

A Guide to the The Vanguard: Early Black alumni at Madison (enrolled 1966-1974, graduated 1970-1978) oral histories SdArch 0048

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2024 March-August



Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

SdArch 0048

Unit ID

/repositories/4/resources/806

Unit Date

2024 March-August

Language

English

source

Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent

55.3 Gigabytes (10 digital files) 5 video files (2 .mov, 3 .mp4), 5 text documents (.docx)

Repository

James Madison University Libraries Special Collections

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research. Agreements with the interviewees govern access to oral history interviews.

Conditions Governing Use

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Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Margaret M. Mulrooney, 2026.

Scope and Contents

The collection comprises five oral history interviews conducted in 2024 by Margaret M. Mulrooney, professor of history at James Madison University and a scholar of U.S. social and cultural history, along with corresponding transcripts. The interviews document the experiences of African American individuals who attended and desegregated Madison College in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of significant institutional change. The project was undertaken to examine the transformation of Madison College from a small, segregated women's college into a desegregated, coeducational, comprehensive university now known as James Madison University. Through firsthand accounts, interviewees describe campus life and the social, cultural, and institutional shifts associated with desegregation and coeducation, as well as the broader societal changes during this period. As an oral history project, the collection documents perspectives and experiences that may not otherwise be captured or preserved. The interviews serve as primary source documentation of this transitional era and contribute to a fuller understanding of the university's history.

Keywords

Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Arrangement

The collection is arranged alphabetically by surname of interviewee.

Description of Subordinate Components

Deborah Tompkins Johnson interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32781

Unit Date 2024 March 12

Deborah Tompkins Johnson interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney, Session 1

Unit ID SdArch48-0001a

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32782

Unit Date 2024 March 12

Language English

Creator Johnson, Deborah Tompkins

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent 10.4 Gigabytes1 digital file(.mp4)1920 x 1080

Extent 01:12:14 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)

Biographical / Historical

Deborah Tompkins Johnson was born March 4, 1956, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and was raised in Petersburg, Virginia. As a student, she was among those who integrated Petersburg High School. She enrolled at Madison College, attending from 1974 to 1978, where she studied communications (radio, television, and film). During her time at Madison College, she was active in several Black student organizations, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., the Contemporary Gospel Choir, and the Black Student Alliance (BSA), serving as BSA president during her senior year.

Following her graduation in 1978, Johnson taught before pursuing a career in broadcast journalism. In 1988, she was appointed to the James Madison University Board of Visitors, becoming the first Black woman to serve in that role; she served until 1994 and again from 2015 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2023. In 1990, she co-founded the university's Black Alumni Chapter and has remained active, including participation in the Ole School Alumni Student Group. Johnson received the Inez Roop Alumni Service Award in 1995. In recognition of a gift made by Johnson and her family in the early 2000s, the entry area of the Leeolou Alumni Center was named the Tompkins Hall of Distinction.

Scope and Contents

Records the first part of an interview with Deborah Tompkins Johnson, documenting her experiences as a student at Madison College beginning in 1974. The interview describes her transition to campus life, including residence in Eagle Hall and early academic experiences in the communications program (radio, television, and film), including studio work and internships. Johnson details her participation in the Black Student Alliance (BSA), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the Contemporary Gospel Singers, with discussion of activities such as Black Emphasis Week programming, step shows, performances, and events such as a student-organized fashion show. The interview recounts student advocacy efforts for institutional change, including demonstrations, meetings with administrators, and requests for increased representation across faculty, curriculum, and student services, as well as the establishment of a Minority Affairs coordinator role. Additional topics include student social life, residence hall dynamics, dining, participation in campus events, and graduation. The interview was held in Wilson Hall at James Madison University.

