

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dr. Mildred Jefferson

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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>	Jefferson, Mildred
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 5, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:28:14).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Surgeon Dr. Mildred Jefferson (1927 - 2010 ) was the first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School, the first woman to be a surgical intern at Boston City Hospital and the first woman admitted to membership in the Boston Surgical Society. Jefferson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 5, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_063
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dr. Mildred Fay Jefferson was born in 1927 in Pittsburg, Texas - the daughter of Gurthie Roberts Jefferson, a public school teacher, and Millard F. Jefferson, a Methodist minister. She attended public schools in East Texas and entered Harvard Medical School in 1947 after receiving a B.A degree summa cum laude from Texas College in Tyler, Texas and a M.S. degree from Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

Jefferson became the first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School in 1951. She was the first woman to be a surgical intern at Boston City Hospital and the first woman admitted to membership in the Boston Surgical Society. She is, however, best-known for her longtime support and involvement in the “right-to-life movement” in America. She helped to establish the National Right to Life Committee and served three times as its president. She has been a local, regional and national speaker and activist.

After her Harvard Medical School graduation, Jefferson served as a general surgeon with the former Boston University Medical Center and Assistant Clinical Professor of Surgery at Boston University Medical School.

Jefferson has had a career-long interest in medical jurisprudence, medical ethics and the interface between medicine and law, as well as their impact on public policy and society. As a founding member of state and national “right-to-life” organizations, she is president of Right to Life Crusade.

Jefferson is a founding member of the Board of Governors and a past President of the Value of Life Committee of Massachusetts and is also active with the American Life League and Americans United for Life Legal Defense Fund. Jefferson is also a member of Black Americans for Life and is held in high esteem by Feminists for Life. Jefferson passed away on October 18, 2010.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson was conducted by Robert Hayden on April 5, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Surgeon Dr. Mildred Jefferson (1927 - 2010 ) was the first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School, the first woman to be a surgical intern at Boston City Hospital and the first woman admitted to membership in the Boston Surgical Society.

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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:

Jefferson, Mildred

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jefferson, Mildred--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## **Occupations:**

Surgeon

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MedicalMakers

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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 Dr. Mildred Jefferson, April 5, 2006. 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 Dr. Mildred Jefferson, Section A2006\_063\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:13 2006/04/05

Dr. Mildred Jefferson was born in 1927 to Gurthie Roberts Jefferson and Millard Jefferson in Pittsburg, Texas. Following emancipation, her paternal ancestors changed their surname to honor President Thomas Jefferson. Her father was born in Louisiana, where his father worked on the railroad. His mother passed away when he and his younger sister were children. A Christian Methodist Episcopal minister, Jefferson's father also served as a U.S. Army chaplain in Korea. Jefferson's mother grew up in Carthage, Texas, a rural farming community, where her father was a Baptist preacher, and her mother was a teacher. The oldest of seven children, she assumed responsibility for her siblings when her mother developed rheumatic heart disease. In Pittsburg, Jefferson was primarily reared by her mother, a teacher, while her father traveled to preach. Later, Jefferson trained as a general surgeon at Harvard Medical School, and her hometown held a celebration honoring the anniversary of her graduation.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson, Section A2006\_063\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:50 2006/04/05

Dr. Mildred Jefferson often visited her maternal family in Panola County, Texas, and enjoyed reading and exploring the woods. Jefferson aspired to be a doctor from an early age, as she was impressed by her family physician. She also recalls living through an era of epidemics, like diphtheria. Jefferson progressed quickly at the Roberts School, and then attended a school in Holland Quarters, Texas, where her mother taught for one year. She went on to Carthage Colored High School in Carthage, Texas, where she admired Superintendent Quintin M. Martin and her English teacher, Fredda Dolly Witherspoon, and preferred academics to sports. Jefferson earned a

bachelor's degree in biology and Spanish at Texas College in Tyler, Texas, and moved to Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, where her father owned a home. There, she completed her graduate studies in the biological sciences at Tufts College. In 1947, she became Harvard Medical School's first female student of color, and studied under Sidney Farber and Carl W. Walter.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson, Section A2006\_063\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:14 2006/04/05

Dr. Mildred Jefferson studied under William Augustus Hinton and J. Hartwell Harrison at Harvard Medical School, and substituted for a neurosurgical resident in her fourth year. She completed a surgical internship at Boston City Hospital before her residency at Boston's New England Medical Center Hospital. There, she practiced multiple specialties, but was unable to advance due to gender discrimination. While she was a chief resident at Boston University School of Medicine, Jefferson co-founded the Value of Life Committee of Massachusetts with physicians Barbara Rockett and Joseph R. Stanton in 1970. To keep abortion illegal, they formed the Massachusetts Citizens for Life and the National Right to Life Committee, of which she was president from 1975 to 1978. She also joined Feminists for Life and Black Americans for Life. Jefferson worked as a surgeon at Boston University Medical Center Hospital until it merged with Boston City Hospital. She was the first woman elected to the Boston Surgical Society.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson, Section A2006\_063\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:24 2006/04/05

Dr. Mildred Jefferson co-founded the National Right to Life Committee in 1973. At this time, she corresponded frequently with Ronald Reagan about abortion legislation. She recalls her involvement in Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, when she helped him win Massachusetts' electoral votes. Despite this, in 1982, he failed to assist her campaign for the U.S. Senate, and she lost the race. Jefferson directed the chapter development of Massachusetts Citizens for Life, a pro-life, citizenship action organization, and she describes the political underpinning of the right to life movement. As one of its

leaders, she was frequently criticized by mainstream media outlets. However, Jefferson's alma mater, Texas College in Tyler, Texas, honored her as Alumna of the Decade. Additionally, she received the Father Flanagan Award for Service to Youth, and was the first woman recognized by Massachusetts' Knights of Columbus organization. Jefferson also shares her perspective on care management and affirmative action.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. Mildred Jefferson, Section A2006\_063\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:33 2006/04/05

Dr. Mildred Jefferson was supported by grassroots organizers of the right to life movement, as well as by her parents. Her right to life organizations were primarily funded by small donations from private citizens. She shares her perspective on sex education and the role of health education for youth, whom she believes would benefit from greater attention to their decision making skills. At the time of the interview, Jefferson was working on several projects, including books on the right to life movement, her political manifesto and her perspective on race relations in the United States. She also describes her aspiration to own a newspaper business. Jefferson talks about the importance of history, and reflects upon her childhood in East Texas; her life; her hopes for the African American community; and how she would like to be remembered.