

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Joseph Donovan

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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>	Donovan, Joseph James, 1936-2009
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 1, 2005 and August 3, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:11:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Author and television and radio correspondent Joseph Donovan (1936 - 2009 ) wrote <i>Why Can't Johnny Read?</i> , a 1976 critique of the public school system. In addition to his activities as an award-winning journalist, Donovan held high-ranking positions at CBS affiliate WCAU-TV10, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Donovan was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 1, 2005 and August 3, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_176
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Edward R. Murrow Award-winning journalist Joe Donovan was born Joseph James Donovan on March 29, 1936, in Camden, New Jersey, to Willie Virginia Jones and Phillip James Donovan. Donovan grew up in rural Chislehurst and attended Chislehurst School, Belmont Elementary School, Sulzberger Junior High School and Edward Bok Vocational Technical High School, from which he graduated in 1954. In October of 1955, Donovan enlisted in the United States Air

Force, and by 1959 he had been promoted to the rank of staff sergeant. Leaving the military in 1960, Donovan, after he was refused admittance to Temple University, returned to Edward Bok High School and enrolled in cartography and photography.

In 1960, Donovan was hired as a librarian at the Philadelphia Daily News. In 1963, Donovan worked as a background writer for a story on the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; six months later he replaced the newspaper's only African American reporter. In 1970, Donovan joined the staff of KYW News Radio and covered George Wallace's speech in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood. Donovan also co-hosted Black Edition with Malcolm Poindexter in 1970. In 1972, Donovan began to appear with Reggie Bryant on the television show Black Perspectives on the News. In 1976, Donovan was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship and wrote the critique of the public education system *Why Can't Johnny Read?*

From 1978 to 1980, Donovan served as assignment manager for CBS affiliate WCAU-TV10. In 1979, Donovan covered the Three Mile Island nuclear emergency, and in 1980, he received the Edward R. Murrow Award for excellence in electronic journalism. That same year, Donovan left CBS and joined the Environmental Protection Agency as Regional Superfund Information officer. From 1990 to 2000, Donovan was employed by Waste Management, Inc; he was the first African American at the Lisle, Illinois, corporate headquarters, where he served as corporate director of community relations. Donovan was also a member of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Donovan passed away on February 26, 2009 at the age of 72.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Joseph Donovan was conducted by Ed Anderson and Larry Crowe on August 1, 2005 and August 3, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Author and television and radio correspondent Joseph Donovan (1936 - 2009 ) wrote *Why Can't Johnny Read?*, a 1976 critique of the public school system. In addition to his activities as an award-winning journalist, Donovan held high-ranking positions at CBS affiliate WCAU-TV10, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

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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:**

Donovan, Joseph James, 1936-2009

Anderson, Ed (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

(Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Donovan, Joseph James, 1936-2009--Interviews

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African American executives--Interviews

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African American journalists--Interviews

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African American television journalists--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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WCAU-TV (Television station : Philadelphia, Pa.)

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## **Occupations:**

Television and Radio Correspondent

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Author

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

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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 Joseph Donovan, August 1, 2005 and August 3, 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).

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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 Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan was born on March 29, 1936 in Camden, New Jersey. His mother, Willie Virginia Jones, was born in 1908 in Sussex County, Virginia. At the age of sixteen, she relocated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she worked as a domestic and, during World War II, as a seamstress. Donovan's maternal great-aunt recorded birth information in the family Bible, which traces their lineage to 1878. His father, Phillip James Donovan, was born in 1910 in Georgetown, Delaware. Some of Donovan's paternal ancestors were conductors on the Underground Railroad and settled in Camden and Philadelphia.

Donovan's paternal great-great grandmother taught English at Camden Normal School. His paternal grandmother was a servant for the Haddon family in Haddonfield, New Jersey while his grandfather was church choir master and Sunday school superintendent. His father attended Friends Select School, a private Quaker school in Philadelphia, before studying manual arts at Bordentown School in New Jersey.

African American executives--Interviews.

African American journalists--Interviews.

African American television journalists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:50 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan's paternal grandfather was a truck farmer who delivered beefsteak tomatoes to Campbell Soup Company. Donovan's parents met at a segregated beach in New Jersey. His father worked for the Works Progress Administration, hauled coal and, during World War II, trained women in steam engineering at Scott Paper Company in Chester, Pennsylvania. Donovan learned to heed his mother's warnings after he touched a hot stove. Growing up in Chesilhurst, an agrarian town in New Jersey, he attended Grant A.M.E. Church. To be closer to his father's job at Scott Paper Company, Donovan's family moved to an integrated community in West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the mid-1940s. Men in the neighborhood protested the opening of a bar, which was eventually replaced by a grocery store. His family attended Philadelphia's Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church. An only son, Donovan grew up with three sisters and shared his father's love of learning. Donovan also learned about Jewish customs from his childhood friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:15 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan attended a two-room school in Chesilhurst, New Jersey until the third grade. When his family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he entered Belmont Elementary School and visited Woodside Amusement Park after Sunday church services. As a child, he remembers fixing his family's radio and constructing a