Deborah Tompkins Johnson interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney, Session 2

Unit ID SdArch48-0001b

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32783

Unit Date 2024 March 12

Language English

Creator Johnson, Deborah Tompkins

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent 7.6 Gigabytes1 digital file(.mov)1920 x 1080

Extent 01:36:06 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)

Biographical / Historical

Deborah Tompkins Johnson was born March 4, 1956, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and was raised in Petersburg, Virginia. As a student, she was among those who integrated Petersburg High School. She enrolled at Madison College, attending from 1974 to 1978, where she studied communications (radio, television, and film). During her time at Madison College, she was active in several Black student organizations, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., the Contemporary Gospel Choir, and the Black Student Alliance (BSA), serving as BSA president during her senior year.

Following her graduation in 1978, Johnson taught before pursuing a career in broadcast journalism. In 1988, she was appointed to the James Madison University Board of Visitors, becoming the first Black woman to serve in that role; she served until 1994 and again from 2015 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2023. In 1990, she co-founded the university's Black Alumni Chapter and has remained active, including participation in the Ole School Alumni Student Group. Johnson received the Inez Roop Alumni Service Award in 1995. In recognition of a gift made by Johnson and her family in the early 2000s, the entry area of the Leeolou Alumni Center was named the Tompkins Hall of Distinction.

Scope and Contents

Records the second part of an interview with Deborah Tompkins Johnson, exploring aspects of her career and contributions as a distinguished alumna. Topics include her service on the Board of Visitors between 1998-1994, her memories of the growth and transformation of JMU in the early 1990s, and her involvement in alumni organizations. She also discusses her reappointment by President Alger nearly a

decade after her earlier term ended. She reflects on the President's task Force on Racial Equity, which she cochaired, and shares her thoughts on how the experiences of contemporary students compare to her own days at Madison College.

Saranna Tucker Rankin and James D. Rankin, Jr. interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney

Unit ID SdArch48-0002

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32784

Unit Date 2024 July 08

Language English

Creator Rankin, Saranna Tucker

Creator Rankin, James D., Jr., 1947-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent 5.6 Gigabytes1 digital file(.mov)1920 x 1080

Extent 01:13:57 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)

Biographical / Historical

Saranna Tucker Rankin is a licensed clinical social worker and community figure connected with early Black student life at Madison College (now James Madison University). Born in Norfolk, Virginia, she spent part of her childhood in New York before returning to Hampton, Virginia, where in 1965 she was among the students who integrated Hampton High School. Encouraged by a Black high school guidance counselor, she enrolled at Madison College in fall 1968 to study social work, joining the first cohort of Black students at the institution. In 1971, Rankin co-founded the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. chapter at Madison College, the first Black Greek-letter organization on campus.

James Rankin, Jr. is a retired juvenile justice professional and the second Black (first male) graduate of Madison College (now James Madison University). Born and raised in New Market, Virginia, he attended segregated schools in Shenandoah County, briefly studied at the Lucy F. Simms School in Harrisonburg, and graduated from the newly integrated Stonewall Jackson High School in 1967. He then enrolled at Blue Ridge Community College, becoming the first Black student both to attend and to earn an associate's degree there, before transferring in 1969 to Madison College, where he studied social work and graduated in 1971; while there, he met his wife, Saranna Tucker. Rankin began his career in Prince William County, Virginia, as a juvenile probation officer, earned a master's degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1980, was promoted to assistant director in 1982, and in 1992 became Director of the 31st District Court Service Unit, supervising more than 55 employees.

Scope and Contents

Records an interview with Saranna Tucker Rankin and James D. Rankin, Jr., who recount their childhoods and primary and secondary education in segregated and newly integrating school systems in Virginia, including experiences in Hampton and Shenandoah County. The interview documents their decisions to pursue higher education and enrollment at Madison College, describing academic experiences in the social work program, financial considerations, and patterns of commuting and residence. Discusses campus life during early coeducation and desegregation, including interaction with campus dining and social spaces, participation in intramural sports, and involvement in early Black student social networks. Recounts participation in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and outreach activities, as well as interactions with faculty and administrators. Addresses perceptions of campus climate, student protests, and the broader context of social change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Vietnam War and civil rights activism. Additional topics include social relationships and post-college transitions. The interview was held in Wilson Hall at James Madison University.

