

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John J. Johnson

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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>	Johnson, John J., 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 21, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:39).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Association executive John J. Johnson (1945 - ) served as the Kentucky president of the NAACP for fourteen years, and also as chief programs officer and chief executive for operations for the national NAACP. He has participated in numerous struggles for national and international struggles for human and civil rights. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 21, 2005, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_220
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

John J. Johnson was born on February 10, 1945, in Louisville, Kentucky. Johnson can trace his family history back to his maternal great-great grandparents, Prince Martin (1826-1908) and Evelyn Martin (1819-1908) and his paternal great grandparents, Alexander and Hester Johnson. Johnson grew up in Franklin, Kentucky where he experienced segregation and racism. While in high school, Johnson was involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council and as a member of student government.

At the age of seventeen, he became the youngest president of any Kentucky chapter of the NAACP.

Johnson worked in a factory after his high school graduation. He then worked for the Kentucky Institute for Community Development as coordinator of training services. In, 1969, Johnson accepted a position as director of operations for a national marketing and research firm based in New York. He returned to Kentucky and worked with several War on Poverty programs before assuming the position as associate director of the Louisville and Jefferson County Human Relations Commission. Johnson was later appointed director of community services for the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights. In 1984, he became the director of the Louisville and Jefferson County Community Action Agency until he joined the staff of the NAACP in Baltimore. While in Baltimore, Johnson received his B.S. degree from Sojourner-Douglass College in community development and public administration.

Johnson held the position of Chief Programs Officer for many years while working for the NAACP; he also directed a wide variety of programs, including Armed Services and Veterans Affairs; Voter Empowerment; Economic Outreach; Labor, Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics; the Prison Project; and the NAACP library. Johnson also worked internationally, including organizing a trip to East Germany in 1992 where he led the NAACP delegation to witness hearings on alleged discrimination against African American military workers. In 1999, Johnson returned to Germany at the United States Army's behest to be a part of the ceremony for the 70th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, birthday. As part of the Freedom House Citizens Exchange Program, Johnson spent two weeks visiting East Africa to help promote global democracy. In 2002, during Zimbabwe's Presidential Election, Johnson's NAACP delegation was the only American organization invited to work as independent observers. Johnson eventually became the NAACP's chief executive of operations, where he oversaw the executive office of the President and CEO.

Johnson spent a lifetime volunteering for worthy causes, but his volunteer and civic work has been faced with many challenges, from integrating the segregated swimming pool in his hometown of Franklin, to challenging issues such as divestment of Kentucky's interest in South Africa. Johnson served as the Kentucky president of the NAACP for fourteen years, increasing Kentucky NAACP branches from four to forty-two. Johnson served as an elected member of the NAACP's national Board of Directors where he was elected one of its vice presidents. Johnson served as chair of the Kentucky Coalition of Conscience; served as a member of the Urban League; and participated in the Kentucky chapter of the National Association of Human Rights Workers and Southern

Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Johnson also moderated a weekly radio program entitled *Louisville Forum* and wrote a column in the weekly newspaper, *The Louisville Defender*, entitled Advocacy Line. Johnson's work in civil and human rights led to a street being named after him, John J. Johnson Avenue, in his hometown in 1993.

Johnson received numerous awards and honors, including an honorary doctorate degree from Simmons University for his civil rights and community development work; a distinguished service award from Kentucky State University; the Kentucky SCLC Annual Civil Rights Leadership Award; and the Medgar Evers Award for Outstanding Service, Sincere Devotion, and Commitment to the NAACP. Johnson served on the National Board of Directors for the A. Philip Randolph Institute; the Board of Directors of the National Committee on Pay Equity; and the National Board of Directors of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. He also chaired the advisory board of the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum, Inc.

Johnson and his wife, Courtrina, raised seven children.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with John J. Johnson was conducted by Paul Brock on September 21, 2005, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association executive John J. Johnson (1945 - ) served as the Kentucky president of the NAACP for fourteen years, and also as chief programs officer and chief executive for operations for the national NAACP. He has participated in numerous struggles for national and international struggles for human and civil rights.

