

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with David B. Wilkins

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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>	Wilkins, David B.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 29, 2013 and October 18, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013 and 2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	12 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:00:58).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer and law professor David B. Wilkins (1956 - ) was the Lester Kissel Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. He also served as the vice dean for global initiatives on the legal profession and faculty director of the program on the legal profession and the Center on Lawyers and the Professional Services Industry. Wilkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 29, 2013 and October 18, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts and Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_109
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Legal scholar and law professor David B. Wilkins was born on January 22, 1956 in Chicago, Illinois. His father, attorney Julian Wilkins, became the first black partner at a major law firm in Chicago in 1971. Wilkins graduated from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in 1973. He received his A.B. degree in government with honors in 1977 from Harvard University and his J.D. degree with honors in 1980 from Harvard Law School. While in law school, Wilkins was a member of the *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review*, the *Harvard Law Review*, and the Harvard Black Law Students Association.

Upon graduation, Wilkins served as a law clerk to Chief Judge Wilfred Feinberg of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. Wilkins then clerked for United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall from 1981 to 1982. In 1982, Wilkins worked as an associate specializing in civil litigation at the law firm of Nussbaum, Owen & Webster in Washington, D.C. He then joined the faculty of Harvard Law School in 1986 as an assistant professor. Wilkins was appointed as Director of the Program on the Legal Profession in 1991 and received tenure in 1992, making him the school's fourth African American tenured professor and the sixth in the history of the school. He served as the Kirkland and Ellis Professor of Law from 1996 until 2008, when he became the Lester Kissel Professor of Law. In 2009, Wilkins was appointed as Vice Dean for Global Initiatives on the Legal Profession and Faculty Director of the Program on the Legal Profession at Harvard Law School.

As a legal scholar, Wilkins authored over sixty articles on the legal profession, and co-authored, along with Andrew Kaufman, *Problems in Professional Responsibility for a Changing Profession*. In addition, Wilkins served as a Senior Research Fellow of the American Bar Foundation and a member of the Faculty Committee of the Harvard University Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics. Wilkins has also lectured on various issues in legal studies internationally as well as in the United States. Harvard Law School honored Wilkins with the Albert

M. Sachs – Paul Freund Award for Teaching Excellence in 1998 and the J. Clay Smith Award in 2009. He received the Order of the Coif Distinguished Visitor Fellowship in 2008 and was honored as the American Bar Foundation Scholar of the Year Award in 2010. In 2012, Professor Wilkins was elected as a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2012, Wilkins was honored with an Honorary Doctorate of Laws degree from Stockholm University in Stockholm, Sweden, the Distinguished Visiting Mentor Award from Australia National University, and the Genest Fellowship from Osgoode Hall Law School.

Wilkins and his wife, Ann Marie Wilkins, live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

David B. Wilkins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 29, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with David B. Wilkins was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson and Larry Crowe on April 29, 2013 and October 18, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 12 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Lawyer and law professor David B. Wilkins (1956 - ) was the Lester Kissel Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. He also served as the vice dean for global initiatives on the legal profession and faculty director of the program on the legal profession and the Center on Lawyers and the Professional Services Industry.

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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:

Wilkins, David B.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Wilkins, David B.--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:

