

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable George Forbes

---

## 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>	Forbes, George Lawrence, 1931-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George Forbes,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 9, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:28:16).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer and city council member The Honorable George Forbes (1931 - ) was the first African American elected as president of the Cleveland City Council and a founding partner of Rogers, Hornton & Forbes, the first African American law firm in Cleveland, Ohio and the largest minority-owned law firm in the State of Ohio. Forbes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 9, 2013, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_164
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and city council member George L Forbes was born on April 4, 1931 in Memphis, Tennessee to Cleveland and Eleanor Forbes. He served a two-year tour of duty in the U.S. Marine Corps after graduating from high school and then moved to the Cleveland area in the 1950s. Forbes received his B.A. degree from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio in 1957 and his J.D. degree from the Cleveland Marshall College of Law in 1961. He was admitted to both the Ohio State Bar Association and the Federal Bar Association in 1962.

In 1963, he secured a seat on the Cleveland City Council where he served in various capacities for the next twenty-seven years. He assisted Carl B. Stokes in his 1967 mayoral campaign, making Stokes the first black mayor of a major U.S. city, and helped to establish the 21st District Congressional Caucus which improve race relations within the Ohio Democratic Party. In 1971, Forbes became a founding partner of Rogers, Hornton & Forbes (now Forbes, Fields & Associates Co., L.P.A.) – the first African American law firm established in Cleveland, Ohio and the largest minority-owned law firm in the State of Ohio. In 1973, Forbes became the first African American to be elected as president of the Cleveland City Council where he served until 1989, and was instrumental in the merging of the city-owned Cleveland Transit System with the new Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority in 1974. In 1992, Forbes was elected as president of the Cleveland Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Forbes served in a number of civic organizations, including the Cleveland Chapter of The National Urban League, the Council of Economic Opportunity, the Businessmen’s Interracial Committee on Community Affairs, the John Harlan Law Club, and the National Association of Defense Lawyers for Criminal Cases. In 1990, Cleveland State University honored Forbes with the Distinguished Alumni Award. In addition, Forbes received Honorary Doctorate degrees from Central State University in 1989 and Baldwin-Wallace College in 1990. Forbes received the top honor bestowed by the NAACP, the Freedom Award, in 2009.

Forbes is married to Mary Fleming Forbes. They have three daughters, Lauren Forbes, Mildred Forbes and Helen Forbes Fields, and three grandchildren, William, Camille, and Brando

George L. Forbes was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 9, 2013.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable George Forbes was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 9, 2013, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer and city council member The Honorable George Forbes (1931 - ) was the first African American elected as president of the Cleveland City Council and a founding partner of Rogers, Hornton & Forbes, the first African American law firm in Cleveland, Ohio and the largest minority-owned law firm in the State of Ohio.

---

# 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:

Forbes, George Lawrence, 1931-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

Lawyer

---

City Council Member

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers|PoliticalMakers

---

## **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 George Forbes, May 9, 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 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 The Honorable George Forbes,  
Section A2013\_164\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:12 2013/05/09

The Honorable George Forbes was born on April 4, 1931 in Memphis, Tennessee to Elnora Bradley Forbes and Cleveland Forbes. He traced his paternal ancestry to late 18th century Mississippi, where his great-great-grandmother, Betty Forbes, was enslaved by his great-great-grandfather, U.S. Army Colonel Alexander Young. Generations later, Forbes' father was born in 1891 in Natchez, Mississippi. He was employed at the Buckeye Cotton Oil Company distillery in Memphis, until he lost his arm in a workplace accident. From that time, he worked in the company's cotton fields, and was frequently absent from the home where Forbes' mother raised him and his eight siblings. Forbes' mother was born in 1893 to Eliza Bradley Lynch in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. Like two of her three sisters, she was the daughter of a white rapist, and was adopted by her mother's husband, Joseph Lynch. With her mother and adoptive father, she helped found the Princeton Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church in Memphis.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George Forbes,  
Section A2013\_164\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:25 2013/05/09

The Honorable George lived with his family near the railroad tracks in the all-black Hyde Park neighborhood of

Memphis, Tennessee. His mother, Elnora Bradley Forbes, had nine children, including his youngest sister, Catherine Forbes, who passed away at one year old. His father was sometimes absent from the home, so Forbes was mostly influenced by his maternal grandfather, Joseph Lynch, who lived across the street. As a child, Forbes worked with his family in the cotton fields, and often traveled to Missouri and Arkansas for seasonal work. As a result, he sometimes missed the start of the school year at the all-black Hyde Park Elementary School and Manassas High School in Memphis. Additionally, Forbes talks about political corruption in the City of Memphis during the early 20th century, under the leadership of Democratic politician E.H. Crump; and remembers the city's strict segregation and poll taxes, which prevented many African Americans from voting.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George Forbes,  
Section A2013\_164\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:05 2013/05/09

The Honorable George Forbes began his education at the all-black Hyde Park Elementary School in Memphis, Tennessee. He was influenced by his history and music teachers, and enjoyed studying English. In 1945, Forbes enrolled at Manassas High School in Memphis, where he participated in the speakers and writers club under the leadership of English teacher Bebe Bowers Fingal. After class, Forbes worked as a cook at the Peabody Hotel and Parkview Hotel in Memphis. He earned a high school diploma in 1949, and went on to attend Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. At this point in the interview, Forbes recalls his decision to become a lawyer, which was influenced by his early experiences in Memphis. There, he witnessed police brutality against African Americans, and was removed from an otherwise all-white courtroom during the trial of a black boy who was accused of killing a white man. The child was then sentenced by the white judge to death by electrocution.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George Forbes,  
Section A2013\_164\_001\_004, TRT: 4:32:40 2013/05/09

The Honorable George Forbes grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, where he and his black peers were frequently harassed and assaulted by the police. After graduating

from high school in 1949, he spent the summer in Chicago, Illinois, where he worked as a porter at the Wallen Fine Furniture Company. In 1950, Forbes joined his brother, Zeke Forbes, in Cleveland, Ohio, where he secured a position at the Cleaners Hangers Company. In 1951, he was drafted into the U.S. Marine Corps, and served for two years as a cook on bases in South Carolina, Florida and Virginia. After being discharged, Forbes matriculated at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, where he began to develop an interest in politics. He majored in political science, served as the president of the Young Democratic Club and was mentored by his history professor, Themistocles Rodis. Forbes graduating in 1953; and, many years later, was invited to join the faculty of Berea College, where he taught political science for ten years.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable George Forbes,  
Section A2013\_164\_001\_005, TRT: 5:24:54 2013/05/09

The Honorable George Forbes earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio in 1957. He secured work as a schoolteacher and mail truck driver in Cleveland, Ohio, and matriculated at the Cleveland Marshall School of Law during the administration of Dean Wilson Gesner Stapleton. His classmates included Clarence Rogers, who later became his law partner. After earning a J.D. degree in 1963, Forbes worked as a legal advisor for Lewis Robinson and the Freedom Fighters, a division of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Cleveland. Under the leadership of Ruth Turner, CORE was also instrumental in the movement to desegregate Cleveland's schools. At this point in the interview, Forbes remembers civil rights leader Reverend James Lawson, who was a fellow alumnus of Baldwin-Wallace College; and President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was elected in 1963. In addition, Forbes recalls meeting his wife, social worker Mary Fleming Forbes.