

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gordon J. Davis

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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>	Davis, Gordon J.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 13, 2016 and July 17, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014 and 2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:14:49).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer and civic leader Gordon J. Davis (1941 - ) a partner with the law firm of Venable, LLP, was the first African American commissioner of Parks and Recreation for the City of New York, as well as first African American president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 13, 2016 and July 17, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_205
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and civic leader Gordon J. Davis was born on August 7, 1941, in Chicago, Illinois to William Allison Davis and Elizabeth Stubbs Davis. Davis grew up near a predominantly African American neighborhood, where he gained a passion for jazz and the arts. He graduated from Williams College in 1963 with his B.A. degree, and then from Harvard Law School in 1967 with his J.D. degree.

Upon graduation, Davis moved to New York City and worked as special assistant

to Mayor John Lindsay. He served on the New York City Planning Commission from 1973 until 1978, when he was appointed New York City's first African American commissioner of Parks and Recreation. During his service as commissioner, Davis was instrumental in the founding of the Central Park Conservancy. In 1983, Davis resigned as commissioner of Parks and Recreation and joined the law firm of Lord, Day & Lord. He began serving as counsel to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that same year. In 1990, he became the founding chairman of Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Davis was named partner at the law firm of LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae in 1994, but left in 2001 when he was voted the first African American president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Davis held this position for nine months before returning to LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae as a senior partner. In 2002, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the organization overseeing the redevelopment of the Ground Zero site, became his client. Davis was named partner at Dewey & LeBoeuf in 2007, after a merger joined LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae and Dewey Ballantine. In 2012, he moved to Venable, LLP as a partner. Davis' clients have included the New York Public Library, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, the United States Tennis Association, and the American Museum of Natural History.

Davis has served on the board of directors of the Municipal Art Society of New York as well as other civic and arts organizations in New York City. In 2001, he was honored by 100 Black Men for his public service, and was named one of "America's Top Black Lawyers" by *Black Enterprise* magazine the following year. He was appointed to a six-year term on the board of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts by President Barack Obama in 2010.

Davis lives in New York City with his wife, and has one daughter.

Gordon J. Davis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 17, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gordon J. Davis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 13, 2016 and July 17, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer and civic leader Gordon J. Davis (1941 - ) a partner with the law firm of Venable, LLP, was the first African American commissioner of Parks and Recreation for the City of New York, as well as first African American president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

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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:

Davis, Gordon J.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Davis, Gordon J.--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Lawyer

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Civic Leader

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers|CivicMakers

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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 Gordon J. Davis, July 13, 2016 and July 17, 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 Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_001\_001, TRT: 1:39:49 2014/07/17

Gordon J. Davis narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_001\_002, TRT: 2:58:29 2014/07/17

Gordon J. Davis was born on August 7, 1941 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Alice Elizabeth Stubbs Davis, was born in 1904 in Wilmington, Delaware to Florence Blanche Williams Stubbs and Dr. J. Bacon Stubbs. She attended Mount Holyoke College before working as his father's research assistant. His father, W. Allison Davis, was born in 1902 in Washington, D.C. to Gabrielle Beal Davis and John Abraham Davis, the son of James Mandeville Carlisle who rose to prominence in the civil service only to have his career curtailed by President Woodrow Wilson's racist policies. Davis' father was a pioneer in the social sciences, attended Williams College and Harvard University, was educated in Europe, taught at Hampton Institute and Dillard University and was tenured at the University of Chicago. His father remained bitter about his treatment at Williams College for much of his life, although he was eventually belatedly honored by the college. Davis and his brother, Allison S. Davis, grew up

on Chicago's South Side.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:08 2014/07/17

Gordon J. Davis and his older brother, Allison S. Davis, were close friends despite their youthful sibling rivalry. Davis and his brother grappled with issues of racial identity due to their ability to pass for white. Despite the racism of the era, the Davis family never passed; rather, the parents instilled a sense of racial pride in their children. While growing up near the racially diverse community of Hyde Park in Chicago, Illinois, Davis attended school at Austin O. Sexton Elementary, the University of Chicago Laboratory and Francis W. Parker High. He was expelled from Jack and Jill despite being related to its founder. His family rode horses at Markes Stable during the hours they allotted for African Americans. Davis and his brother both became lawyers with different career focuses, and Davis settled in New York City while his brother remained in Chicago. As an adult, Davis was introduced to HistoryMaker President Barack Obama by his brother, who was an early supporter of his political career.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_001\_004, TRT: 4:24:56 2014/07/17

Gordon J. Davis had strong family ties to Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts with his father and paternal uncle as graduates. Both men also had distinguished academic careers; Davis' father taught at Hampton Institute, where he mentored St. Claire Drake, before receiving tenure at the University of Chicago, while his uncle chaired the City College of New York's political science department and the American Political Science Association. As a youth, Davis spent summers with his family at Idlewild, Michigan. After graduating from Francis W. Parker High School in Chicago, Illinois, Davis matriculated at Williams in 1959. During his freshman year, he became more aware of social injustices and joined civil rights protest and a group of ninety students who signed the Grinnell Petition calling for an end to fraternities at Williams. Under John Sawyer's presidency, the fraternities were abolished and the college became

coed. Davis also reflects on his family's sense of racial identity and heritage.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_005, TRT: 5:35:40 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_006, TRT: 6:32:29 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_007, TRT: 7:35:30 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_008, TRT: 8:36:48 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_009, TRT: 9:40:35 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section  
A2014\_205\_002\_010, TRT: 10:40:25 2016/07/13

Tapes 5-10 are the second session of his interview, conducted 7/13/2016. Tapes 5-10 have been transcribed but have not been segmented or published to THMDA. She also has no session document.