

A Guide to the William T. Coleman, Jr., Henry L. Marsh, III, and William T. Mason, Jr. Oral History Interviews, 2008-2009

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A Collection in the Supreme Court of Virginia Archives, Virginia State Law Library 00018756, 00018862, 00019961

Virginia State Law Library, Supreme Court of Virginia Archives

2012

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History

Processed by: Catherine G. O'Brien

Title Statement

A Guide to the William T. Coleman, Jr., Henry L. Marsh, III, and William T. Mason, Jr. Oral History Interviews, 2008-2009

Subtitle: William T. Coleman, Henry L. Marsh, III, and William T. Mason Oral History Interviews

Collection: 00028513

Author: Catherine G. O'Brien

Publication Statement

Date: ©2012 By The Virginia State Law Library. All rights reserved.

Publisher: Supreme Court of Virginia Archives, Virginia State Law Library

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid created directly in EAD, by Catherine G. O'Brien, March 13, 2012

Language Usage: Description is in English

Revision Description

2013-11-21 Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

Descriptive Summary

Accession Numbers

00018756, 00018862, 00019961

Language

English

Abstract

Oral history interviews of three attorneys who worked on school desegregation and other civil rights cases in Virginia and elsewhere in the mid-twentieth century. Oral history interviews were conducted by Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Professor of History, Norfolk State University, for the Supreme Court of Virginia Historical Commission. Interviews were conducted with the following: retired U.S. Secretary of Transportation William T. Coleman, Jr. (transcript available), Virginia State Senator Henry L. Marsh, III (transcript available), and retired U.S. Attorney William T. Mason, Jr. (transcript available).

Creator

Supreme Court of Virginia Historical Commission.

Extent

7 mini video cassettes (DV camera) 8 hours, 49 min., sound, color; 3 transcripts (196 p.)

Repository

Supreme Court of Virginia Archives, Virginia State Law Library

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

Because the library is not open to the general public, researchers should contact the library to arrange access to the collection.

Acquisition Information

The interviews were created for the Supreme Court of Virginia Archives by the Supreme Court of Virginia Historical Commission in 2008 and 2009.

Preferred Citation

William T. Coleman, Jr., Henry L. Marsh, III, and William T. Mason, Jr. Oral History Interviews, 2008-2009, Accession 00013636, 00018862, 00019961, Supreme Court of Virginia Archives, Virginia State Law Library, Richmond, Va.

Biographical/Historical Information

The Supreme Court of Virginia Historical Commission was established in 2006 to preserve and promote the history of the court. Oral history interviews of retired Supreme Court justices, Court of Appeals judges, other individuals associated with the court, and civil rights attorneys were begun in 2007. The project is ongoing.

William T. Coleman, Jr. (b. 1920) was a distinguished lawyer and a lead strategist for the NAACP in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. He was president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and director of the executive committee of the NAACP national legal committee. Coleman served as U.S. Secretary of Transportation from 1975 to 1977 and was the second African American to hold a Cabinet position.

Henry L. Marsh, III (b. 1933) is a civil rights lawyer and politician. He joined with Samuel Tucker to form the law firm Tucker and Marsh in Richmond in 1961; in 1965, they were joined by attorney Oliver Hill to form the firm Hill, Tucker, and Marsh. As an attorney, Marsh focused on employment discrimination and school segregation cases. Marsh was elected mayor of Richmond in 1977 and Virginia State Senator in 1991. He was the first African American elected mayor of Richmond. Marsh served in the army from 1959 to 1961.

William T. Mason, Jr. (b. 1926), was a civil rights attorney in Norfolk who worked with civil rights attorney Oliver Hill in the 1950s and was appointed by Robert Kennedy to the U.S. Attorney's office for the eastern district of Virginia. Mason was one of the first African American lawyers appointed to a U.S. Attorney's office in the South.

Scope and Content

In the interview of civil rights attorney William T. Mason, Jr., conducted March 5, 2008, and March 12, 2008 (4 hours, 56 minutes), Mason talks about his parents' background in Trinidad and Pennsylvania, his childhood in Norfolk and New York City, and his education at Virginia Union University, Colby College, and Howard University Law School. He discusses his father's work as an insurance salesman and real estate broker in Norfolk, his mother's career as a social worker, and his mother's volunteer work to improve housing and education in segregated Norfolk. In discussing his father's career, he talks about discrimination in lending and the development of the L and J subdivision in Virginia Beach. While discussing his mother's career, he talks about the community they enjoyed in New York City, his mother's work in the National Council of Negro Women in New York and Virginia, her work organizing the Women's Interracial Council in Norfolk, her efforts to bring attention to the housing shortage in Norfolk after World War II, and her work to support students when the Norfolk schools were closed due to massive resistance. Mason also discusses the work of civil rights attorneys Oliver Hill and others in the Norfolk area during the 1940s. Toward the end of the interview, Mason discusses the context of his appointment to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia and his work there, which included school desegregation cases. He concludes the interview by talking about attorneys Leonard W. Holt, E.A. Dawley, and Joseph A. Jordan, civil rights litigation in Norfolk during the 1970s and 1980s, and his relationship with Norfolk State University president Lyman Beecher Brooks.

