

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James M. Douglas

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## 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>	Douglas, James Matthew, 1944-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 4, 2014 and May 5, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	17 uncompressed MOV digital video files (8:23:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Law professor and university president James M. Douglas (1944 - ) served as president of Texas Southern University from 1995 to 1999. Douglas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 4, 2014 and May 5, 2014, in Houston, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_068
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Law professor and university president James Matthew Douglas was born on February 11, 1944 in Onalaska, Texas to Desso and Mary Douglas. He graduated from Texas Southern University in 1966 with his B.A. degree in mathematics. In 1970, Douglas received his J.D. degree from Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School Of Law, where he graduated first in his class. He went on to receive his J.S.M. degree in computer law from Stanford University in 1971.

From 1966 to 1971, Douglas worked as a computer analyst for Singer Simulation Company, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) contractor

in Houston, Texas. In 1971, he was hired as an assistant professor of law at Texas Southern University. Douglas then worked as an assistant professor at Cleveland State University School of Law from 1972 to 1975; associate professor of law and associate dean at Syracuse University College of Law from 1975 to 1980; and professor of law at Northeastern University School of Law from 1980 to 1981. Then, in 1981, Douglas returned to Texas Southern University, where he was hired as dean and professor of law at the university's Thurgood Marshall School of Law. He served as interim provost and senior vice president for academic affairs in 1995, and, later that year, was named president of Texas Southern University. After his presidency ended in 1999, Douglas was named a distinguished professor of law at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law. He also served as Florida A & M University's interim dean from 2005 to 2007, and was made executive vice president of Texas Southern University in 2008.

Douglas has served on the board of directors of the Hiscock Legal Society, Gulf Coast Legal Foundation and the Law School Admission Council. He was also a member of the Minority Affairs Committee of the Law School Admission Council, served as the American Bar Association's chairman of education for the Committee of Science and Technology Section, and was a member of *The Texas Lawyer* Editorial Board. He has also authored several articles that have appeared in scholarly journals.

Douglas lives in Houston, Texas and is married to Tanya Smith Douglas. He has three children: DeLicia, James and Erika.

James Douglas was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 4, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James M. Douglas was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 4, 2014 and May 5, 2014, in Houston, Texas, and was recorded on 17 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Law professor and university president James M. Douglas (1944 - ) served as president of Texas Southern University from 1995 to 1999.

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## 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®.

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## **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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Douglas, James Matthew, 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Douglas, James Matthew, 1944---Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

## **Occupations:**

Law Professor

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University President

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers|EducationMakers

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## **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 James M. Douglas, March 4, 2014 and May 5, 2014. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:14 2014/03/04

James M. Douglas was born on February 11, 1944 in Onalaska, Texas. His mother, Mary Dirden Douglas, was born near 1926 in Onalaska. Her maiden name was originally spelled “Durden” but had been changed by her brother when he migrated from Onalaska to Houston, Texas. Douglas’ maternal family descended from Georgia and his mother completed school through the eighth grade. Douglas’ father, Desso Douglas, was born in 1921 in Onalaska also. He attended school through the eleventh grade and wanted to attend college, but married instead. He made sure, however, that all nine of his children earned a college degree. Douglas’ parents were married in 1941 and moved to Houston, Texas in 1947. Both Douglas’ maternal and paternal families were farming families and owned land in Onalaska. In the 1960s, the Dirden’s land was seized under eminent domain and flooded to create a lake. Douglas describes celebrating Juneteenth; taking after his father; and his grandmother, Annie Dirden.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_001\_002, TRT: 2:32:06 2014/03/04

James M. Douglas moved to the Fifth Ward community in Houston, Texas in 1947. In 1953, his family left the Fifth Ward for Kashmere Gardens, where they were the only African American family in the neighborhood. Douglas attended Atherton Elementary School, a segregated elementary school located in the Fifth Ward, through the fifth grade and remembers an influential teacher named Ms. Sledge. He attended E.O. Smith Junior High School

and Kashmere Gardens Junior Senior High School. Douglas planned to enroll at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas and law school shortly afterward. Douglas hoped that all of his siblings would attend HBCUs and though all of them graduated from college, two of them attended predominantly white institutions. Douglas describes his earliest childhood memory, the sights, sounds, and smells of his childhood, and growing up in the Baptist church.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:25 2014/03/04

James M. Douglas attended Kashmere Junior Senior High School in Houston, Texas from 1959 to 1962. As a student, he worked as a toy repairman and butcher. Douglas graduated from high school with honors, however, he challenged his teachers and principal often. Douglas was active in student government and organized a student strike in his senior year. Consequently, the principal did not allow the senior class to walk across the stage at commencement. There was a strong national interest in the natural sciences in the 1960s, however, Douglas maintained an interest in law. He had grown fascinated with Texas Southern University, a historically black college in Houston, at twelve years old when he participated in an enrichment program there. Douglas did not experience racial violence in Houston, however, racial tension had been present. Douglas describes hostile situations, including riding in the front of public busses and waiting in the white area of the doctor's office.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:30 2014/03/04

