

# The HistoryMakers: A New Primary Source for Scholars

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## About the Author

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# The HistoryMakers: A New Primary Source for Scholars

## Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of increasing the use and accessibility of The HistoryMakers' video oral history archive. The archive of oral histories of African American "HistoryMakers" from a wide range of backgrounds is a potential resource for academics, school teachers, students, and historians alike. Information is presented on the current state of the archives, potential future uses, and the importance of documenting and preserving these oral histories to gain a deeper understanding of African American history and experience.

The HistoryMakers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit institution operating a special collection as part of the Illinois State Library system. It is one of the largest African American video oral history archives in the nation, with 1400 interviews of both well-known and unsung African Americans. The HistoryMakers' purpose is to record, preserve and disseminate the content of 5,000 video oral history interviews, highlighting the accomplishments of individual African Americans and African American-led groups and movements in order to provide a unique scholarly and educational resource for exploring African American life and culture and the broad range of African American responses to the historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The HistoryMakers is unique among other collections of African American heritage because of its large and varied scope. It combines state-of-the-art technology with the authentic voices of the African American men and women who have helped shape the world in which we live. The HistoryMakers has pursued its mission through collaborations with other institutions and community organizations; public programs; educational curricula and programming; and the media. The HistoryMakers' oral history/public history initiative includes The HistoryMakers Education Institute, a year-long educational program integrating oral history, intergenerational learning, media, and specially-designed curriculum into K-12 schools; and The HistoryMakers Speakers' Bureau, with the potential of becoming the nation's largest African American speakers' bureau, with 700 HistoryMakers currently signed on. The HistoryMakers' media exposure includes PBS broadcasts of The HistoryMakers' events, home video releases, and [The HistoryMakers' website](http://www.thehistorymakers.com) (<http://www.thehistorymakers.com>), rated by Google among the top African American websites on the Internet.

The HistoryMakers' current archive of 1400 interviews, recorded in over 80 cities in the United States, comprises both well-known and unsung African American HistoryMakers, representing a broad range of disciplines, geographical locations and age ranges (36 to 105) to document the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century African American historical experience. The HistoryMakers is unique among other collections of African American heritage because it harkens back to the earliest efforts to capture the voice

of a people, while introducing state-of-the-art technology to allow wide-scale accessibility to a variety of users. The HistoryMakers was forged in the crucible of the struggle by African Americans to reclaim their past as an agency for enlightenment, reflection and empowerment. It marks the first time since the WPA slave narratives recorded in the 1930s that there has been an attempt in the United States to massively record the African American experience as told by the first person. The HistoryMakers is committed to creating a scholarly and educational resource, to make this collection widely available, and to ensure its preservation for future generations.

This paper describes The HistoryMakers' archive, interview protocols, public programs, and potential future use by scholars and educators. The HistoryMakers is developing a searchable digital video database that eventually scholars can use to find and access archived interview data. The potential power of this tool is significant. Working in collaboration with The HistoryMakers, researchers will be able to easily tap the database for a wealth of specific interview quotes and video interview content related to the topic of study. Educators will be able to use the database to enhance the power of their lessons with video extracts and quotes from transcribed interviews.

### **The HistoryMakers and Other African American Oral History Collections**

Most African American oral history collections feature audio-taped subject matter interviews focused on a single theme. The 1930s-1940s recordings of the WPA slave narratives and Lorenzo Dow Turner's documentation of Gullah speakers will be described in detail below. Quinton Taylor's Black Oral History Collection (51 interviews), begun in 1972, focused on African Americans on the Great Plains and the Western frontier. Duke University's "Behind the Veil" (1,000 audio interviews) and the University of Southern Mississippi's Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archives (150 audio interviews) focus on the civil rights movement, as does the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (700 audio interviews) and the Virginia Civil Rights Movement Video Initiative (12 audio interviews). The University of Southern Mississippi's Digital Civil Rights in Mississippi Archive holds digitized, catalogued artifacts and oral histories of

civil rights workers and has constructed a Digital Civil Rights in Mississippi Thesaurus. The Civil Rights Documentation project features 15 interviews from the Student Movements of the 1960s and 17 interviews from the Allard K. Lowenstein Project, both part of the Columbia University Oral History Collection. One must also recognize the recent and significant work of AARP's Voices of Civil Rights that is now housed in the Library of Congress, with thousands of stories recorded; the Black Women Oral History Collection at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College; the more than 300 interviews in the collection of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the more than 356 tapes of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Other collections include the Tuskegee Airman oral history project, the National Visionary Leadership Project and the Black Women at Virginia Tech oral history project. (<http://spec.lib.vt.edu/blackwom/>) There are other collections that are housed in academic institutions across the United States as well as in individual personal collections. However, there is no other project with the envisioned breadth and scope of The HistoryMakers.

