

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Les Payne

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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>	Payne, Les
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 10, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:23:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Newspaper reporter Les Payne (1941 - 2018 ) was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, who was a founder and former president of the National Association of Black Journalists. Working for Newsday in the 1960s, he covered the Black Panther Party and the Symbionese Liberation Army. Payne was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 10, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_071
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and author Les Payne was born on July 12, 1941 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. As a child, Payne was always interested in writing. He graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1964 with B.A. degree in English. Serving six years in the United States Army, Payne worked as an Army journalist and wrote speeches for General William C. Westmoreland. While on assignment in Vietnam, he ran the Army's newspaper, and when he was discharged, he had attained the rank of captain.

Payne joined *Newsday* in the late 1960s, serving as the associate managing editor for the paper's national, science, and international news. In 1968, as an investigative reporter, Payne covered the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther, Jr., and in the 1970s, he covered the Black Panther Party. He won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Heroin Trail* in 1974, which was a *Newsday* series in 33 parts that traced the international flow of heroin from the poppy fields of Turkey to the veins of drug addicts in New York City. Later, it became a published book. He also covered the Symbionese Liberation Army and authored *The Life and Death of the Symbionese Liberation Army*. As a *Newsday* correspondent, Payne reported extensively from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and the United Nations. During the 1976 Soweto uprising, he traveled throughout South Africa and wrote a series that was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in foreign reporting. Payne was also responsible for *Newsday's* Queens edition, whose news staffs have won every major award in journalism, including three Pulitzer Prizes. He was also a columnist for the *Tribune Media Services*.

As one of the founders and former presidents of the National Association of Black Journalists, Payne worked to improve media fairness and employment practices. He was also the Inaugural Professor for the David Laventhol Chair at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Payne received several awards including the United Nations' World Hunger Media Award, and three Unity Awards for investigative reporting. In 1990, he won cable television's highest honor, the Ace Award, for an interview with Mayor David Dinkins on *Les Payne's New York Journal*. In addition, he was a recipient of two honorary doctorate degrees from Medgar Evers College and Long Island University.

Payne passed away on March 19, 2018 at age 76.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Les Payne was conducted by Shawn Wilson on April 10, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Newspaper reporter Les Payne (1941 - 2018 ) was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, who was a founder and former president of the National Association of Black Journalists. Working for *Newsday* in the 1960s, he covered the Black Panther Party and the Symbionese Liberation Army.

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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:

Payne, Les

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Payne, Les--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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## **Occupations:**

Newspaper Reporter

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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 Les Payne, April 10, 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 Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:29 2006/04/10

Les Payne was born on July 12, 1941 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama to Josephine Payne Johnson. His maternal great grandmother was born into slavery, but never spoke about her experiences. His maternal grandparents were cotton sharecroppers who reared fourteen children in Hale County, Alabama. His grandmother, Annie Mae Payne, attended Alabama Baptist Normal and Theological School of Selma. Payne's mother was born in Sawyerville, Alabama in 1919. She worked at a dry cleaners and a café, and was financially independent. While many of his family members migrated north, Payne lived with his mother, two older brothers and grandparents on 16th Street in Tuscaloosa. There, his grandfather, John Payne, worked as a janitor at Tuscaloosa County Library, and was a Baptist minister. Payne's family attended Tuscaloosa's St. Paul Baptist Church, where he recalls his conversion experience on the mourners' bench, and the communion sacrament. He also participated in tent revivals and listened to records of C.L. Franklin's sermons.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:09 2006/04/10

Les Payne attended the all-black Twentieth Street Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Due to his reading skills, he skipped the first grade. One of the school's brightest pupils, Payne also strove for well-roundedness. When he was twelve years old, he recognized his spiritual calling, and was baptized in a stream. Growing up, his oldest brother almost drowned,

and he saw the KKK drive through his neighborhood. He also refused to address a white salesperson as “Sir,” even after he observed his grandmother address a white teenager as such. In 1954, his mother decided to relocate their family to Hartford, Connecticut in search of job opportunities. While the white Hartford Board of Education attempted to hold Payne back a year, he passed the entrance exam, entering the ninth grade at Hartford Public High School. He describes the impact of his segregated schooling in the South, which trained him to feel inferior. However, his perception began to change when he made higher grades than his white peers.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:39 2006/04/10

