

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thomas J. Burrell

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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>	Burrell, Tom
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 5, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:23:23).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Advertising chief executive Thomas J. Burrell (1939 - ) founded Burrell Communications Group in 1971 which grew to become the nation's largest African American-owned marketing firm with clients such as McDonalds and Coca-Cola. Burrell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 5, 2001, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_007
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

As a shy boy growing up on Chicago's South Side, the dynamic advertising mogul Tom Burrell never imagined he would attain the power and prestige he has today. At age 18, he was admitted to Chicago's Roosevelt University. The school stimulated and inspired the young Burrell and he became involved in a variety of activities, including a leadership role with Alpha Delta Sigma fraternity. Burrell began his career in advertising while still attending Roosevelt University, where he later graduated with a B.A. in English. His senior year, he landed a position as a copywriter with the Chicago division of Wade Advertising, before moving over to Foote Cone & Belding, where he became a Copy Supervisor. He spent one year in the firm's London offices. In 1971, seeking to spread his wings and responding to the need for advertising that would target the burgeoning African American market, he founded Burrell Communications Group. Many of his initial clients, such as McDonalds and Coca-Cola, still remain clients today. Due in large part to these lasting partnerships, Burrell Advertising grew to become the nation's largest African American-owned marketing firm. Today, with its Advertising, Public Relations, and Consumer Promotions divisions, Burrell Communications offers a wide array of services to an equally broad range of clients. These include NYNEX, Kmart, Polaroid and the American Association of Retired Persons.

Due to his tremendous success, Burrell has become a nationally acknowledged leader in the advertising world. In 1986, he was the recipient of the Albert Lasker Award for Lifetime Achievement in Advertising, and in 1990, he received the prestigious Missouri Honor Medal for Distinguished Service in Journalism from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. He has served as the Chairman of the Chicago Council of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. He currently sits on the National Board of Directors for that organization.

Burrell also devotes much of his time to various charitable organizations. He currently sits on the Board of Directors of the Chicago Urban League as well as the Board of Governors of Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and the Advisory Council of Howard University's School of Communications.

He lives in Chicago with his wife, Madeleine Moore Burrell.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thomas J. Burrell was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 5, 2001, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Advertising chief executive Thomas J. Burrell (1939 - ) founded Burrell Communications Group in 1971 which grew to become the nation's largest African American-owned marketing firm with clients such as McDonalds and Coca-Cola.

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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:

Burrell, Tom

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burrell, Tom--Interviews

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African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--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:

Entrepreneur

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Advertising Chief Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|MediaMakers

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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 Thomas J. Burrell, June 5, 2001. 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).

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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 Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:00  
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Tom Burrell lists his biographical information and lists his favorites. He then details his mother's family origins and how she lives her life today. Burrell later talks about his father and the family members from Tennessee. Tom Burrell reflects on his father's personality and recalls his cruel behavior. Burrell talks about his family's pattern of migration from the South and how it relates to his parents. He later details the extended family members and the crowded living arrangements he experienced as a child. Lastly, Burrell recalls his childhood personality.

African American families--United States.

African Americans--Migrations--United States.

Childhood and youth.

African American fathers.

African American mothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:55  
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Tom Burrell talks more about his childhood personality. Burrell recalls his vivid imagination as a young boy and his desire to imitate the western and gangster characters he saw in the movies. Burrell reflects on his parents' behavior towards him in his youth and how it influences him today. He later details the many jobs he held and how his mother motivated him to work and succeed. Tom Burrell recalls the teachers that influenced him in elementary school and details one in particular that brought out his creative side. Burrell later talks about his bad experiences at Englewood High School in Chicago and his decision to transfer to Parker High School to get a better education. Tom Burrell details his experiences at Parker High School and talks about the teacher that helped him decide his career path. Lastly Burrell talks about his first year at Roosevelt University and his personal philosophy as it applies to making a career choice.

Childhood and youth--Activities--Illinois--Chicago.

Mentoring--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Education--Illinois--Chicago.

