

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with A. Dwight Pettit

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Pettit, A. Dwight, 1945-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit,
Dates:	August 25, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:49:25).
Abstract:	Trial lawyer A. Dwight Pettit (1945 -) is one of the most prominent criminal and personal injury attorneys in Maryland. Pettit is responsible for bringing the first suit in the country against Maryland for discriminatory practices in the bar examination, which lead to other states changing their testing practices. Pettit was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 25, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_144
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Alvin Dwight Pettit was born on September 29, 1945, in Rutherfordton, North Carolina. His mother worked as a beautician and his father worked as an engineer. His family migrated to Baltimore after his father was offered an engineering job in Maryland. In 1958, his father initiated a lawsuit against Harford County, Maryland school officials, forcing the school system to integrate the all white Aberdeen High School. Pettit, represented by Thurgood Marshall, won his suit and was admitted to Aberdeen and graduated in 1963. In addition to being the first African American male to attend the school, he also integrated the football team.

Pettit attended Howard University from 1963 until 1967, where he earned his bachelor's of arts degree. While at Howard, Pettit played football, participated in the ROTC program, reaching the rank of colonel and pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. While at Howard, he received the Holland Ware award for the student athlete demonstrating all around athletic and academic ability. Pettit earned his law degree from Howard in 1970.

In 1970, Pettit began his career as a trial attorney for the Small Business Administration under President Richard Nixon. His duties included preparing briefs for the Department of Justice on fraud cases involving SBA loans. He litigated his first private case, *Pettit vs. the United States*. The case received national acclaim and is considered a landmark decision, setting the standard for back pay awards in discrimination cases. In 1973, Pettit brought the first suit in the country against Maryland for discrimination in the bar examination. The case would lead to other states changing its testing practices. In 1973, Pettit left the SBA and formed Mitchell, Pettit, David and Gill and later his own practice.

Pettit handled many high profile criminal and personal injury cases. In 1977, he won *Scott v. Sutton Place*, which determined that Maryland landlords have responsibility and are liable for criminal activity on their property. In 1983, he won his first million-dollar judgment against the Washington, D.C. Transit Authority in the accident case,

Goodwin v. Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation. Pettit continues to practice law in Baltimore, where he resides with his wife, Barbara.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with A. Dwight Pettit was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on August 25, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Trial lawyer A. Dwight Pettit (1945 -) is one of the most prominent criminal and personal injury attorneys in Maryland. Pettit is responsible for bringing the first suit in the country against Maryland for discriminatory practices in the bar examination, which lead to other states changing their testing practices.

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:

- Pettit, A. Dwight, 1945-
- Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)
- Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Pettit, A. Dwight, 1945---Interviews
-

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Trial 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 A. Dwight Pettit, August 25, 2004. 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 A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_001, TRT: 0:29:34 ?
A. Dwight Pettit was born on September 29, 1945 in Rutherfordton, North Carolina. His mother, Mildred Miller Pettit, was also born in Rutherfordton and grew up close to several of her siblings. She worked as a beautician. His father,

George Pettit, was born in Sylva, North Carolina. Pettit's paternal grandfather, Abraham Pettit, was a highly respected minister in western North Carolina. His father, known for being a strong fighter and independent, studied engineering at Negro Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina in Greensboro while co-owning and operating the South Side Tavern with his brother. He then moved the family to the Baltimore, Maryland area when hired by the federal government to work as an engineer at Fort Holabird. Pettit recalls family holidays and playing sports with his paternal uncles. He talks about his experiences growing up in Turner Station in Dundalk, Maryland, his paternal aunt Dorothy Mae, and memories of Chesapeake Bay.

Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_002, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

A. Dwight Pettit's father and nine paternal uncles took turns attending Negro Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina in Greensboro while working to pay for each other's education. They also fought in World War II and achieved distinguished careers. Pettit was an only child, which often led to feeling lonely, especially when dealing with his father's alcoholism. Pettit attended Fleming Elementary School in Turner Station, then Bragg Elementary School and Sollers Point High School in Sparrows Point, Maryland. In 1958, Pettit's father was reassigned to the largely white, rural community of Aberdeen, Maryland. Pettit was initially sent to the segregated Havre de Grace Consolidated School, but his father soon arranged for him to board with a family in Baltimore and attend the more academically rigorous William H. Lemmel Junior High School. Pettit's family partnered with the local NAACP and Juanita Jackson Mitchell to integrate Aberdeen High School, which sparked Pettit's interest in the law.

Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_003, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

A. Dwight Pettit was at the center of a successful 1960 lawsuit to integrate Aberdeen High School in Aberdeen, Maryland. Pettit's family was represented by Thurgood Marshall and Juanita Jackson Mitchell. The principal of the segregated school Pettit was attending testified against him, and the case was one of the last to be decided under *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896 rather than *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954. After winning the right to enter Aberdeen High School, Pettit became a star player on its football team and performed well academically, although he encountered racism during his time at the school. He decided to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. in order to leave Baltimore and benefit from the environment of a prominent historically black university. At Howard, Pettit continued playing football and performing well academically, despite some challenging courses and professors. After completing his undergraduate degree in 1967, Pettit entered Howard University School of Law.

Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_004, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

A. Dwight Pettit graduated from Howard University School of Law in 1970 and began working as a trial attorney for the U.S. Small Business Administration in Washington, D.C. While still working as a trial attorney, Pettit filed an anti-discrimination suit against the Maryland State Bar Association and represented his father in the landmark civil rights case, *Pettit v. U.S.*, 1973. To represent his father, Pettit filed an exemption to litigate against the federal government and managed to maintain his deferment from the U.S. military. Pettit won and established case law on the issue. Pettit opened his own practice in Baltimore, Maryland where he argued several prominent civil rights cases. Pettit developed a friendship with and campaigned for President James "Jimmy" Carter in 1976. Carter wanted to appoint him U.S. attorney for Maryland, but Pettit lost the

nomination and began practicing corporate law. Pettit also served on the compliance review commission for the National Democratic Party in 1980.

Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_005, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

A. Dwight Pettit campaigned for HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's 1984 presidential run. Pettit became further involved in politics as he ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Congress in 1986, losing to Kweisi Mfume, and Baltimore City Council in 1996, losing to his protégé, Elijah Cummings. Pettit found it difficult to raise money in Maryland due to his radical reputation. Following President Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, Pettit moved away from corporate law and returned to basic criminal cases. However, Pettit became increasingly involved in police brutality and shooting cases. In 2002, Pettit joined Democrats for Ehrlich and campaigned throughout the state of Maryland on behalf of Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. and Lieutenant Gubernatorial Candidate Michael Steele. He explains Ehrlich's victory over Kathleen Kennedy Townsend and moderate Republicans' appeal for African American voters. Pettit also reflects upon his legacy and talks about his plans and hopes for the future.

Video Oral History Interview with A. Dwight Pettit, Section A2004_144_001_006, TRT: 0:19:26 ?

A. Dwight Pettit narrates his photographs.