James M. Douglas was an outspoken leader on campus at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. He wanted to change the paternal attitude of the college's administration and was often critical of the administration. He was not concerned, however, that he could be expelled for his activism. Douglas was initially a math major, and switched to political science following his freshman year. He remembers an influential math professor named Dr. Laryon Clarkson. Douglas earned his B.A. degree in 1966 and enrolled in the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at

Texas Southern. He dropped out, however, and joined IBM shortly as an analyst. He left IBM to join Singer Simulation when the Singer Company had had a contract with NASA in the fall of 1966. Douglas returned to law school in 1967 and talks about the former president of Texas Southern University, Dr. Samuel Nabrit, as well as the civil rights organizing of HistoryMakers Revered Bill Lawson and Pluria Marshall, Sr.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:50 2014/03/04

James M. Douglas talks about Eugene Harrington, his favorite professor in the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University. Douglas graduated from the law school in 1970. He completed research in computer law at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California for one year; and, in 1971, began teaching computer law at his alma mater, Texas Southern University. In 1972, Douglas was recruited to teach at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in Cleveland, Ohio after having been recommended to Dean Craig W. Christensen. The opportunity appealed to Douglas because Ohio had the first computerized legal research database and he had an interest in how top law schools operated and in bringing that knowledge back to Texas Southern University. Douglas moved into the administration at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law and, in 1975, Christensen presented Douglas with an associate deanship opportunity as well as associate professorship at the Syracuse University Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_002\_006, TRT: 6:32:03 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas developed a close relationship with the fourth president of Texas Southern University (T.S.U.) in Houston, Texas, Dr. Granville M. Sawyer, Sr. As a law school student in The Thurgood Marshall School of Law at T.S.U., Douglas worked full-time as a computer analyst at Link flight simulation, a division of the Singer Company that had a contract with NASA. As a Singer employee, Douglas established a program to train employees in software coding and revised the software for a flight simulator. In 1972, he graduated from Stanford

University Law School, in Palo Alto, California with a Master of the Science of the Law, J.S.M., with a focus on the intersection of computer science and law. Douglas, in turn, received several offers to teach computer law. While at Stanford, Douglas clashed with the dean of the law school over the school's policies for admitting minority students. He had also been investigated by the Ronald Reagan gubernatorial administration for his student work with legal services.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_007, TRT: 7:30:28 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas describes entering college administration at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in Cleveland, Ohio, as well as working with a difficult colleague at the Singer Company. The dean of the law school, Craig W. Christensen, recruited Douglas into the administration for his unique interest in administrative matters. In 1975, Douglas accepted a position as associate dean and associate professor at Syracuse University College of Law. The decision was difficult for Douglas considering it would delay his return to Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. At Syracuse, Douglas encountered resistance to his appointment from students as opposed to faculty. When he was up for tenure, a student started a petition to reject his tenure recommendation. Douglas improved the operation of the law school and successfully negotiated the transfer of control over the law school library. In 1980, he accepted a position at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_008, TRT: 8:30:33 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas actively recruited African American students as an administrator at both Cleveland-Marshall Law School in Cleveland, Ohio and Syracuse University College of Law in Syracuse, New York. Douglas was active in the American Bar Association and discovered that the law school admissions formula used by the ABA disadvantaged students from historically black colleges and universities. During his tenure, he successfully convinced the law school at both Cleveland State and

Syracuse to eliminate the formula from their admissions practices. In 1980, he took a position on the faculty of Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts, which had a unique experiential legal education program. He remained at Northeastern a year before getting word of a deanship opportunity at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University. Douglas also talks about technological developments in the legal sector, the impact of the 1973 Watergate hearings, and former President Jimmy Carter.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_009, TRT: 9:32:56 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas describes his experience on faculty at the Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts. Douglas encountered several logistical problems with the Northeastern cooperative law program's mode of operation. He received word of a deanship opportunity at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University while also learning that the faculty at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law thought that he had refused several offers to join the faculty. Douglas had never received nor refused such an offer, and after the departure of Dean Otis King, Douglas was offered deanship at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law and began his tenure there in 1981. He had also been considered for deanship at the Northeastern University School of Law before his departure. Douglas talks about his philosophy toward legal education, why he enjoyed law school and the problems he encountered as dean of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_010, TRT: 10:28:29 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas was appointed Dean of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas in 1981 and held the position for fifteen years. When he began tenure, the law school was on the brink of losing its accreditation from the American Bar Association (ABA). His goals were to regain the school's good standing and increase its revenue. He successfully increased the revenue; however, the faculty committee would not approve his long-term improvement plan.