Lawyer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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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 David B. Wilkins, April 29, 2013 and October 18, 2016. 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 David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:47  
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David B. Wilkins was born on January 22, 1956 in Chicago, Illinois to Elizabeth Sweeney Wilkins and Julian Wilkins. His paternal great-grandfather, John Wallace Robinson, built the St. Mark's United Methodist Church in New York City, where his maternal grandfather, Samuel Sweeny, later served as pastor. Wilkins' paternal grandfather, J. Ernest Wilkins, Sr., was one of the first African Americans to graduate from the University of Chicago Law School. Afterward, he opened the law firm of Wilkins, Wilkins and Wilkins; and served as the undersecretary of labor under President Dwight Eisenhower. Wilkins' paternal uncle, J. Ernest Wilkins, Jr., obtained his doctorate degree in mathematics from the University of Chicago at nineteen years old, and worked on the Manhattan Project. Wilkins' mother grew up in the Harlem area of New York City, where she took piano lessons from composer Bela Bartok. She went on to study music education at Hunter College in New York City and Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:29  
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David B. Wilkins' father, Julian Wilkins, entered the University Wisconsin-Madison in Madison, Wisconsin at fourteen years old. After graduating, he attended Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Wilkins' paternal uncle, John R. Wilkins, had previously attended and served as the fourth African American editor of the Harvard Law Review. While there, Wilkins' father met his mother, Elizabeth Sweeney Wilkins, who was studying nearby at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. After graduating from law school in 1949, Wilkins' father returned to Chicago, Illinois to join Wilkins, Wilkins and Wilkins, the law firm started by his father, J. Ernest Wilkins, Sr. In 1954, Wilkins' paternal grandfather was appointed as the undersecretary of labor, leaving the firm to Wilkins' father. While there, his father also helped to found the Seaway National Bank. Then in 1970, Wilkins' father became the first African American partner at the Chicago based law firm Jenner and Block.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:33  
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David B. Wilkins' father worked at the law firm of Jenner and Block in Chicago, Illinois, where he was the first African American partner. During this time, Wilkin's father lost many of his African American clients, as they were intimidated by the atmosphere of the all-white firm. After five years, Wilkins' father left Jenner and Block, and returned to private practice until he was approached by Jewel Lafontant-MANKarious to start one of the first minority owned law firms, Lafontant, Wilkins and Fisher. Wilkins' father remained at the law firm until his death in 1984. Wilkins talks about his parents' personalities and their thoughts on his career as a law professor. He also reflects upon the career paths of his paternal grandfather, uncle and father. Growing up in Chicago, Wilkins enjoyed going out to dinner and a show with his mother, Elizabeth Sweeney Wilkins. When he was fifteen years old, Wilkins and his family travelled around South America for five and a half weeks.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:52  
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David B. Wilkins was one of four children born to Elizabeth Sweeney Wilkins and Julian Wilkins. His older sister, Carolyn Wilkins, became a professional jazz pianist and professor at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. She also published two books on their family's history: 'Damn Near White' about the professional careers of the male family members, and 'They Raised Me Up,' which focused on the women. Wilkins' also had two younger brothers, Stephen Wilkins and Timothy Wilkins; both of whom lived abroad for a time. Wilkins and his siblings grew up in the integrated Hyde Park neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, where they attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. There, Wilkins was one of the few African American students in his class until the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., prompted the school to recruit minority students. Wilkins' classmates included media executive Linda Johnson Rice and future U.S. secretary of education, Arne Duncan.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:41  
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David B. Wilkins grew up in the integrated Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, where he spent his time buying records at Rose Records, playing basketball at Jackson Park and watching films at the Ida Noyes Hall. Wilkins also became involved with Jack and Jill of America, Inc.; through which his family came to know the Bowman family including their daughter, Valerie Jarrett. In Chicago, Wilkins excelled academically at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he also thrived on the debate team under the tutelage of Coach Earl Bell. While in high school, Wilkins became politically involved through the protests and strikes on the University of Chicago's campus. He also joined the protestors outside of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, but left before the riots began. During his youth, gang violence began to rise on Chicago's South Side; and although he avoided gang activities, Wilkins was once mugged while walking to a friend's house.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_001\_006, TRT: 6:31:48  
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David B. Wilkins was raised on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, which was heavily segregated from the African American community on the West Side and the predominately white community on the North Side of the city. During this time, his father became politically involved in Chicago, and was appointed to the blue ribbon panel that investigated the deaths of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in 1969. Wilkins' father also worked on the Illinois Senate campaigns of Richard Newhouse, Jr. and Harold Washington. Wilkins attended his father's alma mater, Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There, he studied government, and became acquainted with the dean of students, Archie C. Epps, III, and lawyer Walter J. Leonard. Recognizing the need to organize the university's large African American student population, Wilkins and his roommate, future business executive Anthony R. Chase, created the Black Students Association, through which they advocated for the development of an Afro American studies department.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_007, TRT: 7:29:31  
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David B. Wilkins' father, Julian Wilkins, and paternal uncle, John R. Wilkins, both attended Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts when they were only eighteen and nineteen years old. Although his father's education was

briefly interrupted by his military service in World War II, both graduated and returned to Chicago, Illinois to practice at their father's law firm, Wilkins, Wilkins and Wilkins. Following his high school graduation from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in 1973, Wilkins was admitted to Harvard University by David L. Evans, the university's first African American admissions director. There, Wilkins joined the growing number of African American students, which included business executive Anthony R. Chase, scholar Cornel West and anesthesiologist Emery Brown. While at Harvard University, Wilkins also met Al Haymon who began his career as a promoter by bringing musicians Grover Washington, Jr. and Rick James to campus.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_008, TRT: 8:30:02 ?

