

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Frankie Freeman

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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>	Freeman, Frankie Muse, 1916-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 19, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:11:53).
<b>Abstract:</b>	U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner The Honorable Frankie Freeman (1916 - 2018 ) was a former municipal court judge for St. Louis, Missouri and was the first female member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Freeman was the lead attorney for the NAACP case, Davis et al v. St. Louis Housing Authority. Freeman was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 19, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_183
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner Frankie Freeman was born Marie Frankie Muse on November 24, 1916 in Danville, Virginia. Her parents, Maude Beatrice Smith Muse and William Brown Muse, came from college-educated families. Her relatives included Charles Sumner Muse, Edward Muse and Clarence Muse. Freeman grew up in Danville where she attended Westmoreland School and learned to play the piano. At age sixteen, Freeman enrolled in her mother's alma mater, Hampton Institute, which she attended between 1933 and 1936. While in

New York, Freeman met and married Shelby T. Freeman. In 1944, she was admitted to Howard University Law School where William H. Hastie and Spottswood Robinson were on the faculty. Freeman graduated second in her class in 1947.

Upon graduating from law school, Freeman set up her law offices in the Jefferson Bank Building in June of 1949 and became engaged in the Civil Rights Movement. Freeman was a part of an NAACP legal brain trust, which included Sidney Redmond, Robert Witherspoon and Henry Espy in the NAACP's 1949 *Brewton v. the Board of Education of St. Louis*, following the case to victory in the Supreme Court of the State of Missouri. In 1954, the same year as *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Freeman was the lead attorney for the landmark NAACP case *Davis et al v. the St. Louis Housing Authority*, which ended legal racial discrimination in public housing. In 1955, Freeman became the first associate general counsel of the St. Louis Housing Authority and Land Clearance Authority. In 1958, she became a charter member of the Missouri advisory committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Freeman provided NAACP counsel to CORE activists demonstrating against hiring discrimination policies at Jefferson Bank. In March of 1964, she was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson as the first female member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Freeman served as a commissioner for sixteen years, and later as Inspector General for the Community Services Administration during the Carter Administration. Freeman was also a municipal court judge in the early 1970s. In 1982, Freeman helped form a bipartisan Citizens Commission on Civil Rights to monitor the federal government's enforcement of laws barring discrimination. Freeman was a practicing attorney for more than fifty years.

Freeman was a Trustee Emeritus of the Board of Trustees of Howard University, past Chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Council on Aging, Inc. and the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis. She was also a board member of the United Way of Greater St. Louis, the Metropolitan Zoological Park and Museum District and the St. Louis Center for International Relations. She was the author of *A Song of Faith and Hope: The Life of Frankie Muse Freeman* and past national president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Freeman also received several honorary doctorate degrees from institutions that include Hampton University, Washington University and Howard University. She was inducted into the National Bar Association's Hall of Fame in 1990.

Freeman passed away on January 12, 2018 at age 101.

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 19, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner The Honorable Frankie Freeman (1916 - 2018 ) was a former municipal court judge for St. Louis, Missouri and was the first female member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Freeman was the lead attorney for the NAACP case, Davis et al v. St. Louis Housing Authority.

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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:**

Freeman, Frankie Muse, 1916-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Freeman, Frankie Muse, 1916---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:**

U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers

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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 The Honorable Frankie Freeman, December 19, 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 The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:51 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman was born on November 24, 1916 in Danville, Virginia to Maude Smith Muse and William Muse, Sr. Her maternal grandparents, Mary Swan Smith and Charles Smith, owned property in a suburb of Danville called Almagro, Virginia. They were active in Danville's African American community, and helped found the Calvary Baptist Church and the town's first black bank, The Savings Bank of Danville. Her paternal grandparents, Mary Finney Muse and Frank Muse, were from Penhook, Virginia, where they were friends with Booker T. Washington. Her paternal grandfather owned a tobacco farm and faced threats from the Ku Klux Klan, but successfully defended himself against them. Freeman's mother studied education at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute and became a teacher,