Douglas bypassed the faculty and approached the president of the university—Dr. Leonard H.O. Spearman, the ABA, and the university board. He was granted broader power by the board, but continued battling with the faculty. An early issue Douglas faced as dean was over the absence of Mexican American representation for Mexican American students on the academic standing and admissions committee. Douglas talks about dealing with difficult faculty and describes the history of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_011, TRT: 11:30:57 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas was critical of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University when he arrived as dean in 1981. Douglas' critiques included the faculty was not demanding enough; students came to class unprepared; and professors had been stating the facts of a case as opposed to requiring students to state the facts. From Douglas' perspective, students had not been putting the necessary effort into their classes, and therefore had been struggling to pass the bar exam. The students had not developed proper study habits, or comprehension and analytical skills. One student accused Douglas of calling the students "dumb" because Douglas criticized their preparation for the bar exam. Douglas made an effort to have the number of required courses increased in the law school curriculum. He talks about gaining the support for his improvement plans from the chairman of the Board of Regents.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_012, TRT: 12:30:34 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas was named dean of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University (T.S.U.) in 1981. In 1985, the Texas legislature convened a committee on higher education. Their observations had potential implications on the future of T.S.U. Douglas attended the committee meetings but T.S.U.'s President, Dr. Robert J. Terry, was often absent. On the day of T.S.U.'s hearing before the committee, Douglas, with the support of HistoryMaker Wilhelmina Delco, gathered enough support to force the committee to postpone any

decisions until T.S.U. had proper representation. Douglas talks about his relationships with T.S.U. President Dr. William H. Harris, receiving a public endorsement from a Texas governor and negotiating budget cuts. He talks about the merger of Tennessee State University and the University of Tennessee at Nashville negotiated by HistoryMaker Frederick Humphries and a similar proposal, which was discarded, that proposed T.S.U. merge with the University of Houston—Downtown.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_013, TRT: 13:31:42 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas lobbied to increase the revenue of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law during his tenure as dean. However, he disagreed with the president of Texas Southern University at the time, Dr. William H. Harris, over the allocation of the funds. Douglas was appointed Interim Provost at Texas Southern University by Dr. Joann Horton. One of the early problems he addressed as provost was a technology glitch during student registration. After Dr. Joann Horton resigned as president, Douglas was appointed as interim president; and, in December 1994, was appointed president of the university and began his tenure in 1995. During both his tenure as president and dean, Douglas dealt with lawsuits from white professors claiming discrimination in salary and hiring. Douglas uses a compelling analogy to explain the reason he wanted to be president of T.S.U. and talks about his first two encounters with former T.S.U. president Dr. Joann Horton.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section A2014\_068\_002\_014, TRT: 14:33:29 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas succeeded in keeping Texas Southern University (T.S.U.) in Houston, Texas solvent, even after the U.S. Department of Education put the school on a reimbursement plan in 1996. Douglas refutes claims that the state had to bail out the school. According to Douglas, such accusations stem from a desire to close T.S.U. He kept T.S.U. independent of any of systems of higher education in Texas. He handled a number of lawsuits against the university and lost only one, which Douglas considers was due to poor management of the case by its lawyer. Douglas convinced the Law School Admissions

Committee to do a study on the performance of African and Mexican Americans on the bar exam, which was published in 1998. The study showed evidence of the lower performance of those two groups, but not a reason for the lower scores. Douglas talks about the mission of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University and acknowledges experiencing difficulty educating underprepared students.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_002\_015, TRT: 15:30:22 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas was asked by the board of regents of Texas Southern University (T.S.U.) to step down from his presidency in 1999. He negotiated with the board for an acceptable pay package and transitioned back to teaching on the faculty of Thurgood Marshall School of Law. Douglas had a lot of conflict with T.S.U. board member HistoryMaker Alphonso P. Jackson, who wanted Douglas removed as president of T.S.U. In 2001, HistoryMaker Frederick Humphries asked Douglas to design the law school at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (F.A.M.U.) in Tallahassee, Florida. In 2005, he took a position as interim dean of F.A.M.U. College of Law. Douglas talks about the settlements in cases historically black colleges and universities brought against states for underfunding HBCUs. Douglas also talks about former T.S.U. president Priscilla Slade, T.S.U. board member Willard L. Jackson, and faculty salaries at Thurgood Marshall School of Law.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_002\_016, TRT: 16:29:19 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas helped design the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (F.A.M.U.) College of Law in Orlando, Florida. The school, which was established in 2002, was the second law school in Florida A&M's history. The first law school was closed in 1965, when the Florida legislature diverted funds from F.A.M.U. to establish Florida State University College of Law in Tallahassee, Florida. Douglas returned to Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas and was appointed executive vice president in 2008 by university President Dr. John M. Rudley. In 2011, Rudley appointed him vice president for

governmental and community relations. Douglas was instrumental in founding the University Museum at Texas Southern University, an African American art museum. Douglas is active in 100 Black Men, the NAACP, and the Boy Scouts. He talks about salaries at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the Black Law Student Association at Thurgood Marshall School of Law, and being pro-black in white environments.

Video Oral History Interview with James M. Douglas, Section  
A2014\_068\_002\_017, TRT: 17:15:47 2014/05/05

James M. Douglas talks about his family and shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He considers his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.