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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:

Johnson, John J., 1945-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, John J., 1945---Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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African American civic leaders--Interviews

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African American political activists--Interviews

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African American political consultants--Interviews

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Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--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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National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

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## **Occupations:**

Association Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakersI

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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 John J. Johnson, September 21, 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 John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:30 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson was born on February 10, 1945 in Louisville, Kentucky to Evelyn Johnson. Johnson's distant cousin, John Purdue, was a freed slave who founded a school for African Americans in Franklin, Kentucky. His son, Melvin Purdue, pastored Emmanuel Baptist Church in Louisville and headed CORE in Kentucky. Johnson's mother was born in Crab Orchard, Kentucky to a mother who died in childbirth and a father who was a farmer. She had three siblings and was raised by her aunt and uncle, Bertha and Frank Johnson, with whom she lived throughout her life due to a mental disability. When Johnson was born, he and his mother went to live with Johnson's great aunt and great uncle, Hagar and Morris Benjamin, in Detroit. When he was three years old, Johnson's great aunt suffered a stroke, so his mother returned to her childhood home, and Johnson was raised by his aunt and uncle, Frederick and Lenny Harris, in Franklin. Johnson recalls visiting the train station where his uncle worked and being fascinated by Morse code.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

African American political activists--Interviews.

African American political consultants--Interviews.

Nonprofit organizations--Employees--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:11 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson and his family were active members of Alpha Baptist Church in Franklin, Kentucky. Johnson frequently participated in church activities while he lived with his aunt and uncle. He remembers his elementary school teachers, including one, Ms. Stringer, who hosted a radio program through the local AME Church. When his aunt and uncle who were his guardians died, Johnson relied on his godparents, Matthew and Lucille Brooks. They introduced Johnson to student council. He attended the Kentucky Student Council Association in Louisville, an event that furthered his interest in community organizing. Johnson graduated Lincoln School in 1963, just before desegregation of the Simpson County school system. He describes the termination of Walter H. Story, his former principal, in 1964, and how this racial injustice inspired him to run for president of the local branch of the NAACP. Johnson was recommended by Story for a janitorial position at Potter & Brumfield, a factory where Johnson worked for five years.

Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:40 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson was one of the first African Americans to be promoted to the stockroom at the Potter & Brumfield factory in Franklin, Kentucky. He remembers being denied entry to a local chapter of the United States Junior Chamber and being turned down for a loan due to discrimination. Fueled by these incidents, Johnson became a committed civil rights activist. He led the Franklin Simpson County chapter of the NAACP in constructing a playground and in desegregating a local swimming pool. However, he faced retaliation from some white coworkers at Potter and Brumfield. After experiencing racial harassment, Johnson left the factory. He joined the Kentucky Institute for Community Development, where

he set up community action agencies and poverty program activities throughout the state. Johnson recalls the birth of his first child, Gloria Edmond, in 1964; HistoryMaker Julian Bond heading SNCC in Nashville, Tennessee; and the intimidation tactics used by local police during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:11 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson served as president of the Franklin Simpson County Branch of the NAACP while Fermon Knox led the state branch. During his tenure, Johnson forged connections with the few NAACP branches in Kentucky and organized a rally to oppose Lawrence Rainey's nomination as sheriff of Franklin, with the support of the national NAACP office and Charles Evers. Johnson recalls an incident where La Citadelle hotel in Hazard, Kentucky refused to rent space to the NAACP. In 1969, Johnson left the presidency and his position at the Kentucky Institute for Community Development to direct the Southern Kentucky Economic Opportunity Council. He separated from his first wife, Jean Johnson, and worked in marketing research in New York City. In order to be closer to his four children, he joined the Community Action Agency in Louisville, where he met with Leo Lesser and directed the Park DuValle neighborhood services center. In 1970, Johnson married his second wife, Courtrina Johnson. Together, they raised seven children.

Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:08 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson was associate director for crisis intervention and community relations at the Louisville and Jefferson County Human Relations Commission. In 1972, Johnson was elected state president of the NAACP. During his tenure, Johnson oversaw the local branches in Kentucky grow from four to forty-two, and Louise Day Hicks visited Louisville to protest school integration. Facing scrutiny for his NAACP involvement, Johnson left the Human Relations Commission to join the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights as assistant director. While directing the Louisville and Jefferson County Community Action Agency, he was urged by HistoryMakers Madeline

Murphy Rabb and Maurice F. Rabb to join the NAACP national board. During his time with the national NAACP, Johnson served as executive assistant to Historymaker Benjamin L. Hooks and directed the voter empowerment program, the armed services and veterans affairs division, and the labor department. Johnson also recalls the NAACP's first convention in Kentucky in 1979.

Video Oral History Interview with John J. Johnson, Section  
A2005\_220\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:59 2005/09/21

John J. Johnson reflects upon his contributions as head of the programs department for the national office of the NAACP. Johnson describes the work and accomplishments of Historymaker Bruce Gordon, who was elected president of the NAACP in 2005. Johnson thanks those who have contributed to the NAACP, the Civil Rights Movement and the movement for human rights. He talks about his seven children and reflects upon his legacy. Johnson concludes his interview by narrating his photographs.