David B. Wilkins studied government at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he and Anthony R. Chase founded the Black Students Association during their junior year. They also hosted their own radio show, 'Night Birds,' on WHRB Radio in Cambridge. Wilkins joined the BlackCAST theater group, and performed in productions such as Douglas Turner Ward's 'Day of Absence.' Although the campus was integrated, the City of Boston was still racially segregated, and the introduction of school bussing contributed to the racial tension. During the summers, Wilkins returned home to Chicago, Illinois to work in the file and computers rooms at the Commonwealth Edison Company. Following graduation, Wilkins entered Harvard Law School in Cambridge, where he studied under torts professor Robert Keeton and contract professor Phillip E. Areeda. To excel in Areeda's class, Wilkins wrote an extensive outline that was used by future students as a study guide. He also recalls meeting his wife, Ann Marie Wilkins.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_009, TRT: 9:30:36 ?

David B. Wilkins excelled academically at Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the end of his first year, Wilkins participated in a writing competition, which earned him a spot on the Harvard Law Review alongside Adebayo Ogunlesi and Harold Hongju Koh, its first Asian member. This was also the first time that three African American students served on the law review at the same time. That summer, he clerked at the Chicago firm of Kirkland and Ellis, LLP, where he was one of only a few African American associates. The relationships he formed there proved to be beneficial years later, as he was named the Kirkland and Ellis Professor of Law at the Harvard Law School in 1992. In his second year, he studied with Richard Parker, and was introduced to critical legal studies through Duncan Kennedy and Morton Horwitz. Following his second year, Wilkins clerked for Judge Wilfred Feinberg of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court Judge Thurgood Marshall.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_010, TRT: 10:30:07 ?

David B. Wilkins served on the Harvard Law Review alongside Adebayo Ogunlesi and W. Randy Eaddy while studying at the Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There, he befriended professor Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr., for whom he worked as a teaching assistant. After graduating, Wilkins completed a clerkship with Justice Wilfred Feinberg in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York City; during which time he lived with his paternal great aunt, Juanita Robinson Jackson, in Brooklyn, New York. He then went on to clerk in the U.S. Supreme Court for Thurgood Marshall.

While there, Wilkins worked on cases and listened to Marshall's many stories, which inspired Wilkins' 1989 article, 'Justice as Narrative.' At the end of his clerkship, he joined the law offices of Nussbaum, Owen and Webster, a boutique firm in New York City. Wilkins remained at there for three years until he was approached by Harvard Law School's newly appointed dean, James Vorenberg, to teach at the college.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_011, TRT: 11:35:19 ?

David B. Wilkins became a law professor at his alma mater, Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1986. Wilkins and other African American lecturers, including Charles Ogletree, Christopher Edley, Jr. and Randall Kennedy, were brought to the school following campus protests against the controversial selection of a white professor, Jack Greenberg, to teach the school's first class on civil rights law. Prior to this, there were only a handful of African American professors at the school including Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr. and Derrick A. Bell, Jr., the first African American professor at Harvard Law School. During his interview for the position, Wilkins ran into Bell who helped to convince the college to hire Wilkins. Once hired, Wilkins' gave a presentation to the school's faculty on his legal work and made an effort to meet each of the sixty faculty members. Wilkins' excelled during his first year, and received high marks from his students.

Video Oral History Interview with David B. Wilkins, Section A2013\_109\_002\_012, TRT: 12:22:13 ?

David B. Wilkins served as a graduate assistant for civil procedure instructors David L. Shapiro and Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr. while studying at the Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this role, Wilkins taught the research and writing portion of the civil procedure course. This teaching experience later informed his decision to join the faculty of the Harvard Law School in 1986. That same year, Wilkins married Ann Marie Wilkins, a fellow Harvard Law School graduate. During his first semester of teaching, Wilkins taught a portion of the first year students along with Albert Sacks and David Trubek. He met with his students often to get to know them as individuals, which led to favorable teacher evaluations at the end of his first year. Other African American lecturers at the school included criminal law professor Charles Ogletree and Derrick A. Bell, Jr. who pushed for more minority and women representation on the faculty.