

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter J. Leonard

---

## 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>	Leonard, Walter J., 1929-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 27, 2003 and June 18, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001 and 2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:56:56).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Academic administrator, college president, and law professor Walter J. Leonard (1929 - 2015 ) was the primary force behind the "Harvard Plan," a blueprint for establishing equal educational and employment opportunities in higher education for women and minorities, cited as a model in the landmark 1978 Bakke decision on affirmative action. Leonard was also noted for his extensive efforts to save Fisk University in his first year as president. Leonard was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 27, 2003 and June 18, 2001, in Chevy Chase, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_038
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

A leading educator and scholar, Walter Leonard was born on October 3, 1929, in Alma, Georgia. His early education was in the Savannah, Georgia, public school system and later at Savannah State College. He went on to study at Morehouse College, Atlanta University's Graduate School of Business, Howard University School of Law and Harvard University Business School.

Leonard has served as Assistant Dean of both the Howard University School of Law (1968-69) and Harvard University Law School (1969-71). As Assistant Dean and Assistant Director of Admissions at Harvard Law School, he is credited, through the use of conferences, recruitment, and outreach programs, with the education of more minority and women lawyers than almost any other administrator in the United States. In 1971, Leonard was appointed to the position of Special Assistant to Harvard University's President, Derek Curtis Bok. There, Leonard was the primary force behind the Harvard Plan, a blueprint for establishing equal educational and employment opportunities in higher education. The Plan was cited approvingly by the United States Supreme Court in the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke decision and adopted by hundreds of colleges and universities nationwide. Leonard also chaired the committee that established Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research.

Perhaps, his most awe-inspiring moment was in 1978, when, as president of Fisk University, Leonard used a \$1.5 million insurance policy on his life as collateral to obtain a loan to keep the school from closing. Fisk was nearly bankrupt when Leonard assumed the presidency in 1977. Over the course of his seven year presidency, Leonard managed to raise more than \$12 million dollars for Fisk University.

Over the years, Leonard has found time to serve as a board member or consultant for many of the country's most-renowned policymaking organizations, including the Ford Foundation, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Commerce and the United Negro College Fund, and many others. He has published numerous scholarly articles on such topics as the First Amendment, black capitalism, the student protest movements in the universities and affirmative action. Two fellowships were created at Oxford University in his honor.

Leonard passed away on December 8, 2015.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter J. Leonard was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on January 27, 2003 and June 18, 2001, in Chevy Chase, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Academic administrator, college president, and law professor Walter J. Leonard (1929 - 2015 ) was the primary force behind the "Harvard Plan," a blueprint for establishing equal educational and employment opportunities in higher education for women and minorities, cited as a model in the landmark 1978 Bakke decision on affirmative action. Leonard was also noted for his extensive efforts to save Fisk University in his first year as president.

---

## 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:

Leonard, Walter J., 1929-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Leonard, Walter J., 1929---Interviews

African American college presidents--Interviews.

African American law teachers--Interviews.

African American college administrators--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Harvard University

University of Oxford

Fisk University

Occupations:

Academic Administrator

Law Professor

College President

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|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 Walter J. Leonard, January 27, 2003 and June 18, 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).

---

## 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 Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Walter J. Leonard describes his family background. His mother, Rachel Jewel Kirkland, was born in Georgia in the early 1900s. Her father was born on the Kirkland Plantation in Cheraw County, South Carolina near the end of the Civil War. He relocated to Macon, Georgia at a young age where he completed high school at Central City College. He also received his Doctorate of Divinity degree, and founded a school in Alma, Georgia. Leonard's father, Francis Albert Leonard, was born in Dothan, Alabama in the early 1900s. Francis and Rachel Kirkland gave birth to Walter J. Leonard on October 3, 1929 in Alma Georgia. Francis Leonard died soon after the birth, so Walter Leonard was raised by Oliver Jenkins, whom Rachel Kirkland married in 1932. Jenkins was a tenant farmer and a cook for the railroad section gang in Nichols, Georgia. Leonard moved Savannah, Georgia in the early 1930s to live with his maternal grandparents, in order to provide him with a better education than in rural Georgia.

African American college presidents--Interviews.

African American law teachers--Interviews.