Les Payne grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where segregated schooling negatively impacted his self-worth. He practiced public speaking to address his shyness and perceived inferiority. Outside of school, he read Russian literature, which he felt articulated suffering better than works by white American writers. He also visited the Hartford Public Library’s periodicals section. He shares his opinion of Mark Twain, whose perceptiveness of race he admired. At Connecticut’s Hartford Public High School, one of Payne’s teachers commended his writing. Payne also excelled in math and science, and decided to pursue engineering, although his white guidance counselor blocked him from preparatory courses. After graduating in 1958, he took a year off, then began his engineering studies at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. Although he passed his first year, he decided to leave the program to pursue writing instead. He recalls feeling discouraged by the lack of black journalists at daily newspapers.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:13 2006/04/10

Les Payne joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. In the early 1960s, he was president of the Northern Student Movement, through which he developed a tutorial program for black youth in Hartford. He also read the work of black psychologists, which informed his understanding of

perceived racial inferiority. Although Payne enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1963, he did not obtain security clearance for eighteen months due to his prior civil rights activity. From 1967 to 1968, while serving in the Vietnam War, he was editor of the Army newspaper, and wrote speeches for General William C. Westmoreland. Payne also shares his opinion of the war. In 1968, he was honorably discharged as an Army captain, and considered careers in law and academia. His former Army lieutenant, Bill Nack, connected him to Newsday, who hired him in 1969. Payne describes the paper's majority white readership, and one of his first stories about Long Island's migrant community.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:16 2006/04/10

Les Payne created Uptight, a black opinion magazine, while serving in the U.S. Army. In July of 1970, he spent one week on Long Island, New York, documenting the area's migrant laborer community while undercover. Although his identity was questioned by a work crew chief, he successfully published his first major piece for Newsday. His coverage of Black Panther Party activities on the West and East Coasts also bolstered his reputation. Payne then joined a team of three reporters to cover the international heroin trade. For three months, he lived abroad in Turkey and France to chronicle the heroin supply chain. Payne and his fellow editors received a Pulitzer Prize for their piece, 'The Heroin Trail,' in 1974. In 1975, he was a founding member of the National Association of Black Journalists, and later became its fourth president. He covered the 1976 Soweto uprising in South Africa, and interviewed Africans, whose perspectives were neglected by white journalists. Payne and his wife had three children.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:40 2006/04/10

Les Payne's son, Jamal Payne, was born while Payne was documenting the international heroin trade in Marseille, France in 1974. The French government, suspicious of Payne's Newsday team, tracked them, and protested at the American embassy. Payne shares his opinion of President Ronald Wilson Reagan, whose administration he

criticized. He comments on the significance of Reagan beginning his presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where James Chaney and his fellow CORE workers were killed. He offers criticism of other political leaders, like Edward Koch and Rudy Giuliani, and talks about how the black community was misled by white politicians. In 1980, he became national editor, in charge of Newsday's White House coverage. Payne talks about Malcolm X, including his teachings, and how Malcolm overcame his sense of inferiority to whites through counter-rejection. As Newsday's deputy manager and editor, Payne oversaw the paper's coverage of the Iraq War, sending twelve reporters to the war zone.

Video Oral History Interview with Les Payne, Section  
A2006\_071\_001\_007, TRT: 0:26:21 2006/04/10

Les Payne advocated for Newsday journalists to remain in Iraq, even when President George W. Bush called for the removal of all Americans from the war zone. Payne allowed Matthew McAllester to stay due to his experience in conflict zones, but the Mukhabarat eventually arrested him and his photographer. They were detained in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. Payne and a team of editors enlisted numerous leaders, including the papal nuncio and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, to assist, and gained the prisoners' release. Payne reflects upon his U.S. Army experience, and how the leadership skills he gained facilitated his journalism career. He shares his future plans, such as completing his biography of Malcolm X and continuing his activities with the National Association of Black Journalists and the Trotter Group. He also talks about the dearth of African American White House correspondents. Payne reflects upon his decision to share his story with The HistoryMakers, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.