while her father was the third African American U.S. Postal Office Department employee in Virginia. Her parents met and married in Danville, where they raised their eight children.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:22 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman grew up in a segregated neighborhood in Danville, Virginia, where white children called her racial slurs when she passed them on the street. She attended the Westmoreland School, where she was encouraged by her principal and algebra teacher, Edwin A. Gibson. She graduated as valedictorian of her class, and matriculated at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, where she majored in mathematics. Freeman later read about African American lawyer Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, and aspired to become a lawyer upon her graduation. She moved to New York City, and applied to St. John's College of Law, but was denied entry due to her race and gender. She joined the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and was mentored by politician Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Freeman also met and married her husband, educator Shelby Freeman, Jr. at the church, and moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked for the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Price Administration as a statistician during World War II.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:05 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman attended Howard University School of Law in 1944. During her second year, Freeman became pregnant with her son, Shelby Freeman III, and was told to take time off; but determined to complete her degree, she returned two weeks after her son's birth. She was taught by Charles Hamilton Houston, and met NAACP leader Thurgood Marshall, who inspired her to become a civil rights attorney. Upon graduating in 1947, Freeman moved to St. Louis, Missouri. There, she opened her own firm in the Jefferson Bank and Trust Company building in 1949, where she shared space with pediatrician Helen Nash and dentist Ruth Durley Carter. She represented the NAACP for *Brewton v. Board of Education of St. Louis* case in 1950, where she

successfully argued against segregation in a high school aviation program. Later, Freeman served as the lead attorney alongside Constance Baker Motley in *Davis et al. v. the St. Louis Housing Authority*, which ended public housing segregation in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:27 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman was appointed as an assistant attorney general for the State of Missouri in 1951, where she handled local tax cases. Following her success in the *Davis et al. v. the St. Louis Housing Authority*, 1955 case, Freeman was appointed as an associate general counsel for the St. Louis Housing Authority. There, she became involved in urban renewal projects with the St. Louis Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority. In 1958, she was appointed to the state advisory agency of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, where she reported on local civil rights issues. In 1964, she was nominated by President Lyndon Baines Johnson as the first woman to join the national U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In 1965, she held a hearing on voting rights discrimination against African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi, which later influenced the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Freeman recalls the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954 decision, and St. Louis' Pruitt Igoe housing project.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:35 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman was nominated to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1964, where she held hearings on discrimination cases, which varied from citizenship, race, age and gender. In 1967, she served as the national president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., where she focused on social action initiatives. In 1970, she suspended McDonnell Douglas Corporation's state contract due to a lack of affirmative action programs. As a result, Freeman was dismissed from her position at the St. Louis Housing Authority. In 1977, she defended the Native American community against contractual discrimination in Seattle, Washington. Then in 1978, she successfully settled the *Edward Haynie v. Southern*

Illinois University case, which prompted the school of dentistry to change its discriminatory policies. In 1979, she was appointed by President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr. as inspector general of the Community Services Administration. Freeman reflects upon affirmative action and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:29 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman served as inspector general for the Community Services Administration under President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr.’s administration, where she audited public human service agencies to ensure that funds were properly allotted. In 1981, she returned to St. Louis, Missouri, where she joined the law offices of Montgomery Hollie and Associates, LLC. In 1982, Freeman and former commissioner Arthur Fleming founded the bipartisan Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, which reported on the federal government’s enforcement of civil rights laws. In 1996, St. Louis Congressman William Clay, Sr. declared November 24th as Mrs. Frankie Muse Freeman Day, and the Frankie Freeman Homes housing project was later named in her honor. Freeman remembers Clarence Thomas’ nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court, and reflects upon her life, legacy and family. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Frankie Freeman,  
Section A2006\_183\_001\_007, TRT: 0:17:04 2006/12/19

The Honorable Frankie Freeman narrates her photographs.