

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Harry Elam

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Elam, Harry, 1922-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam,
Dates:	August 11, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:02:42).
Abstract:	Municipal court chief justice The Honorable Harry Elam (1922 - 2012) was the first African American appointed to the Boston Municipal Court of Massachusetts, and was later appointed as an Associate Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court. Elam was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 11, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_196
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired Judge Harry Justin Elam was the first African American appointed to the Boston Municipal Court of Massachusetts. Subsequently, Elam became the Chief Justice of this court and later was appointed as an Associate Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court. Prior to his judgeship years, between 1971 and 1988, he was a prominent lawyer in the city of Boston from 1952 to 1971.

Elam was born on April 29, 1922 in Boston, Massachusetts, the second child of five born to Robert H. and Blanche Lee Elam. A graduate of Boston Latin School,

he attended Virginia State College between 1940 and 1942. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II from 1942 to 1946 and earned an A.B. degree from Boston University in 1948 and his J.D. degree from Boston University's Law School in 1951. In his early years of general law practice, Elam partnered with Edward W. Brooke, who went on to become a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, the first since Reconstruction.

As a judge in both the municipal and state courts, Harry Elam maintained a deep and sensitive connection to Boston's neighborhoods. He saw the reduction of adult and juvenile crime as a responsibility of those leading the court system and so he linked himself and fellow jurists with social, cultural, and political issues in his community. Elam was the founder and first president of the Massachusetts Black Judges Conference. He was the founder and first president of the Roxbury Multi-Service Center, serving twelve years as the Center's president. Elam also chaired the board of directors of the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts for ten years.

Elam's signature community project was Project Commitment. He served as its creator and chair for twelve years. This project brought Black judges and lawyers into public school classrooms to mentor youth. His most coveted recognition is one received in 1983, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Drum Major for Justice Award presented jointly by two of Boston's venerable Black Episcopal churches.

Elam retired to Buzzards Bay on Cape Cod in Massachusetts with his wife, Barbara, have four children, Patricia, Harry, Jr., Keith, and Jocelyn.

Judge Harry Elam passed away on August 16, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Harry Elam was conducted by Robert Hayden on August 11, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Municipal court chief justice The Honorable Harry Elam (1922 - 2012) was the first African American appointed to the Boston Municipal Court of Massachusetts, and was later appointed as an Associate Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court.

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:

Elam, Harry, 1922-2012

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Elam, Harry, 1922-2012--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Akron (Ohio)

Occupations:

Municipal Court Chief Justice

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 Harry Elam, August 11, 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 Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_001, TRT: 0:30:50 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam was born on April 29, 1922 in Boston, Massachusetts to Blanche Lee Elam and Robert Elam. His mother was born in Aiken, South Carolina to Henrietta Frasier Lee and Sherman Lee. When she was a child, her family sought a better life and moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts where her father worked as a chauffeur. Elam's father was born in Chase City, Virginia to farmers Nanny Elam and Creed Elam and was raised by his father and stepmother, Lucy Elam. At the age of fifteen, he followed his older brothers to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he worked in steel mills until entering the military during World War I. Elam's parents met when his father moved to Cambridge, and they married in her home in 1920. His mother worked as a domestic for several white families while his father was an auto mechanic who owned his own shop until the stock market crash of 1929. Elam describes his three siblings, including his younger sister Harriet Elam Thomas, a U.S. diplomat. He also talks about his career.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_002, TRT: 0:29:08 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam spent his early childhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He remembers his grandmother's funeral. His maternal aunts and uncles were close to the family, and one, Ralph Lee, was in the original cast of the Broadway musical, 'Shuffle Along.' While in Cambridge, his family attended Massachusetts

Avenue Baptist Church and annual summer picnics at Salem Willows. In 1932, his family moved to the Roxbury area of Boston, and Elam and his brothers joined St. Mark Congregational Church so they could participate in its Boy Scout troop. Elam attended Henry L. Higginson Elementary School before transferring to Boston Latin School. Although he received a good education, there were few African Americans students, and Elam had to repeat his junior year after failing math. After high school, Elam attended Virginia State College for Negroes with a cousin for two years and majored in history. In 1942, he was drafted into the U.S. military. Upon his return, he met his wife, Barbara Clark, at St. Mark.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam attended Virginia State College for Negroes where he studied under historian Luther Porter Jackson and sociologist Henry Walter Roberts and joined the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. In 1942, he enlisted in the U.S. Army despite his 4F draft designation. Elam was stationed in the China-Burma-India Theater where he installed phone lines on Ledo Road. In 1946, Harvard University rejected Elam because another African American student, Royal Bolling, had been admitted. Elam attended Boston University where several friends from Virginia State, including Hilary Jones, Noel Torres, James W. Bailey, and Reuben K. Davis, were studying law. Inspired by his friends, Elam entered Boston University School of Law; and, upon graduation, he joined HistoryMaker Edward Brooke's law practice in Roxbury. He and Brooke worked in politics there as well until Brooke moved to Boston. Elam continued practicing in Roxbury with Louis White and Herman Hemingway. He also describes his father's and brother's jobs.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_004, TRT: 0:30:24 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam was appointed Boston Municipal Court judge by Governor Francis W. Sargent in 1971, partly thanks to the lobbying efforts of women, like Melanie Cash, from St. Mark Congregational Church. The court's chief justice, Elijah Adlow, retired soon after and

was replaced by Jacob Lewiton. Elam had to threaten Lewiton with a lawsuit in order to have George Skelly, a qualified African American candidate, appointed as chief probation officer. Elam served on the citizens committee for state correctional institutions reform. In 1978, Elam succeeded Lewiton as chief justice of the court. He also served on the boards of the Greater Boston Urban League and HistoryMaker Elma Lewis' arts school. Elam created Project Commitment, Inc., which brought court officials into classrooms to provide role models for students. Elam also describes his four children, his admiration for Wade H. McCree and HistoryMaker Edward Brooke, and his attempts to have Frank Barbour appointed assistant clerk in Suffolk County.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_005, TRT: 0:29:59 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam, as a judge on the Boston Municipal Court, ruled in favor of peddlers in Boston's North End, winning him the support of the defendants. He was also appreciated by Boston's Chinese community after mandating that police return unethically confiscated money. While serving on the Massachusetts Superior Court, Elam was forced to face an ethics board after the family of an assault victim sought to overturn his sentencing of the perpetrator, who was the son of another African American Massachusetts judge. Elam also joined HistoryMaker Wayne Budd in a lawsuit to have Frank Barbour appointed assistant clerk in Suffolk County and ruled in several criminal cases where Willie J. Davis served as the defense attorney. Although he retired in 1988, Elam continued to hear civil cases. He also describes his wife's career as a librarian and his fight to have Wade H. McCree honored at Boston Latin School.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Harry Elam, Section A2005_196_001_006, TRT: 0:31:11 2005/08/11

The Honorable Harry Elam met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during his 1963 visit to Boston. At that time, Elam and Dick Banks were advocating that Roxbury students be allowed to attend William Lloyd Garrison School while the Boardman School was under construction, and they escorted King on tours of these

sites. In the aftermath of King's death in 1968, Elam, as chairman of the board for the Roxbury Multi-Service Center, urged the community to cease rioting. In the 1990s, Elam worked with the Boston Latin School's alumni association to memorialize Wade H. McCree on the upper frieze of the school auditorium. He also created the Wade H. McCree scholarship fund. Elam describes the increased opportunities for African Americans in the legal field. He reflects upon being interviewed by The HistoryMakers, his life, and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the tape by narrating his photographs.