Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter L. Gordon

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Gordon, Walter L.

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon,

Dates: April 3, 2008

Bulk Dates: 2008

Physical Description: 3 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:31:30).

Abstract: Civil rights attorney Walter L. Gordon (1908 - 2012) practiced law for over sixty years in Los Angeles, where he represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers, including Billie Holiday. He also has an extensive photo collection of notable African Americans including Count Basie and Louis Armstrong. Gordon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 3, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2008_071

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights attorney and photo collector Walter Gordon, Jr. was born on June 22, 1908, in the Ocean Park neighborhood in Santa Monica, California. Originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, Gordon’s parents were well educated and served as community leaders. His father was a mail carrier in South Pasadena and worked for African American owned newspapers and publications including: "The Messenger," "The Negro World," "The Chicago Defender" and "The Crisis." As a youth, Gordon also helped to keep the African American community informed by delivering newspapers to homes and barbershops. He soon became a familiar face in Los Angeles and was recognized by many of its elite crowd.

Gordon attended University of Southern California (USC) Preparatory School where he graduated and went on to enroll at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. After graduating with his degree, he earned his J.D. degree. In 1936, at a time when the Los Angeles legal system was plagued with segregation, Gordon became one of the city’s first attorneys when he established his law practice in the same facility as one of Los Angeles’s oldest African American publications, "The California Eagle." As a neighbor of the publication, he also began collecting photographs given to him by the newspaper’s editor. During the next few decades, his legal practice became a prominent and vital institution in Los Angeles’s downtown and Central Avenue District. He represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers.

In the mid-1940s, when the Los Angeles Police Department began targeting African American night club owners for operating during late night hours without a special permit, Gordon successfully persuaded the court to allow various African American night club owners a special permit to operate. Then, in 1947, he successfully represented a former Hollywood cameraman and owner of Shepp’s Playground, Gordon Sheppard, in an entrapment case. Gordon also represented legendary jazz vocalist, Billie Holliday, in a case in which she allegedly slashed a heckler with a knife after he interrupted her performance of "Strange Fruit."
Gordon has kept a special collection of memorable African American photographs throughout his career. His collection includes valuable photographs of the Langston Law Club, composer Count Basie, musician Louis Armstrong and the black resort Val Verde. In 2003, he was awarded the Shattuck-Price Outstanding Lawyer Award from the Los Angeles County Bar Association, and in 2004, he retired after more than sixty years of practicing law. Gordon's photo collection is housed and made available for scholarly and public access through the Edward L. Doheny, Jr. Memorial Library's Digital Collection, at the University of Southern California.

Walter L. Gordon was interviewed by "The HistoryMakers" on April 3, 2008.

**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Walter L. Gordon was conducted by Jacques Lesure on April 3, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 3 Betacam SP videocassettes. Civil rights attorney Walter L. Gordon (1908 - 2012 ) practiced law for over sixty years in Los Angeles, where he represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers, including Billie Holliday. He also has an extensive photo collection of notable African Americans including Count Basie and Louis Armstrong.

**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:**

Gordon, Walter L., 1908-

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)
Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Gordon, Walter L., 1908---Interviews

African American lawyers--California--Los Angeles--Interviews

Collectors and collecting--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 7/2/2012 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
Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers ® Video Oral History with Walter L. Gordon

Series I: Original Interview Footage, April 3, 2008

Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Section A2008_071_001_001, TRT: 0:31:10
2008/04/01

Walter L. Gordon, Jr. was born on June 22, 1908 in Ocean Park, California to Bertner (nee Lewis) and Walter Gordon, Sr. Gordon’s mother was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She graduated from Southern University and when she moved to California where she took leadership positions in the Parent Teacher Association and the Southern California Alumni Association. Gordon, Sr. was born in Woodville, Mississippi, travelled around the world, worked as an entrepreneur, a postal worker and real estate agent in the Los Angeles area. Gordon, Sr. was a local distributor for various black publications, such as The Crisis, Negro World, and the Chicago Defender. Gordon attended Rose Hill Elementary School on Huntington Drive in Los Angeles, California. He was ostracized by his school principal, Ms. Grisman. After many years of unanswered correspondence, Gordon was able to speak to Ms. Grisman and receive a long awaited validation from her, for all that he had achieved.

African American families--California--Santa Monica.
African American children--Education (Elementary)--California--Los Angeles.
African American neighborhoods--California--Santa Monica.
Parents' and teachers' associations.
African American newspapers-California--Los Angeles.
United States Postal Service – Employees – California.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Section A2008_071_001_002, TRT: 0:29:09
2008/04/01

Walter Gordon depicts his childhood as fun, especially the antics of his father, Walter Gordon Sr. and the love and support from both of his parents. He describes the ethnic demographics of Los Angeles, including the area designated for blacks and the influx of immigrants from Germany (Prussia). Gordon’s family ultimately moved to Churton (sp) Park to avoid dealing with housing discrimination leveled at blacks in California in the 1910s and 1920s. In high school, his best friend was Tommy Miles, a fast talking older student who led Gordon on many adventures. He goes on to explain how his admiration of Harvard University athletes such as Edward Orval “Ned” Gourdin and William Henry “Ham” Lewis, led him to Boston, Massachusetts as soon as he graduated from high school.

African American children--California--Los Angeles--Social life and customs.
African American high school students--California.
Harvard University--20th century.
Lewis, William H. (William Henry), 1868-1949
Los Angeles (Ca.)--Social life and customs.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Section A2008_071_001_003, TRT: 0:31:11
2008/04/01

Walter Gordon had an adventurous high school experience, primarily due to the large imagination of his friend Tommy Miles. In 1924, Gordon boarded a boat in San Francisco and sailed through the Panama Canal to Brooklyn, New York in pursuit of his childhood sweetheart, Madeline Johnson. Ms. Johnson had decided to permanently pass as a white woman, which ended any hopes that Gordon had for a long term romance, he decided to stay in New England.
anyway. In Boston, Massachusetts Gordon was asked to leave the YMCA when the proprietor discovered he was black, he found other housing accommodations with a West Indian doctor, named Dr. McCurty. Gordon continued working at various jobs in Boston and eventually found a position in the mess hall of a ship, serving meals to officers and sailors.

African Americans--Massachusetts--Boston--Social life and customs.
African Americans--California--Los Angeles.
California eagle
Passing (Identity)—New York.
YMCA of the U.S.A.-History.