

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dr. James Williams

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, James, 1919-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams,
Dates:	July 16, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:56:53).
Abstract:	Surgeon and tuskegee airman Dr. James Williams (1919 - 2016) co-founded the Williams Clinic on Chicago's South Side. He also served as Dr. King's physician while Dr. King lived in Chicago. He was also a member of the Tuskegee Airmen as an Engineering Officer after World War II. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 16, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_088
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

As a military officer and physician, Dr. James B. Williams has spent his entire career in public service. Co-founding the Williams Medical Clinic in Chicago with his two brothers, Dr. Jasper F. Williams and Dr. Charles L. Williams, he was also part of a handful of dedicated young men who enlisted and became America's first black airmen, known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

In 1942, with a pre-medicine background, Williams was drafted into the military and given a position with the medical corps at Camp Pickett, Virginia, and was chosen to attend Medical Administrative Officers Candidate School. Wanting to become a pilot, however, he asked to transfer to the Army Air Corps. He was subsequently appointed an aviation cadet and sent to Boca Raton Club, Florida, for basic training. From there, he went to Yale University for technical training, where he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Air Corps. As a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, Williams served as an Engineering Officer in the post war 99th Fighter Squadron. Also during his time in the service, Williams was among the 101 black officers who attempted to integrate a segregated officers' club in what became known as the Freeman Field Mutiny.

Williams, a native of Las Cruces, New Mexico, was born on May 28, 1919 to Clara Belle Williams and Jasper B. Williams and was educated in a segregated grade and high school. He earned his B.S. degree in chemistry from New Mexico State University after finishing his military service, and with dreams of becoming a physician, he earned his M.D. degree from Creighton University School of Medicine. There, he met his future wife, Willeen Brown. Williams continued his medical education and was accepted into Creighton's surgical residency program, earning his M.S. degree in surgery in 1956. With his various medical experiences, he and his brothers established the Williams Clinic on Chicago's South Side. At its peak, there were more than twenty-eight doctors practicing at the clinic. Williams also worked at Chicago's St. Bernard's Hospital in 1957 as its first African American physician, becoming the hospital's chief of surgery from 1971 to 1972. Williams combined his dedication to

progress and medical prowess by meeting with President John F. Kennedy in 1963, as a member of a National Medical Association delegation to advance an amendment to the Hill-Burton Act that would prevent discrimination in hospitals built with federal assistance. Williams also served as physician to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when the civil rights leader lived in Chicago.

Williams and his wife lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The couple had two children: a daughter, Brenda Payton Jones, a former columnist for the *Oakland Tribune*, and a son, Dr. James B. Williams II, colorectal surgeon in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Williams passed away on November 23, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dr. James Williams was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 16, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Surgeon and Tuskegee Airman Dr. James Williams (1919 - 2016) co-founded the Williams Clinic on Chicago's South Side. He also served as Dr. King's physician while Dr. King lived in Chicago. He was also a member of the Tuskegee Airmen as an Engineering Officer after World War II.

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:

Williams, James, 1919-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Williams, James, 1919-2016 --Interviews

African American physicians--Interviews.

African American air pilots--Interviews.

African American soldiers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

Occupations:

Surgeon

Tuskegee Airman

HistoryMakers® Category:

MedicalMakers|MilitaryMakers

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. James Williams, July 16, 2008. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 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

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_001, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Dr. James Williams was born on May 28, 1919 in El Paso, Texas to Clara Drisdale Williams and Jasper Williams. His mother was born in 1885 to former slaves Melinda Drisdale and Isaac Drisdale. She was the first in her family to attend school, and earned a scholarship to Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College in Prairie View, Texas, where she graduated in 1904. Williams' father was born near Cameron, Texas, and attended Wiley University in Marshall, Texas, where he befriended Lawrence A. Nixon, a doctor educated at Meharry Medical College. He and Nixon settled in Cameron; but, after a man was lynched in the town, both moved to El Paso to become involved in civil rights efforts. There, Williams' father ran a drugstore, and served as the first president of the local NAACP chapter. His parents married in 1917, and later moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where they built a homestead, and worked as schoolteachers. Williams' two brothers, Jasper F. Williams and Charles Williams, both trained as doctors.