wagon for delivering The Evening Bulletin. His father's friend, a trumpeter, gave Donovan music lessons, and his father took Donovan to see Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway at Philadelphia's Earle Theater. He also regularly listened to Stu Wayne's news broadcast on KYW Radio. After graduating from Mayer Sulzberger Junior High School, he followed his counselor's advice and attended Edward Bok Vocational School, learning optical mechanics and watchmaking. Throughout high school, Donovan worked full-time as a dishwasher and short order cook. After graduation from Bok in 1954, he faced racial discrimination when he was unable to find work as an optician.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:11 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan worked as a dispensing optician at Edward Bok Vocational School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1956, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. After basic training at Sampson Air Force Base in Geneva, New York, he was stationed in Ardmore, Oklahoma, followed by Ernest Harmon Air Force Base in Stephenville, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Racism was rampant even after the U.S. military's official desegregation in 1948. Donovan advanced to airman first class before being discharged in 1959. Finding that universities did not accept his high school diploma, Donovan reenrolled at Bok to study photogrammetry and cartography while driving a taxicab and selling real estate. However, Donovan left the real estate industry because of its blockbusting practices. In 1960, the Philadelphia Daily News hired Donovan. He concludes the tape by describing his duties as a display advertiser.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:20 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan left advertising to serve as librarian for the Philadelphia Daily News in 1961. After contributing to coverage of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, he began working as a police reporter. He covered George Wallace's campaign speech at church in Fishtown, an all-white neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1970, in collaboration with a dozen black journalists and communication

specialists from Philadelphia, he helped found the Black Communicators Associated, Inc., which, in 1973, became the Association of Black Journalists. After leaving the Daily News, he began reporting for KYW, an all-news radio station in Philadelphia, and, in 1976, he received a Ford Foundation Fellowship in educational journalism. Donovan reflects upon issues facing black journalists in the 1970s and the impact of black journalists, both within the African American community and in the field of journalism. He also describes the rise of black professional organizations in the 20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:10 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan co-founded the Association of Black Journalists (ABJ) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with Austin W. Culmer, Jr. and Edie Huggins to address the lack of media coverage on issues affecting the African American community and the lack of recognition for black journalists. ABJ's first president was HistoryMaker Acel Moore. As it gained momentum, ABJ attracted the attention of area journalists, including HistoryMaker Chuck Stone. Reporting on a fire across from the Divine Tracy Hotel in West Philadelphia, Donovan interviewed a fire marshal and obtained a great quote, which a rewrite person changed, landing the fire marshal in trouble and ruining Donovan's story. Mayor of Philadelphia, Frank Rizzo, sued a Philadelphia Inquirer journalist for a satirical piece written about him. Donovan remembers the trial where Rizzo named him as the only fair and impartial reporter present. At KYW, Donovan received an Edwin R. Murrow Award in broadcast journalism for his coverage of the Three Mile Island accident.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section  
A2005\_176\_001\_007, TRT: 0:28:50 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan, as a founding member of the Association of Black Journalists, helped create a summer internship program for young journalists and fostered majority-owned papers' recruitment of minority reporters. ABJ invited black-owned newspapers, such as the Philadelphia Afro-American, to join their efforts; however, many declined, citing ABJ as too radical or



elitist. In 1970, Donovan, Pamela Haines and other Philadelphia-area journalists served as regular panelists on 'Black Perspectives on the News,' which aired on the PBS station WHYY-TV in Philadelphia. During this time, Donovan co-hosted 'Black Edition' with Malcolm Poindexter, a lead-in for the six o'clock news. When the FCC relaxed requirements for public interest broadcasting, stations dropped 'Black Perspectives on the News' and 'Black Edition.' Along with HistoryMakers Vernon Jarrett and Paul Brock, Donovan served on the board of the Ford Foundation Fellowship Program. Donovan describes the evolution of black journalism since the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section A2005\_176\_001\_008, TRT: 0:31:14 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan credits his entry into journalism, in part, to the 400 Ministers' call for newspapers to hire black reporters. During his tenure at the Philadelphia Daily News, Donovan witnessed the paper's African American readers respond to the increased coverage of issues affecting their community. From 1970 to 1978, Donovan worked as a reporter for KYW Newsradio. He left for an assignment manager position at WCAU-TV, a CBS affiliate. After management refused to address his concerns about racism, he joined the Environmental Protection Agency as a regional Superfund information officer in 1980. As information officer, Donovan spoke with communities about their environmental concerns and educated them about hazardous materials, including polychlorinated biphenyls. In 1990, he was hired as director of community relations for Waste Management, Inc. in Lisle, Illinois. He describes his hopes for the African American community and his unpublished work, 'The Magic Word.' He also reflects upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section A2005\_176\_001\_009, TRT: 0:03:05 2005/08/01

Joseph Donovan describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Joseph Donovan, Section A2005\_176\_002\_010, TRT: 0:11:30 2005/08/03

Joseph Donovan narrates his photographs.