

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Herman Russell

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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>	Russell, Herman J.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Herman Russell,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 15, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:10:08).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Construction executive Herman Russell (1930 - 2014 ) was the chairman and CEO of H. J. Russell & Co., the fourth largest construction company in the U.S. An avid supporter of Atlanta and its youth, Russell was also the founder of the Herman J. Russell Entrepreneurial Scholarship Foundation. Russell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 15, 2002, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_025
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Atlanta construction executive Herman Russell is a civic leader and philanthropist whose construction company ranks as the fourth largest in the U.S. The company has annual sales of more than \$150 million and employs 700.

Russell, chairman/CEO of H. J. Russell & Co., was born on December 23, 1930, in Atlanta, one of seven children of Maggie and Rogers Russell. His father was a plasterer from whom he learned the trade starting at the age of twelve. He bought his first parcel of land for \$125 at age sixteen, later building a duplex on the property. He used his savings to help pay his tuition at Tuskegee University. Returning to Atlanta, he worked alongside his father. After his father's death in 1957, Russell took over the company and expanded it into a conglomerate that includes general contracting, construction/program management, real estate development and property and asset management. Russell's other interests are in airport concessions.

In 1963, Russell became the first black member, and later president, of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. He also played a leading role in the modern Civil Rights Movement working very closely with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Russell has served also as a board member for civic organizations like the Allen Temple; Butler Street YMCA; Central Atlanta Progress; Tuskegee University; the NAACP Atlanta chapter; Citizens Trust Bank; Midtown Improvement District and the Georgia State University Advisory Board.

An avid supporter of Atlanta and its youth, Russell is the founder of the Herman J. Russell Entrepreneurial Scholarship Foundation for an Atlanta elementary school. Among his recognition awards are induction into the Junior Achievement Atlanta Business Hall of Fame in 1992, and recipient of the Horatio Alger Award in 1991. He and his wife, Otelia, lived in midtown Atlanta. They are the parents of two sons and a daughter, who are executives with H. J. Russell Co.

Herman Russell passed away on November 15, 2014, at the age of 83.

Herman J. Russell was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 15, 2002.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Herman Russell was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 15, 2002, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Construction executive Herman Russell (1930 - 2014 ) was the chairman and CEO of H. J. Russell & Co., the fourth largest construction company in the U.S. An avid supporter of Atlanta and its youth, Russell was also the founder of the Herman J. Russell Entrepreneurial Scholarship Foundation.

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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:

Russell, Herman J.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Russell, Herman 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:

Construction Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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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 Herman Russell, March 15, 2002. 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 Herman Russell, Section A2002\_025\_001\_001, TRT: 0:27:21 ?  
Photographs include Herman Russell with family, friends and colleagues including Tom Bradley, Vernon Jordan, Jesse Hill, Jimmy Carter, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy, Bill Clinton and Willie

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Video Oral History Interview with Herman Russell, Section A2002\_025\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:51 ?

Herman Russell talks about his mother and father's background and then states the names of his siblings. He reflects on his childhood neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia, his earliest memories and some of the sights and smells of Summerhill. Russell then states that during his childhood, "Church was everything." He discusses the role that organized religion played. He then tells a story about an elementary school teacher that was not helpful in dealing with his speech impediment. He also talks of the successes he had during elementary school. Russell then reveals his passion to be an entrepreneur at a young age and lists off the string of moneymaking ideas he put into action throughout his youth. He makes the point that his father influenced him very much in his goals to be successful in life. Russell then tells the story of how he got his first bank loan.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Russell, Section A2002\_025\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Herman Russell reflects on his days as an athlete in junior high and high school where he played baseball and football. Continuing on the subject of sports he reveals that one of his heroes was Jackie Robinson. At age sixteen Russell bought his first piece of real estate where he, with the help of his friends and family, built a duplex, which he would later rent. Russell then decided to attend Tuskegee Institute because of their building technology program where he learned the fundamentals of construction. He integrated himself into life at the Tuskegee Institute and, in an interesting side story, tells about how he managed a jazz group that landed a gig with Nat King Cole. He continues on to tell of his current involvement with Tuskegee University as the Vice Chairman of the Board. After college Russell returned to Atlanta, Georgia and began setting up his own operations while doing sub-contracting work. By the 1960s Russell had moved into larger construction jobs and started to become a major player in the city. Russell continued to purchase real estate but needed a non-African American to sign the initial paperwork before transferring ownership to Russell. Herman Talmadge worked for Russell in this capacity. Russell goes on to talk about another business venture he was involved in and discusses the insurance company he owned. He details his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and tells of his relationships with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Atlanta's rich history of Civil Rights activism. Russell then moves on to tell how he became associated with the broadcasting industry with ABC. Herman Russell then briefly tells of the current status of his business.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Russell, Section A2002\_025\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Herman Russell talks about how he was involved in the television industry as a cable franchisee and owner of a local ABC affiliate station. Next, he discusses being in the wholesale liquor business and the changes he needed to make in order to move into airport concessions. Russell speaks about experiences he had when he helped fund Jimmy Carter's campaign and was Maynard Jackson's Treasurer, stating that he has been involved in politics throughout his whole life. He then talks about the need for more African American politicians. Herman Russell briefly speaks about being the Chairman and major shareholder of the Citizen's Trust Bank. He discusses a development that he is currently overseeing as well as some future plans for H.J. Russell & Company. Continuing on the subject of business, he ties in African American ownership stating that he is convinced blacks need to strive to be entrepreneurs. Russell then describes his hopes for the future of the black community as well as what might have been done wrong in the past.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Russell, Section A2002\_025\_001\_005, TRT: 0:12:20 ?

Herman Russell talks about the importance of his family. He speaks about his relationship with his wife and grandchildren. He goes into detail about how he prefers to raise children and some of the differences that exist between his "old school" ways and the more modern beliefs. Russell also talks about being a role model to his grandchildren in a way that will help them learn the value of a hard day's work. He then discusses the family's younger generations having the opportunity to work in his business. He makes his point clear that he has the highest hopes for his grandchildren and that they are in no way required to work at for him. Herman Russell then expresses what he'd like his legacy to be. The tape concludes with two photos of Herman Russell.