Daphyne Saunders Thomas interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney

Unit ID SdArch48-0003

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32785

Unit Date 2024 August 30

Language English

Creator Thomas, Daphyne Saunders

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent 21.1 Gigabytes1 digital file(.mp4)1920 x 1080

Biographical / Historical

Daphyne Saunders Thomas, a native of southwest Virginia, graduated from Franklin County High School in 1972 during the period of public school desegregation in Virginia. She attended Virginia Tech, where she studied English and Sociology, served on the Human Relations Council, and worked in the admissions office recruiting Black students. After graduating in May 1976, she joined the admissions staff at Madison College (after 1977, JMU) as a minority recruiter where her work focused on increasing the enrollment of both male and minority students. In 1979, Thomas left JMU to attend the Washington and Lee University School of Law, receiving her Juris Doctor in 1981. She subsequently returned to JMU as an assistant professor of business law in the College of Business and completed a Master of Business Administration at JMU in 1985. She taught in the College of Business for several decades. Thomas co-founded and co-directed the CyberCity Summer Program, which served underrepresented middle and high school students from Virginia and the surrounding area, and received multiple awards for this work. In addition to her university service, she participated in local boards and community initiatives. She retired from JMU in 2020. The interview was held in Wilson Hall at James Madison University.

Scope and Contents

Records an interview with Daphyne Saunders Thomas, who describes her educational experiences in a segregated and desegregating public school system in southwest Virginia and her college experience at a predominantly white institution, including participation in Black student organizations and recruitment activities. The interview documents her role beginning in 1976 as a minority recruiter for Madison College, including travel to secondary schools, engagement with guidance counselors and prospective students, and efforts to promote the institution to Black students. Discusses institutional priorities to increase enrollment of minority and male students, as well as challenges related to financial aid, internal admissions decision-making processes, and allocation of resources. Addresses interactions with students, faculty, and administrators, including accounts of student concerns about campus climate and discrimination, and describes informal support networks among Black students and staff. Additional topics include housing barriers in the local community, early diversity initiatives, and the development of student organizations and administrative support structures. The interview was held in Wilson Hall at James Madison University.

Janis Smith Wilson interviewed by Margaret M. Mulrooney

Unit ID SdArch48-0004

Unit ID /repositories/4/archival_objects/32786

Unit Date 2024 July 17

Language English

Creator Wilson, Janis Smith, 1950-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Creator Mulrooney, Margaret M., 1966-

Extent 5.6 Gigabytes1 digital file(.mp4)1920 x 1080

Extent 01:13:57 Duration (HH:MM:SS.mmm)

Biographical / Historical

Janis Smith Wilson (b. 1950) is a retired educator and school administrator who was among the early Black students to enroll at Madison College (now James Madison University) following desegregation. Born in Staunton, Virginia, she attended local schools and was raised in a family of educators in Augusta County's segregated school system, who supported her pursuit of higher education. She enrolled at Madison College in 1969 as a transfer student from Virginia State College (now Virginia State University). At Madison, she pursued a double major in business education and data processing and accounting, resided on campus, and co-founded the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc chapter, the first Black sorority on Madison College campus. Smith graduated in 1972 and began her career teaching in Virginia high schools, later continuing her work in education in New York, where she became a school administrator; she also earned two advanced degrees from Syracuse University.

Scope and Contents

Records an interview with Janis Smith Wilson, who recounts her early education in segregated schools and subsequent experiences with desegregation in Staunton, Virginia, and her enrollment at Madison College. Wilson describes campus life as part of a small cohort of Black students, including residence hall experiences, social networks, and academic work in business and data processing. Discusses participation in student activities such as dance theater and details the founding of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. on campus, covering topics such as organizing efforts, institutional requirements, and administrative support. Addresses relationships among Black students, strategies for building community, and participation in social and cultural activities both on and off campus. Additional topics include travel, financial constraints, changing campus conditions during the transition to coeducation and increased enrollment, interactions with faculty, and engagement with the Harrisonburg community. The interview was held in Roanoke, Virginia.