African American college administrators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Walter J. Leonard was influenced by his maternal relatives, including his uncle, Robert Benjamin Kirkland, and his grandfather. Leonard moved to Savannah, Georgia in the mid-1930s to live with his paternal grandparents. Leonard enjoyed school, and enrolled at Alfred E. Beach High School in Savannah, Georgia around 1943. Here, he was influenced by many of his teachers. Leonard's history teacher exposed him to the heroes of black history in an era where black identity or history was not popular. His music appreciation teacher expanded his knowledge of Negro Spirituals, European classical music, and American jazz. Leonard's biology teacher exposed him to the work of Philippa

Schuyler, which shaped his aspiration to become a doctor. Leonard notes that the culture of the early and mid-1900s shaped African American success, and in turn, his drive as a youth.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00  
?

In the mid-1930s, Walter J. Leonard moved to Savannah, Georgia to live with his maternal grandparents. Leonard's grandfather was a minister and educator, and shaped a young Leonard's desire to learn. The culture of the 1930s and 1940s instilled the importance of achievement in Leonard. Leonard talks about African American accomplishment and activism during the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. He also describes how the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the National Urban League were founded. Leonard's describes how the public education system historically responded to different cultures of immigrants, as well as the significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Leonard enrolled at Alfred E. Beach High School in Savannah, Georgia, in 1943, yet dropped out in 1945 following his grandfather's death. Leonard went on to join the U.S. Coast Guard, where he served as a storekeeper aboard the U.S.S. Duane.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:05  
?

In 1945, Walter J. Leonard joined the U.S. Coast Guard. He was honorably discharged in 1946, and returned to Beach High School in Savannah, Georgia to finish school. Leonard graduated in 1947 and enrolled at Savannah State College, where he met his wife, Betty Singleton. The couple married in 1951. At Savannah State College, Leonard majored in chemistry, but later changed to the humanities. After attending an NAACP Youth Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., Leonard was inspired to found the NAACP Youth Council at Savannah State College in 1948. He was asked to leave Savannah State College in 1949 as a result of his "communist" activities. Leonard moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked a number of part-time civil service positions and took classes at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Graduate School. Around 1955, Leonard moved to Atlanta, Georgia to work as a correctional parole officer for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. He became involved with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00  
?

In Atlanta, Georgia, Walter J. Leonard served as an advisor to the NAACP Youth Council. He built relationships with leaders like Ruby Hurley, Donald L. Hollowell, and HistoryMaker Veronon Jordan, who encouraged him to attend law school. Leonard enrolled at the Howard University School of Law in 1965 with the intention of serving as legal counsel to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, Leonard's mentor, Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr., suggested that Leonard pursue legal education, and named him Assistant Dean of Howard University School of Law upon his graduation in 1968. After giving a speech at an Association of American Law Schools meeting, Leonard was offered a position as an Assistant Dean at Harvard Law School, which he accepted in 1969. Leonard worked closely with Robert McKay, Dean of the New York University Law School, to establish a section of the minority groups of the Association of American Law Schools, which Leonard chaired.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_001\_006, TRT: 0:03:30  
?

Walter J. Leonard enrolled at Howard University School of Law in 1965. He intended to move back to Atlanta, Georgia to serve as legal counsel to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. However, when he graduated in 1968, the organization was in disarray following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a result, he was encouraged by his mentor, Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr. to accept a position as Assistant Dean of Howard University School of Law, which he did in 1968. Leonard also talks about his distant relatives who came from the Krikland Plantation in Cheraw County, South Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_007, TRT: 0:30:20  
?

After being hired as Assistant Dean of the Howard University School of Law in 1968, Walter J. Leonard was invited to work for several other institutions, including the Chrysler Corporation. Leonard accepted a position as Assistant Dean of Harvard Law School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1969, a decision he felt was best for his family. Leonard was also appointed Assistant Director of Admissions and Director of Financial Aid. Derek Bok, then-President of Harvard University, planted the seed for what would become The Harvard Plan. Leonard's desire to transform the admissions process of Harvard Law School, so that future classes would reflect segments of U.S. society more accurately, inspired what would become The Harvard Plan.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_008, TRT: 0:31:30  
?

