerson attended Boston College Law School, earning her J.D. in 1981.

Beginning her legal practice that same year, Wilkerson clerked in the Massachusetts Appeals Court until 1982, when she left to become deputy counsel to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In 1983, she joined the law firm of LeBoeuf, Lamb, Lerby and McRae, where she remained until 1985. That year, Wilkerson became the assistant legal counsel to Governor Michael Dukakis. In 1987, Wilkerson became the first African American woman in Boston to become a partner in a major law firm, Roche, Carnes and DeGiacomo, where she practiced until being elected to the Massachusetts State Senate in 1992. In 2005, she was the highest-ranking black official in the State of Massachusetts, serving her sixth term representing the Second Suffolk District.

As a state senator, Wilkerson has sponsored a number of bills to protect low-income, black and other minority residents of Massachusetts, including a bill authorizing the collection of data relative to racial profiling in traffic stops and a bill to curb high interest rates on bank loans. As the lone African American in the Massachusetts State Senate at the time of her interview, Wilkerson has described herself as a “professional agitator,” and has championed policies to improve the lives of people underserved by the government.

---

## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson was conducted by Robert Hayden on January 27, 2005, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. State senator The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson (1955 - ) was the first African American woman elected to the Massachusetts State Senate. In January, 2005, she was serving her sixth term representing the Second Suffolk District and the only African American in the Massachusetts Senate. Wilkerson sponsored a number of bills to protect low-income, black and other minority residents.

---

## **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:**

Wilkerson, Dianne

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Wilkerson, Dianne--Interviews

---

African American women politicians--Massachusetts--Interviews

---

African American women legislators--Massachusetts--Interviews

---

Discrimination--Arkansas--Pine Bluff

---

Branton, Wiley Austin, 1923-1988

---

Trials (Murder)--Arkansas

---

Rural-urban migration--United States

---

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

---

School integration--United States--Massachusetts

---

Springfield (Mass.)--Social life and customs

---

Teenage pregnancy--Massachusetts

---

American International College

---

Boston College. Law School

---

Racism--Massachusetts--Boston

---

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

---

Massachusetts. Appeals Court

---

Massachusetts. Supreme Judicial Court

---

Massachusetts. General Court. Senate

---

Same-sex marriage--Law and legislation--Massachusetts

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Massachusetts

---

## **Occupations:**

State Senator

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

PoliticalMakers

---

## **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 Dianne Wilkerson, January 27, 2005. 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 The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson, Section A2005\_026\_001\_001, TRT: 0:27:49 2005/01/27

Massachusetts State Senator Dianne Wilkerson talks about her own early childhood and shares memories of family stories about life in rural Arkansas and the degradation and brutality they endured as second-class citizens. Two of her uncles, arrested for killing a white man in a shoot-out, were represented by attorney Wiley Austin Branton and, although convicted, almost miraculously were not executed but given fifteen year sentences; upon their eventual release from prison they left the state, and Wilkerson's family accompanied one of them to Massachusetts -- the farthest they could get from Arkansas by train. She also recalls elementary school teachers and relates her memory of President Kennedy's assassination.

African American women politicians--Massachusetts--Interviews.

African American women legislators--Massachusetts--Interviews.

Discrimination--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Branton, Wiley Austin, 1923-1988.

Trials (Murder)--Arkansas.

Rural-urban migration--United States.

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

School integration--United States--Massachusetts.

Springfield (Mass.)--Social life and customs.

Teenage pregnancy--Massachusetts.

American International College.

Boston College. Law School.

Racism--Massachusetts--Boston.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored  
People.

Massachusetts. Appeals Court.

Massachusetts. Supreme Judicial Court.

Massachusetts. General Court. Senate.

Same-sex marriage--Law and legislation--Massachusetts.

Youth--Political activity--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson,  
Section A2005\_026\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:30 2005/01/27

Dianne Wilkerson describes her childhood neighborhood and her education in Springfield, Massachusetts, including her experience, starting in sixth grade, of attending a majority-white school as part of a controversial policy of busing to achieve racial integration. She also recalls summer visits to relatives in Arkansas, where she herself had lived until the age of five.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson,  
Section A2005\_026\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 2005/01/27

Dianne Wilkerson describes her experience with an unplanned pregnancy during her senior year of high school, and her struggle to be allowed to graduate with her class. Marrying right after high school, she juggled family life with her studies, first at American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts and then at Boston College Law School. She describes experiencing culture shock at the racial hostility she felt in Boston in the late 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson,  
Section A2005\_026\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:10 2005/01/27

Dianne Wilkerson describes her career, a series of "firsts" - the first African American clerk in the Massachusetts Appeals Court, the first black female deputy in the Supreme Judicial Court, the first black female member of a major Boston law firm. She describes in detail her work representing the NAACP in their case against HUD and the Boston Housing Authority. Following this experience, out of "sheer frustration" with continuing discrimination in housing policy, she decided to run for the Massachusetts State Senate and won a landslide election victory. Wilkerson goes on to detail some of her legislative successes in the State Senate.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Dianne Wilkerson,  
Section A2005\_026\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:50 2005/01/27

Dianne Wilkerson talks about her legislative work, the divisive issue of gay marriage, and her advice to youth -- that one person can make a difference and that youth can have a very powerful influence. She reflects on her life and legacy, and then shows and describes photos from her career in law and government.