

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts

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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>	Butts, Calvin O.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 1, 2005 and March 7, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:58:09).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III (1949 - 2022) was pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, one of the largest churches in Harlem. He also hosted a weekly radio show and served as president of the Council of Churches of New York, and vice-chair of the Board of Directors of the United Way. Butts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 1, 2005 and March 7, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_036
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III was born on July 19, 1949, in Bridgeport, Connecticut; his mother worked as an administrative assistant and his father was a chef and butler. During his early childhood, Butts's family moved to New York City, where he received his primary education; in 1967, he earned his high school diploma from Flushing High School, where he was a member of the track team and president of the senior class.

In 1972, Butts received his B.A. degree from Morehouse College; while a student, he pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity and was active in civil rights. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Butts and several other Morehouse students took to the streets in anger. After graduation, Butts returned to New York where he earned his master of divinity degree in church history in 1975 from Union Theological Seminary and later his doctorate of ministry in church and public policy from Drew University. While still in graduate school, Butts was hired to work at Abyssinian Baptist Church where he began as an office assistant and worked his way up to assistant pastor, eventually being named head pastor in 1989.

While serving as pastor of one of Harlem's largest churches, Butts was committed to the church's goal of creating a viable and dynamic community in central Harlem. In 1989, he established the Abyssinian Development Corporation, a non-profit community-based housing and commercial development organization; the corporation raised \$2.8 million to purchase and renovate property to be used as a homeless shelter. In addition to the shelter, during Butts's tenure as pastor a large apartment complex for senior citizens and apartments for moderate income households were renovated in conjunction with the Partnership for New York City program.

In addition to his activities with the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Butts hosted a weekly radio show, and served as president of the Council of Churches of New York and vice-chair of the Board of Directors of the United Way. In 1999, he was appointed president of the State University of New York College at Old Westbury. Butts also served

as chairman of the National Affiliate Development Initiative of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS.

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, III passed away on October 28, 2022 at the age of 73.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts was conducted by Larry Crowe and Racine Tucker Hamilton on February 1, 2005 and March 7, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III (1949 - 2022) was pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, one of the largest churches in Harlem. He also hosted a weekly radio show and served as president of the Council of Churches of New York, and vice-chair of the Board of Directors of the United Way.

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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:

Butts, Calvin O.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Butts, Calvin O.--Interviews

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African American clergy--New York (State)--New York--Harlem--Interviews

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African American civic leaders--New York (State)--New York--Harlem--Interviews

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African American Baptists--New York (State)--New York--Harlem--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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Abyssinian Baptist Church (New York, N.Y.)

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## Occupations:

Pastor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

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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 Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, February 1, 2005 and March 7, 2005. 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts was born on July 19, 1949 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. His paternal grandmother, Verdie Butts, was a religious woman who disciplined Butts as a child. His mother, raised in Ocilla, Georgia, a farming community, worked in administrative positions. Butts' father, Calvin Butts, Sr. was born in Fitzgerald, Georgia, and migrated to the North at the time he joined the U.S. Army. He work as a chef and butcher for most of his life. Many of Butts' earliest memories are from his childhood in the Lillian Wald housing projects on Houston Street on the Lower East Side of New York City. His neighbors and best friends were of African American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish descent. At family gatherings, Butts remembers discussions around politics and religion ranging from blacks in the media, the Civil Rights Movement, black Jesus, and the Masonic Lodge. Butts would later become a 33rd degree, Prince Hall Mason.

African American clergy--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

African American Baptists--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:59 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts remembers the sights, sounds, and smells of growing up in the projects on the Lower East Side of New York City. He attended P.S. 97, P.S. 92, and then Russell Sage Junior High (J.H.S. 190). In elementary school, Ms. Jackson was a teacher who inspired some of Butts' sermons after he became a minister. Butts dreamt of becoming the Mayor of New York City and improving living conditions in the city. He was a good student who participated in Boy Scouts, enjoyed teasing his peers and was greatly influenced by his parents. While a student at Flushing High School in Flushing, New York, Butts' ran track and was president of the senior class. He credits his girlfriend's father for his increased involvement in Black Nationalism and his interest in figures like Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Patrice Lumumba. Butts also recounts his religious upbringing and his decision to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:08 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts enrolled at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia in 1972. At Morehouse, Butts pledged Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, participated in civil rights activities, and met Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Cleveland Sellers, and HistoryMaker Bernice Johnson Reagon. He participated in the

rioting that occurred after the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., burning stores, firebombing a local church, and tossing Molotov cocktails before choosing the path of non-violence. Butts learned about race and political activism from Bill Strickland. After graduating from Morehouse College in 1972, Butts entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City where his major influences included HistoryMaker James H. Cone, C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence Jones, and Leon Watts. Butts recalls the support his decision to enter the ministry received. He talks about the history of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City where he worked as an office assistant. He also describes 1970s Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:03 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts recounts the founding of the Abyssinian Development Corporation in Harlem, New York in 1987. The corporation, an arm of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, was created to renovate and build housing and shelters in the city. Butts' community redevelopment efforts put him at odds with former New York City Mayor Ed Koch. He describes his interactions with former New York City Mayor and HistoryMaker David Dinkins, as well as HistoryMakers Charles Rangel and Reverend Jesse Jackson. Other black leaders during that period included C. Virginia Fields and HistoryMakers Al Sharpton, Adelaide Sanford, Floyd Flake, and Reverend Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker. Butts talks about the Amadou Diallo murder and the Abner Louima case, which showcased racially motivated police brutality cases in New York City during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Butts also spoke out against National Baptist Convention head Reverend Henry Lyons. Butts describes his first sermons as the head pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_002\_005, TRT: 0:28:12 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts describes how the media sensationalized his pulpit comments after the acquittal of New York police officers for the murder of Amadou Diallo. He recounts his efforts to work with former Mayor Rudy Giuliani whom he regarded as a racist. As head pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Butts used his clout to endorse political candidates like Ross Perot, but never allowed them to use the pulpit. Butts also talks about the George W. Bush Administration and recalls the reluctance of black churches in New York City to receive Malcolm X's body after his assassination in 1965. Butts also remembers public sentiment around Malcom X before his death, and the Black Muslims from his childhood neighborhood in Queens, New York. As a college student, Butts had reservations about joining the Nation of Islam and subscribing to HistoryMaker Minister Louis Farrakhan. He also reflects upon the role and legacy of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts, Section A2005\_036\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:52 ?

Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts continues to talk about the legacy of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. who preceded him as a head pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, New York. In addition to pastoring the church, Powell represented the interests of African Americans as a member of the city council and in Congress. Butts' own responsibilities as the President of State University of New York College at Old Westbury also occupied his time and efforts. Butts describes his work as university president including his efforts to recruit black students to campus. His acknowledges that his theology was largely informed by the works of Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and HistoryMaker

James Cone. He expresses his disdain for megachurches. Butts also talks about his hopes and concerns for the African American community and what he would do differently. He reflects upon his legacy and aspirations before talking about his family and how he would like to be remembered.