

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert James

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	James, Robert E. (Robert Earl)
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert James,
Dates:	January 22, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:25).
Abstract:	Bank chief executive Robert James (1946 -) served for over thirty years as the president and CEO of Carver State Bank. James was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 22, 2007, in Savannah, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_024
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Bank president and entrepreneur Robert Earl James was born on November 21, 1946, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to Annie Mae and Jimmie James, Sr. James graduated from L.J. Rowan High School in 1964, after which he received his B.A. degree in accounting from Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1968, James became one of the first African Americans to be accepted into Harvard Business School.

After obtaining his M.B.A. in 1970, James became President of Carver State Bank in Savannah, Georgia, one of the oldest African American-owned commercial banks. During his thirty-year tenure as President and CEO of Carver State Bank, James pioneered the re-development of Atlanta's inner city as well as helped avert the financial crisis of Morris Brown College. In addition, James acted as Chairman of the National Bankers Association in 1978 and 1990. From 1981 to 2002, James served on the board of the Georgia Telecommunication Authority; he also purchased and revived *The Savannah Tribune* (now known as *The Tribune*). In 1989, James became the owner and publisher of *The Fort Valley Herald*; both are publications dedicated to the African American community.

James was recognized for his work with various honors and awards, including being named one of the 100 Most Influential Black Americans by *Ebony* Magazine in 2003, and being awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the National Bankers Association.

James and his wife, Shirley James, who is the editor of *The Tribune*, lived in Savannah, Georgia; they raised three children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert James was conducted by Denise Gines on January 22, 2007, in Savannah, Georgia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Bank chief executive Robert James (1946 -

) served for over thirty years as the president and CEO of Carver State Bank.

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:

James, Robert E. (Robert Earl)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

James, Robert E. (Robert Earl)--Interviews

African American bankers--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Bank Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Robert James, January 22, 2007. 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 Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Robert James was born on November 21, 1946 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi to Jim James and Annie Gee James, whose family had Native American heritage. James' mother was active in the Hattiesburg community as a beauty shop owner; the president of the parent teacher association at Royal Street High School and L.J. Rowan High School; a missionary at Zion Chapel A.M.E. Church; and a member of the NAACP. James' father was treasurer of the parent teacher

association, and also worked at Dixie Pine Chemicals, Inc. James describes how he takes after his father's hardworking parenting style. Raised in the Robinson Place housing project, James and his five siblings grew up poor. Nevertheless, James enjoyed Thanksgiving and Christmas. He was involved in the church's Young People's Division; played Little League baseball; and attended Grace Love Elementary School, where his principal was P.C. Bailey. James describes his childhood friend, George McFarland, and the professions of his neighbors in his working class community.

African American bankers--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Robert James was the state president of the African Methodist Episcopal Young People's Division, where he befriended Reverend Dr. Floyd Flake and William D. Watley. James' mother encouraged him to learn to play the saxophone, and later he played the tuba and French horn in the high school band. With the encouragement of his high school principal, N.R. Burger, James was president of his class; a member of Hi-Y; and represented the student council at the Williamsburg Student Burgesses, where his friends included Sanford Bishop, Jr. As a teenager, James picked cotton; worked at a bakery; and raked leaves. He also listened to St. Louis Cardinal games on the radio, and attended a game while visiting his aunt in East St. Louis, Illinois. After band director Cleopas Johnson invited James to Atlanta's Morris Brown College, he enrolled there on a scholarship. He also recalls the March on Washington; Freedom Riders visiting his home; and his sadness after President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Robert James attended civil rights rallies at his church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and remembers cross burnings and the bombing of Vernon Damer's home by the Ku Klux Klan. Wanting to attend one of Atlanta, Georgia's historically black colleges, James enrolled at Morris Brown College on a four year scholarship. He joined the band, headed by Cleopas Johnson; pledged Omega Psi Phi Fraternity; and became the Basileus of the fraternity's Alpha Sigma Chapter. During the summer, James interned at Armco Steel Corporation. Upon graduating in 1968 with a bachelor's degree in accounting, James was drafted into the Vietnam War, but instead of serving like his older brothers, was declared exempt. He enrolled in Boston's Harvard Business School, where his classmates included John Garamendi, who became the lieutenant governor of California. Of 750 students, there were only 26 African Americans, and some professors proposed awarding them certificates of attendance instead of M.B.A. degrees.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Robert James remembers his Harvard Business School classmates, Herbert P. Wilkins, Sr. and Daniel Dennis, Sr., with whom he successfully opposed a movement to award black students attendance certificates instead of M.B.A. degrees. He later helped recruit more African American students to the school. James preferred living in the South over Boston, Massachusetts, and interned in Atlanta at The Citizens and Southern National Bank of Georgia during his sophomore year. Upon graduating, James turned down an offer to work with Robert Green at Michigan State University, and returned to The Citizens and Southern National Bank of Georgia as one of the first African American commercial lenders at a majority bank. While there, James met Maynard

Jackson, Andrew Young and Herman Russell. In 1971, he became the president of Carver State Bank in Savannah, Georgia. James recalls attending the birth of his son, Robert James, II, in 1970. He also describes his family's legacy at Harvard University.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_005, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Robert James' thirty-five year tenure at Savannah's Carver State Bank made him the longest serving African American bank president. James grew the bank's net worth from \$4 million to \$33 million, and expanded to multiple locations in Savannah, Georgia. James also served on the Savannah Economic Development Authority, and as president of the National Bankers Association. There, he worked with President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter to institute the Minority Bank Deposit Program, which helped stimulate financial growth in minority banks across the country. James talks about the importance of African American owned businesses, as well as the consequences of the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, which was created to encourage economic growth in communities of color. James was also the Basileus of the Alpha Sigma Chapter of Omega Psi Fraternity and the Grammateus of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity. He was acquainted with fraternity members like scholar John B. Clemmons, Sr. and Black Enterprise founder Earl G. Graves, Sr.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_006, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Robert James co-authored 'The Mississippi Black Bankers and Their Institutions' with his brothers, Arthur James and Jimmie James, Jr. His son, Robert E. James, II, completed missionary work at South Africa's Wilberforce Institute upon graduating from Harvard Law School. James' daughter-in-law, Angela Payne James, was also a Harvard Law School graduate, and a relative of Atlanta Life Insurance Company's vice president, Norris L. Connally. James' older daughter, Anne James Gennaio, was the headmaster of Children First in Boston, Massachusetts and the Poppins International Pre-School in Tokyo, Japan., while his younger daughter, Rachelle James Gregory, worked for Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. James received honorary doctoral degrees from Morris Brown College and B.F. Lee Theological Seminary at Edward Waters College. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and shares his message to future generations. James also reflects upon his life and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert James, Section A2007_024_001_007, TRT: 0:14:10 ?

Robert James narrates his photographs.