

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marlene Johnson

---

## 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>	Johnson, Marlene L., 1936-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marlene Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 2, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:19:02).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Newspaper reporter and assistant editor Marlene Johnson (1936 - ), former assistant editor at the the Washington Times and past executive editor at Redding Communications, Inc., filed and won a class-action discrimination lawsuit against the Associated Press in Detroit, Michigan that led to a training program for minority journalists. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 2, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_066
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Newspaper reporter and assistant editor Marlene L. Johnson was born on November 22, 1936 in Rochester, New York and raised by foster parents on a small farm in Avon. At age twelve, she was stricken with polio. Johnson attended Second Baptist Church in Mumford, N.Y. where Reverend Mordecai W. Johnson once was pastor. She graduated from Geneseo Central High School and then received her A.A. degree from the University of Buffalo. Johnson moved to Detroit, Michigan and earned her B.S. degree in secondary education and English from Wayne State University in 1973. She went on to earn her M.S. degree in media instructional systems from the University of the District of Columbia in 1983. In 2007, Johnson graduated from the Howard University School of Divinity with her M.A. degree in religious studies.

Johnson began her career in journalism as a general assignment reporter for the Associated Press in Detroit. She sued the Associated Press in 1973 on behalf of African Americans and women after being terminated without just cause. A court upheld her claims of discrimination and handed down a landmark decision. This ruling was the catalyst for the establishment of a formal training program for minority journalists at the Associated Press. In 1975, Johnson moved to Washington, D.C. to work for The Newspaper Guild. From 1976 to 1992 she was a public relations practitioner for nonprofit organizations including the National Urban League and the National 4-H Council.

Johnson served as the assistant editor of the “Features” and the “Arts & Entertainment” sections of the *Washington Times* from 1994 until 2004. She covered stories at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the National Gallery of the Arts, and the Warner Theater. In 2007, Johnson became the executive editor for the online newspapers owned by Redding Communications, Inc., which included the *The Washington Continent* and the *Redding News Review*. She left Redding Communications in April of 2008 to pursue personal writing projects.

Johnson also has worked for the National Caucus and Center on Black Aged and the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing. She is an active member in the National Association of Black Journalists and has supervised student reporters for the *NABJ Monitor*. In addition, Johnson founded Grapevine Communications, a media consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

Johnson received the Excellence of Lifestyle or Entertainment Pages Award from the Virginia Press Association in 1998; and the SPJ Washington Dateline Award for Excellence in local journalism in 2000.

Marlene L. Johnson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 2, 2013.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Marlene Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 2, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper reporter and assistant editor Marlene Johnson (1936 - ), former assistant editor at the the Washington Times and past executive editor at Redding Communications, Inc., filed and won a class-action discrimination lawsuit against the Associated Press in Detroit, Michigan that led to a training program for minority journalists.

---

## 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, Marlene L., 1936-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Johnson, Marlene L., 1936- --Interviews

---

African American editors--Interviews.

---

African American journalists--Interviews.

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Washington Times

---

## Occupations:

Newspaper Reporter

---

Assistant Editor

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

---

## 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 Marlene Johnson, March 2, 2013. 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 Marlene Johnson, Section A2013\_066\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:18 ?

Marlene Johnson describes her family background and her youth as a foster child in Avon, New York. She remembers very little of her time in her birthplace, Rochester, New York, but knew her grandmother and mother, with whom she would later reconnect and live with in Detroit. She did not know the identity of her biological father and her relatives worked to keep his identity unknown. At the age of five, Johnson left Rochester, New York, and moved to Avon with her foster parents, George and Edna Wilson, whom she lived with until the age of eleven. She describes the joy of growing up on a farm, the deep influence Edna had upon her growth as a young woman, and the profound impact that George had upon her religious education. At age eleven, she moved in with her second foster family, Edna and Henry Cottam. She reminisces about her time in high school in Geneseo, New York, where she developed a love for learning and athletics.

African American families--United States.

Childhood and youth--United States.

African American--Foster children--New York (State).

African Americans--Education, Secondary--New York (State)--Geneseo.

African Americans--Religion--New York (State).

Video Oral History Interview with Marlene Johnson, Section A2013\_066\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:24 ?

Marlene Johnson attended high school in Geneseo, New York and describes her pleasant experience there. Her foster family consisted of Henry and Edna Cottam, her two foster siblings, Warren and Sandra, her cousin, and herself. Edna and Johnson eventually moved to Geneseo, bringing Johnson with them and thereby taking Johnson away from her foster siblings. She reminisces about her high school jobs as a bean picker and a babysitter. Johnson graduated from high school in 1954 and received a scholarship to attend the University of Buffalo, where she pursued an associate's degree in secretarial science. Her initial experience in Buffalo was hard as she was saved by a local minister who found her left out in the cold and snow by her brother's wife. Johnson graduated from the University of Buffalo in 1956 when she was nineteen years old and was hired as a secretary by the federal government.

African American--Foster children--New York (State).

African American families--United States.

African Americans--Education, Secondary--New York (State)--Geneseo.

University of Buffalo.

Video Oral History Interview with Marlene Johnson, Section A2013\_066\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:27 ?

Marlene Johnson describes her move to Detroit, Michigan, where she

reconnected with her biological mother and began secretarial work for the Veteran's Administration. She recalls her first experiences with racial discrimination at the Veteran's Administration and her interest in politics, activism and literature. In 1959, Johnson was hired as a secretary at Wright State University, where she eventually earned her B.S. degree in English and secondary education. In 1964, she then left Wright State and was hired at General Motors before working for Hughes Aircraft and Ebony Magazine as a secretary in Los Angeles for a brief period. In 1968, she returned to Detroit during the political unrest that surrounded Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. After working for Congressman John Conyers for a brief period, Johnson was hired as a journalist for the Associated Press. However, she then sued them in 1973 in a class action suit after being terminated without just cause.

United States. Veterans Administration.

African American mothers--Michigan--Detroit.

Wright State University.

King, Martin Luther Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

Conyers, John, 1929-

Associated Press.

Class actions (Civil procedure).

Video Oral History Interview with Marlene Johnson, Section A2013\_066\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:23 ?

Marlene Johnson describes the law suit she filed against the Associated Press in 1972, and how she had difficulty finding another job in the newspaper industry. Johnson was finally hired by the Newspaper Guild in Washington, D.C. in 1975. She then began her work in public relations in 1976 working for various nonprofit organizations, including the National Urban League and the National 4-H Council. She also tells of her experience as the Assistant Editor of Features and the Assistant Metro Editor at the Washington Times, where she was criticized for writing 'too many black stories'.

Associated Press.

Class actions (Civil procedure).

Newspaper Guild.

Washington times herald.

National Urban League.

National 4-H Council (U.S.).

Video Oral History Interview with Marlene Johnson, Section A2013\_066\_001\_005, TRT: 5:25:30 ?

Marlene Johnson resigned from her position at the Washington Times in 2004 in order to pursue her Master's Degree in Divinity School from Howard University. Her favorite teachers there included Dr. Eugene Rice, Kane Hope Felder and Cheryl Saunders. Her Master's thesis focused on the political and humanitarian responses to Hurricane Katrina. She also expresses her concern on black on black crime and the need to rediscover the moral leadership of those like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Johnson reflects upon her legacy as an activist and someone who filed suit against the Associated Press. Finally, she talks about how she wants to be remembered.

Howard University.

African American leadership--United States.

Rice, Eugene F.

Associated Press.

## Hurricane Katrina, 2005.