In the first interview of State Senator Henry Marsh, conducted September 8, 2008 (55 minutes), the senator discusses his parents' roots in Newport News and North Carolina, his early childhood in Richmond and Smithfield, Virginia, attending segregated schools in Isle of Wight County and Richmond, his siblings, and his children. He talks about the influence of teachers and early work experiences: Marsh was a newspaper carrier and worked in a restaurant in Richmond; he attended Maggie Walker High School, where he edited the school newspaper and became involved in the school's NAACP chapter; and he became involved in student government at Virginia Union University. He relates the experience of protesting massive resistance in January 1956 and witnessing Oliver Hill's forceful denunciation of it to the all-white Virginia legislature. Marsh discusses attending law school at Howard University and the influence of Charles Houston and other students on his development as a civil rights attorney. He discusses at length his early career as a civil rights lawyer in Richmond, particularly his work on 55 school desegregation and busing cases, his early years at the Tucker & Marsh law firm, and his involvement in the lengthy court battle over the desegregation of Norfolk schools.

In the second interview, conducted October 8, 2008 (1 hour, 5 minutes), Marsh continues to describe his work as a civil rights attorney and elaborates in more detail on his work in the Norfolk schools case and other cases in the Tidewater area. He talks about his relationship with U.S. district court judge Walter E. Hoffman, school desegregation cases in Giles County, Portsmouth, and Nansemond County. He also discusses opposition he faced from African Americans in Portsmouth and Norfolk who did not want to integrate black schools, and opposition he faced from NAACP leader Ben Chavis and Norfolk civil rights lawyer Jim Jordan. Marsh talks about his decision to become involved in politics in Richmond, testifying in congressional hearings on whether Virginia should be included in the provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, running into Senator Edward Kennedy and providing him with evidence of continuing voter discrimination in Virginia, and his work litigating employee discrimination cases, particularly a class-action tobacco workers case. He also talks about his partner S.W. Tucker and Tucker's influence on him as a mentor and a teacher. He relates the experience of seeing Chicago attorney Bob Ming defend Tucker in a Greensville County trial, in which Tucker was charged with unethical conduct. Marsh also mentions his disagreement with Oliver Hill over whether to endorse Lewis Powell's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court, his professional involvement in the National Caucus of Elected Officials and the U.S. Conference of Mayors, his early support of Jimmy Carter, and efforts to restrict sprawl and preserve historic districts in Richmond when he was mayor of Richmond. The interview closes with a discussion of Marsh's decision to run for the state senate and his career there.

In the interview of William T. Coleman, Jr., conducted January 30, 2009 (1 hour 29 minutes), Coleman discusses his parents' roots in Baltimore, Maryland, the history of his mother's family (Mason), his youth in suburban Philadelphia, and discrimination he experienced there, and attending the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University Law School. He talks about his experiences in World War II training as a pilot in Mississippi and Texas, attending Harvard University business school while he was in the army, and defending African American pilots who were denied access to the officers' club at Freeman Field in Seymour, Indiana in 1945. Coleman describes his experiences clerking for Judge Herbert F. Goodrich of the U.S. Court of Appeals, Third Circuit, and for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. He discusses his work as a lawyer in New York City and Philadelphia, and on the *Brown v. Board of Education* and Little Rock school desegregation cases. He also discusses his work on the Eisenhower Committee on Government Employment Policy, formed to expand employment of African Americans in federal government, his work as General Counsel on the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination of President Kennedy, his accomplishments as Secretary of Transportation, and advising President Ford on the Boston school busing case. Coleman also mentions his relationships with civil rights advocates Thurgood Marshall, Charles H. Houston, William H. Hastie; Elliott L. Richardson, who also clerked with Justice Frankfurter; and President Lyndon Johnson.

Index Terms

Coleman, William Thaddeus, 1920-.
Frankfurter, Felix, 1882-1965.
Goodrich, Herbert Funk, 1889-1962.
Hill, Oliver White, 1907-2007.
Hoffman, Walter Edward, 1907-1996.
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973.
Marsh, Henry L., 1933-.
Marshall, Thurgood, 1908-1993.
Mason, William T., 1926-.
Ming, William Robert, 1911-1973.
Newby-Alexander, Cassandra, 1956-.
Richardson, Elliott L., 1920-1999.
Tucker, Samuel Wilbert, 1913-1990.
Virginia -- Supreme Court -- Historical Commission.
African American civil rights workers -- Interviews.
African American lawyers -- Interviews.
Civil rights -- United States -- History -- 20th century.
Segregation in education -- Virginia.
Massive resistance.
Minorities -- Civil rights -- Virginia.
Norfolk (Va.) -- History -- 20th century.
Richmond (Va.) -- History -- 20th century.
Oral histories (document genre) -- Virginia.

Location of Originals

The William T. Mason, Jr., Henry L. Marsh, III, and William T. Coleman, Jr. oral history videos and transcripts may be found at <https://scvahistory.org/oral-histories-judges-and-court-staff/oral-histories-civil-rights-attorneys/>.