In 1969, Walter J. Leonard was hired as Assistant Dean of Harvard Law School. Through recruitment efforts and outreach programs, Leonard was successful in diversifying the applicant pool, and incoming classes of students, to Harvard Law School, particularly in terms of minorities and women. This inspired the implementation of The Harvard Plan, which Leonard developed after he was appointed as Special Assistant to the President of Harvard University, Derek Bok. The Harvard Plan effectively established equal education opportunities at Harvard University. In 1970, Leonard organized "The Black Lawyer in America Today" symposium. The symposium sought to expose Harvard Law School students and faculty to the work and contributions of African American legal professionals. Leonard left Harvard Law School in 1977 to become President of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Leonard also tells a story about A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Clarence Clyde Ferguson.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_009, TRT: 0:29:15  
?

Special Assistant to Derek Bok, President of Harvard University, Walter J. Leonard, developed The Harvard Plan in 1971. At Harvard Law School, Leonard worked with students like Randall Robinson. Leonard helped Robinson travel to Africa as a law student, which inspired Robinson to found TransAfrica in 1977. Leonard worked with the University of Virginia School of Law's Council on Legal Education Opportunity program briefly before assuming his duties at Harvard Law School, and talked about living in the campus' Colonnade Club. Leonard also talked about the law school experiences of A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Raymond Pace Alexander. Leonard became Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr.'s research assistant while studying at Howard University School of Law in the late 1960s. By the time Leonard graduated in 1968, their relationship had developed into a close, long-lasting friendship. Leonard described Ferguson's experience attending Ohio State University, and commented on the concept of colorblindness, as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_010, TRT: 0:29:05  
?

In 1971, Walter J. Leonard was appointed Special Assistant to the President of Harvard University, Derek Bok. Leonard developed The Harvard Plan, and chaired Harvard University's Committee Equal Employment. He was also partially responsible for developing a university-wide daycare system, and helped facilitate the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology's repatriation of Native American artifacts. Leonard chaired the committee that established Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research in 1975. Leonard served on the Selection Committee for the Neiman Foundation Fellowship Program, and worked with Doris Mitchell, Assistant Dean of Radcliffe College, to develop a black women's conference. This conference resulted in The Black Women's Oral History Project chaired by Leonard's wife, Betty Singleton, as well as a book entitled "I Dream A World." Around 1977, Leonard was asked about assuming the presidency of Fisk University.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_011, TRT: 0:29:20  
?

In 1977, Walter J. Leonard became the President of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, at a time of financial crisis. Leonard faced many challenges, including a depleted endowment fund, tension with the board of trustees, and a general lack of support for the university. Nevertheless, Leonard secured gifts from the Ford Foundation and Georgia O'Keefe, who gave \$150,000 towards the refurbishment of the university's art gallery, and donated The Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Modern American and European Art to Fisk University. In total, Leonard raised \$12 million dollars during his tenure. He left the institution in 1984 to serve as a distinguished fellow at Howard University in Washington, D.C. In 1987, Leonard became Special Assistant to the President of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Alexander Farrelly. In 1997, Leonard received a lifetime appointment as a visiting scholar to the University of Oxford's Wolfson College in Oxford, England, which named a fellowship in Leonard's honor.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_012, TRT: 0:29:10  
?

Walter J. Leonard talks about his plans for the future, which include writing a memoir, continuing his writing of scholarly articles, and monitoring the fellowship named in his honor at Wolfson College, Oxford University. Leonard also provides advice for young African-Americans, and talks about how some want to distance themselves from issues like affirmative action, which The Harvard Plan helped to bring about. In particular, he talks about the importance of acknowledging such contributions. Leonard closes the tape by talking about Harvard University President Derek Bok, and how his family background helped to shape his sensitivities and desire to have The Harvard Plan implemented.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Leonard, Section A2001\_038\_002\_013, TRT: 0:24:50  
?

Walter J. Leonard had a special relationship with Derek Bok, President of Harvard University, during his tenure as Bok's Special Assistant. As a result of this partnership, Leonard and Bok were able to lead Harvard University in a progressive direction in 1971 as it related to Harvard's minority population, as represented by The Harvard Plan. In addition, Leonard increased the university's partnerships with African-American insurance companies. Leonard also helped establish the Ellen S. Jackson Fellowship, in honor of the Civil Rights leader, in 1975. Leonard closes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy and narrating

his photographs.