

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

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Davis, Gordon J.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis,
Dates:	July 13, 2016 and July 17, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014 and 2016
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:14:49).
Abstract:	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.
Identification:	A2014_205
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and civic leader Gordon J. Davis was born in Provident Hospital on August 7, 1941, in Chicago, Illinois to William Allison Davis and Elizabeth Stubbs Davis. Davis grew up on Chicago's South Side—the African American Woodlawn neighborhood and then the University of Chicago Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood—it was there he gained a life long passion for jazz, the arts and civic involvement. He received his B.A. degree from Williams College in 1963, and his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School in 1967.

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 by Mayor Edward I. Koch as New York City's first African American commissioner of Parks and Recreation. During his service as commissioner, Davis was instrumental in rebuilding New York's parks system following the City's near bankruptcy, and the founding of the Central Park Conservancy, the Prospect Park Alliance and the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation. In 1983, Davis resigned as Parks commissioner 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 left private practice in 2001, when he was selected to be the president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Subsequently, Davis returned to private practice at LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae and then Venable LLP as a senior partner. Davis' clients included the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the organization overseeing the rebuilding of the Ground Zero site, the New York Public Library, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, the United States Tennis Association, Amtrak and the American Museum of Natural History.

Davis has served on the board of directors of Lincoln Center, the New York Public Library, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museum of Modern Art, the NY Public Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center and the Francis W Parker School.

He has received the Medal of the City of New York for Exceptional Service, honorary doctorate degrees from Williams College and Bard College, the 100 Black Men public service, award, the Frederick Law Olmsted Medal and designation as a Founding Director by the Central Park Conservancy, and was named one of “America’s Top Black Lawyers” by Black Enterprise magazine. In 2010, Davis was appointed to 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 Peggy Cooper Davis, the John E R Shed Professor of Law and Ethics at New York University Law School. Their daughter Dr. Elizabeth Cooper Davis is a professor of theater at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.

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

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.

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:

Davis, Gordon J.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Gordon J.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 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 Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_001_001, TRT: 1:39:49 ?
Gordon J. Davis narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_001_002, TRT: 2:58:29 ?
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 ?
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 ?
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 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_002_006, TRT: 6:32:29 ?
Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_002_007, TRT: 7:35:30 ?
Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_002_008, TRT: 8:36:48 ?
Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_002_009, TRT: 9:40:35 ?
Video Oral History Interview with Gordon J. Davis, Section A2014_205_002_010, TRT: 10:40:25 ?