African American parents.

Roosevelt University.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40  
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Tom Burrell talks about his decision to work in the advertising field, a unique career choice for African Americans in the 1950s. Burrell recalls his plan to attend college in Mexico and how his father sabotaged it. He later details his difficult freshman year at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Tom Burrell details his eyesight problem and talks about how it may have interfered with his early learning ability. Burrell then recounts his earning an English degree after taking a year off from school to work. Burrell reflects on his Roosevelt University experience and the friends and faculty that influenced him. Later Tom Burrell talks about the leadership experience he gained while a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Finally he talks about his mother's support and details how he gained entry into the advertising field.

African American fathers--Illinois--Chicago.

African American leadership--Illinois--Chicago.

Roosevelt University.

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.

African American mothers--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans in advertising.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:51  
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Tom Burrell details how he got promoted from delivering the mail to becoming a copy writer at Wade Advertising in Chicago. He later describes the accounts he received and his very first commercial. Burrell later recalls the acts of racial discrimination he was subjected to while at Wade. Burrell changes jobs and moves to Leo Burnett advertising agency in Chicago and describes the discriminatory office culture there. Burrell details Leo Burnett's failed attempt at integrating the company in the 1960s, and how a support group for black employees is formed as a result. Tom Burrell talks about what forced him to leave Leo Burnett and go live in Europe. Lastly Burrell reflects on his personal self-esteem and theorizes on how self-esteem dictates to the African American race as a whole.

African Americans in advertising--Illinois--Chicago.

Race discrimination--Illinois--Chicago.

Leo Burnett Company.

African Americans--Self-esteem.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:42  
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Tom Burrell talks about his life in London after getting married in Chicago. He later reflects on how the low salary in Britain forced him to return to work in the U.S., despite the more favorable work environment. Burrell recalls his experiences at Needham, Harper & Steers and the office culture there. He later details the first black-owned advertising agencies in New York and Chicago. Tom Burrell describes the institutionalized racism he experienced and self-esteem issues that returned upon returning to the U.S. Burrell then details how he formed his own advertising business and discusses his first advertising clients. Tom Burrell recalls how he gained entry into the advertising business and how his company differed from other notable black advertisers in Chicago. Lastly Burrell explains how his agency portrays African Americans positively in its advertising campaigns.

Relocation (Housing)--England.

African Americans in advertising--Illinois--Chicago.

Needham, Harper, and Steers Advertising.

African Americans--Self-esteem.

Race discrimination--Illinois--Chicago.

African American advertising agencies.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:15  
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Tom Burrell talks about his company's positive and negative milestones. Burrell then discusses his company's alliance with the French communications conglomerate, Publicis. He then talks about the changes the advertising industry needs to adapt to a multicultural society. Burrell talks more about the industry and how it is still catering to a white consumer base. He then reflects on how his industry has changed and how the client now tries to dictate profit earnings. Tom Burrell then talks about the legacy of black-owned businesses and how they

need to adapt in order to survive. Lastly Burrell talks about what he believes his business legacy will be.

Advertising agencies.

African American business enterprises--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section A2001\_007\_001\_007, TRT: 0:22:00  
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Tom Burrell talks about the future of his company and the importance of giving back to the community. Burrell talks about the other things he would like to do with his life and his concern for the black community. He talks about the problem of 'race esteem deficiency' and his thoughts on how to solve it. Tom Burrell then reflects on what his parents might say about his life accomplishments and reflects on what his legacy might be. Lastly Burrell describes the photographs he provided.

Photographs.

Community service.

African Americans--Self-esteem.

African American parents--Attitudes.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas J. Burrell, Section  
A2001\_007\_THOMAS\_J\_BURRELL\_06\_MED\_002, TRT: 0:03:00

This tape contains television spots titled "Great Moments in African American History." The spots feature Thomas J. Burrell, Hermene Hartman and Dr. Carla Wilson-Hawkins. They were produced for Comerica Bank by SCTN Teleproductions in 2001.