

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter L. Gordon, Jr.

---

## 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>	Gordon, Walter L., 1908-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 3, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	3 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:31:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civil rights lawyer Walter L. Gordon, Jr. (1908 - 2012 ) practiced law for over sixty years in Los Angeles, where he represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers, including Billie Holliday. He also has an extensive photo collection of notable African Americans including Count Basie and Louis Armstrong. Gordon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 3, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_071
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights attorney and photo collector Walter Gordon, Jr. was born on June 22, 1908, in the Ocean Park neighborhood in Santa Monica, California. Originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, Gordon's parents were well educated and served as community leaders. His father was a mail carrier in South Pasadena and worked for African American owned newspapers and publications including: "The Messenger," "The Negro World," "The Chicago Defender" and "The Crisis." As a youth, Gordon also helped to keep the African American community informed by delivering newspapers to homes and barbershops. He soon became a familiar face in Los Angeles and was recognized by many of its elite crowd.

Gordon attended University of Southern California (USC) Preparatory School where he graduated and went on to enroll at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. After graduating with his degree, he earned his J.D. degree. In 1936, at a time when the Los Angeles legal system was plagued with segregation, Gordon became one of the city's first attorneys when he established his law practice in the same facility as one of Los Angeles's oldest African American publications, "The California Eagle." As a neighbor of the publication, he also began collecting photographs given to him by the newspaper's editor. During the next few decades, his legal practice became a prominent and vital institution in Los Angeles's downtown and Central Avenue District. He represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers.

In the mid-1940s, when the Los Angeles Police Department began targeting African American night club owners for operating during late night hours without a special permit, Gordon successfully persuaded the court to allow various African American night club owners a special permit to operate. Then, in 1947, he successfully represented a former Hollywood cameraman and owner of Shepp's Playground, Gordon Sheppard, in an entrapment case. Gordon also represented legendary jazz vocalist, Billie Holliday, in a case in which she allegedly slashed a heckler with a knife after he interrupted her performance of "Strange Fruit."

Gordon has kept a special collection of memorable African American photographs throughout his career. His collection includes valuable photographs of the Langston Law Club, composer Count Basie, musician Louis Armstrong and the black resort Val Verde. In 2003, he was awarded the Shattuck-Price Outstanding Lawyer Award from the Los Angeles County Bar Association, and in 2004, he retired after more than sixty years of practicing law. Gordon's photo collection is housed and made available for scholarly and public access through the Edward L. Doheny, Jr. Memorial Library's Digital Collection, at the University of Southern California.

Walter Gordon passed away on April 16, 2012 at the age of 103.

Walter L. Gordon was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 3, 2008.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter L. Gordon, Jr. was conducted by Jacques Lesure on April 3, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 3 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer Walter L. Gordon, Jr. (1908 - 2012 ) practiced law for over sixty years in Los Angeles, where he represented a wide assortment of public servants, athletes and entertainers, including Billie Holliday. He also has an extensive photo collection of notable African Americans including Count Basie and Louis Armstrong.

---

## 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:

Gordon, Walter L., 1908-

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Gordon, Walter L., 1908---Interviews

---

African American lawyers--California--Los Angeles--Interviews

---

Collectors and collecting--Interviews.

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Civil Rights Lawyer

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

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 L. Gordon, Jr., April 3, 2008. 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 L. Gordon, Jr., Section A2008\_071\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Walter L. Gordon, Jr. was born on June 22, 1908 in Santa Monica, California, to Vertner Lewis Gordon and Walter L. Gordon, Sr. His paternal grandmother was a slave in Woodville, Mississippi, where Gordon's father was born. Later, his father left school to found the Gordon Day Work Company, a cleaning business in Santa Monica. Gordon's mother was raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and studied teaching at Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College. After marrying, his parents moved to Los Angeles, where his father was active in the Los Angeles Forum, and his mother raised money for the education of diplomat Ralph Bunche and singer Marian Anderson. His father worked as a mail carrier, and later founded an agency that distributed publications like the Negro Digest. In Los Angeles, Gordon attended Rose Hill Elementary School, where he was the only black student, and faced racial discrimination. He remembers his principal, Henrietta Glissman; and paternal uncle, policeman Walter A. Gordon.

African American families--California--Santa Monica.

African American children--Education (Elementary)--California--Los Angeles.

African American neighborhoods--California--Santa Monica.

Parents' and teachers' associations.

African American newspapers-California--Los Angeles.

United States Postal Service – Employees – California.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Jr., Section A2008\_071\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Walter L. Gordon, Jr. grew up in the diverse community of Rose Hill Park in Los Angeles, California. His family owned a home on Armour Avenue, where their white neighbors refused to talk to them because of their race. Gordon excelled at Rose Hill Elementary School; where, of his class of forty pupils, he was one of three students who went on to attend high school. From 1922, Gordon was a student at Los Angeles' Abraham Lincoln High School, where he befriended Thomas W. Myles, Jr., an older student who became his mentor. During the summers, they rode the train to Sacramento, California, where they earned money picking peaches and pears. Gordon was later encouraged by Miles to apply to Harvard University. Although he was not admitted, he moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where he met athletes Edward Gourdin and athlete William Henry Lewis, who went on to serve as a U.S. attorney. Later, in 1936, Gordon earned a degree from the Ohio State University College of Law.

African American children--California--Los Angeles--Social life and customs.

African American high school students--California.

Harvard University--20th century.

Lewis, William H. (William Henry), 1868-1949

Los Angeles (Ca.)--Social life and customs.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter L. Gordon, Jr., Section A2008\_071\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Walter L. Gordon, Jr. attended Abraham Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, California. He admired his classmate, Thomas W. Myles, Jr., who led the Reserve Officers' Training Corps despite its discriminatory policies. Then, Gordon transferred to University of Southern California Preparatory School, where he met Madeline Johnson, the niece of California Eagle newspaper owner Charlotta Bass. After Johnson left California, Gordon obtained work on the Andrew F. Luckenbach freighter ship, which took him through the Panama Canal to New York City. There, he learned that Johnson had chosen to pass for white permanently. Gordon settled in Boston, Massachusetts, where Harvard University admissions director Henry Pennypacker secured a room for him at the YMCA. The staff mistook him for white, until his African American friends visited, and he was told to leave. In Boston, Gordon worked as a launderer, window cleaner and magazine salesman, and later as a cook in the mess hall of a ship, which returned him to California.

African Americans--Massachusetts--Boston--Social life and customs.

African Americans--California--Los Angeles.

California eagle

Passing (Identity)—New York.

YMCA of the U.S.A.-History.