

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Geraldine Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Geraldine
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Geraldine Johnson,
Dates:	April 29, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:19:41).
Abstract:	Teacher Geraldine Johnson (1919 - 2015) was the first African American woman to serve as superintendent of the Bridgeport Public Schools. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 29, 2010, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_004
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Geraldine Johnson is a distinguished retired educator, community activist, and volunteer. She was born on April 11, 1919, in Bridgeport Connecticut – the third in a family of seven children. She grew up in the East End of the city where she attended McKinley, Harding, and Bridgeport Normal Schools, which she later went on to lead as Superintendent of Schools. Johnson received her B.A. degree in teacher education at New Haven Teachers College (now SCSU) in 1940 and her M.A. degree at New York University in 1959. Following graduate school, she went on to earn her sixth-year professional certificate at the University of Bridgeport in 1969.

In 1961, Johnson became a principal after achieving the number one score on Bridgeport's civil service examination. She served in many other educational capacities as well and taught first, seventh, and eighth grade, as well as a music class. She also worked as a Director of Title I Programs in Bridgeport, assisting disadvantaged pupils with achievement in school programs. In 1969, she served as the Assistant Superintendent of Bridgeport Public Schools, the second largest school system in Connecticut. She went on to become Superintendent of Schools in 1976, notably working through the 19-day teachers' strike over salary contracts in 1978. She became Interim Superintendent of Schools in Fairfield, Connecticut in 1986, after her retirement in 1981.

Governor Ella Grasso listed Johnson as one of Connecticut's 100 Most Distinguished Women in 1976. The Girl Scouts also named her a "Woman of Distinction." She was bestowed Honorary Doctorate Degrees from Fairfield University, Sacred Heart University, and the University of Bridgeport. To honor her work as a superintendent and her commitment to education, in 2008 a new elementary school was dedicated to her and named the Geraldine W. Johnson School.

Geraldine Johnson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 29, 2010.

Johnson passed away on November 28, 2015.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Geraldine Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 29, 2010, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Teacher Geraldine Johnson (1919 - 2015) was the first African American woman to serve as superintendent of the Bridgeport Public Schools.

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:

Johnson, Geraldine

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Geraldine--Interviews

African American women educators

Organizations:

Occupations:

Teacher

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Geraldine Johnson, April 29, 2010. 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).

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 Geraldine Johnson, Section
A2010_004_001_001, TRT: 0:29:24 2010/04/29

Geraldine Johnson was born on April 11, 1919 in Bridgeport, Connecticut to Alice Whiting Farrar and Edward Farrar. Johnson's paternal grandparents, Plummer Farrar and Annie Farrar, raised her father on their farm in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. He left school before graduating, and became a power engineer at the Bridgeport Brass Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where there were few African Americans. Johnson's mother was born in 1893 in Fauquier County, Virginia; and moved at a young age to Connecticut, where Johnson's maternal grandmother, Mary Williams Whiting, worked in domestic service in Westport. Johnson's mother did not complete high school, and opened a salon in Bridgeport after attending beauty school in New Haven, Connecticut. She was active at Bridgeport's Phyllis Wheatley Branch YWCA, and served for fifty years as the organist at the Walters Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. Johnson also describes her close relationship with her father, as well as his love of storytelling.

Video Oral History Interview with Geraldine Johnson, Section
A2010_004_001_002, TRT: 0:30:05 2010/04/29

Geraldine Johnson was the third of seven children born to her parents, Alice Whiting Farrar and Edward Farrar. She grew up in the East End of Bridgeport, Connecticut, where her family was the only African American household in the neighborhood. As a result, she experienced racial discrimination from an early age, and was sometimes accosted on the street with racial slurs. Johnson began her education at Bridgeport's McKinley School, where her maternal aunt, Lillian Whiting Hamilton, was one of the

first African American faculty members. Johnson's mother encouraged her to be active with the YWCA and Girl Scouts, and to learn to play the piano and cello. Johnson aspired to become a teacher, but was discouraged by an instructor at Warren Harding High School. Nevertheless, after graduating in 1936, she enrolled at the Bridgeport Normal School, and completed her degree at the New Haven Teachers College. Johnson also describes her talkative personality and her childhood nickname, Mouth Almighty.

Video Oral History Interview with Geraldine Johnson, Section A2010_004_001_003, TRT: 0:29:35 2010/04/29

Geraldine Johnson enrolled in 1936 at the Bridgeport Normal School in Bridgeport, Connecticut; and, in 1940, completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education at the New Haven Teachers College in New Haven, Connecticut. She became a first grade teacher in 1942 at Bridgeport's Prospect School, but was unsatisfied with early education, and transferred to the McKinley School to teach the eighth grade. She went on to study school administration at New York University and the University of Bridgeport. From 1961 to 1964, Johnson served as the principal of the Wheeler School and then the Washington School in Bridgeport. She was recruited as the Bridgeport Public Schools' director of developmental programs, and later promoted to assistant superintendent. When the role of superintendent became available, Johnson was recommended by the search committee, but the school board ignored their advice. Johnson prepared a lawsuit; and, under pressure from civil rights groups, the school board awarded her the position.

Video Oral History Interview with Geraldine Johnson, Section A2010_004_001_004, TRT: 0:29:03 2010/04/29

Geraldine Johnson was the first African American woman to serve as the superintendent of the Bridgeport Public Schools. Despite opposition from several members of the school board, she began her tenure in 1976; and, from that time, focused on truancy reduction, after school programs and student competency in reading and arithmetic. She also negotiated with the district's teachers during a strike in 1978. Johnson retired in 1981 at the age of sixty-two

years old, and served briefly as the interim superintendent of Fairfield Public Schools in 1986. The Geraldine W. Johnson School, an elementary school in Bridgeport, Connecticut, was named in her honor in 2008. Johnson shares her perspective on the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was designed by activist Marian Wright Edelman. She also talks about her marriage from 1942 to 1961 to Robert Carson, with whom she had one child, Adrienne Farrar Houel; and her brief marriage to George Johnson.

Video Oral History Interview with Geraldine Johnson, Section
A2010_004_001_005, TRT: 0:21:34 2010/04/29

Geraldine Johnson was active with numerous civic organizations, including The Links, the Council on Adolescent Pregnancy and the NAACP. For her service to the community, she was named a Woman of Distinction by the Girl Scouts of the United States of America. Johnson's daughter, Adrienne Farrar Houel, was active in the environmental movement, and raised Johnson's three grandchildren. Johnson reflects upon her life and legacy, and then concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.