African American physicians--Interviews.

African American air pilots--Interviews.

African American soldiers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_002, TRT: 0:28:23 ?

Dr. James Williams' father met Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in El Paso, Texas, where he operated a drugstore, and was active in the NAACP. He moved his family from El Paso to Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1924. There, Williams' mother became the city's first black schoolteacher, and his father served as the principal of a black high school for one year, until he was fired by the superintendent for canceling class on President Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Williams grew up on a homestead in Las Cruces, where his family raised vegetables and cotton, and kept a dog to guard their land from cattle ranchers. His younger brother, Charles Williams, was born with a clubfoot, and a doctor from El Paso with a pilot's license often made house calls by plane to care for him. In Las Cruces, Williams and his brothers were honor students at the Booker T. Washington School. Williams's family sometimes attended Phillips Chapel Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, but were not regular churchgoers.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_003, TRT: 0:28:51 ?

Dr. James Williams attended the all-black Booker T. Washington School in Las Cruces, New Mexico. His school lacked the facilities of the white Las Cruces Union High School, which had a gym, library and laboratory. As a teenager, Williams drove his brother to the Tuskegee Institute, where they met George Washington Carver. Upon graduating from high school, Williams enrolled at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, where he took pre-medical classes, and met debate coach Melvin B. Tolson. After two years, Williams transferred to the integrated University of New Mexico, where his peers included pianist John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet. Williams left college to work as a high school principal in Clovis, New Mexico, before being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942. He was assigned to the U.S. Army Medical Corps, but secured a transfer to the U.S. Army Air Corps. After training in Boca Raton, Florida, and then at Yale University, Williams was commissioned as an engineering officer of the 619th Bombardment Squadron.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_004, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Dr. James Williams served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. He initially served in integrated flight squadrons, but was transferred to Freeman Army Airfield in Seymour, Indiana, where Colonel Robert Selway ordered the segregation of the officers' clubs on base. Williams and 101 African American officers at Freeman refused to obey his order, and were arrested and confined to quarters. William T. Coleman, Jr. of the NAACP, represented those arrested, but Williams chose to defend himself at his disciplinary hearing, winning his case. Eventually, he joined the 99th Fighter Squadron in Ohio, where he served under General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and studied at The Ohio State University. Discharged in 1946, Williams returned to Las Cruces, New Mexico to study for a B.S. degree in biochemistry at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. Like his two brothers, Williams pursued a career in the medical field. He was admitted to Creighton University School of Medicine in Omaha, Nebraska.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_005, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Dr. James Williams enrolled at Creighton University School of Medicine in Omaha, Nebraska, where he was the only black student. His protest of the dentistry department's refusal to fill African Americans' cavities led the university president to admit a black dental student; and Williams' brother, Jasper F. Williams, also enrolled at the school, after being injured at the family homestead in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Williams went on to intern at Provident Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. He returned to Creighton University School of Medicine as its first black surgical resident, and was joined the next year by Claude H. Organ, Jr. Williams earned his master's degree in 1956. He moved to Chicago; and, in 1961, opened the Williams Clinic with his brothers. Their patients included Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., minister Louis Rawls and Elijah Muhammad. At the clinic, Williams and his brother also operated on the first infant to suffer a gunshot wound in utero and survive.

Video Oral History Interview with Dr. James Williams, Section A2008_088_001_006, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Dr. James Williams served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, and was a longtime member of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. organization in Chicago, Illinois. He recalls how, even after the integration of the U.S. Air Force in 1948, black trainee pilots were often failed by instructors due to their race. In Chicago, Williams and his brothers operated the Williams Clinic for several

decades. During his medical career, Williams belonged to the American College of Surgeons and the National Medical Association. He also witnessed a decrease in practicing doctors after the growth of health maintenance organizations (HMOs) as insurance providers. In 2002, Williams attended a medical conference in Cuba, and learned about its national health system, which provided treatment and schooling at no cost. Williams reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community; his life, family and legacy; and how he would like to be remembered.