### **Oral History: Scholarly and Intellectual Framework**

The traditions of oral history are as ancient as man and as storied as the prophets. Oral history is inarguably the oldest form of historical inquiry. The creative, dynamic and multi-disciplinary nature of the field has enhanced, expanded and reinvigorated the study of history.

One of the best-known examples of early efforts to collect oral history occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s under the auspices of the Federal Writers Project, an agency of the Works Progress Administration, in an effort to expand public awareness of the lives and histories of the "common man" during the Great Depression. The slave narratives collected in this project have remained an invaluable "primary source" for understanding the institution of slavery and its effect on those of African American descent. For example, George Rawick used computers to analyze the narratives anew as an important if imperfect analytical tool for understanding the slaves' responses and

strategies to the institution of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Nobel Prize winning economist and historian Robert Fogel used Rawick's research extensively in his examination of the African American slave experience, *Time on the Cross* (with Stanley Engerman, 2 volumes)<sup>2</sup> and *Without Consent or Contract*.<sup>3</sup> However, the WPA slave narratives were not without their problems. The paucity of audio recording and the lack of videotape recorders meant that, for most of its interviews, the project relied on the human note-taker's memory and transcription accuracy. There were also issues of race and class that permeated the collection. These narratives were presented and analyzed in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (1977) edited by John Blassingame.<sup>4</sup> Then, in 1998, Ira Berlin brought the slave narratives to life with his critical analysis in *Remembering Slavery*.<sup>5</sup> His work represents some of the best scholarship in this area.

Between 1932 and 1942, at approximately the same time as the slave narratives project, the first professionally trained African American linguist, Lorenzo Dow Turner, was traveling through the coastal islands and adjacent mainland of South Carolina and Georgia documenting the isolated and largely-ignored linguistic phenomenon called Gullah. Turner published his findings in *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.<sup>6</sup> Using the technology then available, Turner recorded the voices and stories of Gullah speakers. But, as a linguist, Turner was more interested in the origins of words and tracing their connection to the language of West Africa than in preserving the lives and stories of the Gullah people. Lacking resources, and working essentially on his own, Turner's research offers a tragic "might-have-been" story.

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1 See Rawick, George P., ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 volumes. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972-79).

2 Fogel, Robert William and Engerman, Stanley L. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.)

3 Fogel, Robert William, *Without Consent or Contract* (London : W.W. Norton & Company, 1989).

4 Blassingame, John W., ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1977.)

5 Berlin, Ira; Favreau, Mark; and Miller, Steven F., *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. (New York: The New Press, 1998.)

6 Turner, Lorenzo Dow, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1949.)

The HistoryMakers understands that oral history is the counterbalance to documentary evidence and it is this that historical scholarship is based on. Modern oral history collection is credited to Allan Nevins<sup>7</sup> who, beginning in the 1940s, sought to systematically record and make accessible audio-taped oral histories. His first interview was of the prominent civic leader George McAneny in 1948. While working on a biography of then-President Grover Cleveland, Nevins found that Cleveland's associates left few diaries, manuscripts or memoirs—the common beginning points for biographies. Developments of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps the nature of late 19<sup>th</sup> century politics, had robbed the professional historian of many tools of their trade. The telephone was replacing personal correspondence. The ease, speed, and inexpensive nature of new modes of transportation meant that people could go and visit their loved ones instead of writing long, elegant, and historically valuable personal letters. Nevins founded Columbia University's Oral History Research Office and initially, this office focused its efforts on interviewing the elite, the movers and shakers of society, the men and women, but mostly men, who “made” history. But the “social history” revolution of the 1960s and 1970s broadened the scope of inquiry and widened the range of those interviewed. Columbia University's oral history collection now includes interviews of women, racial and ethnic minorities, blue-collar workers and union leaders, and political activists along with an extensive video documentation of those involved in the 9-11 World Trade Center bombing.

In 1967, attempts to secure and preserve oral history led to the formation of the Oral History Association (OHA). A year later, in 1968, OHA issued its first set of goals and guidelines. In 1979, at the OHA Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, revised and expanded evaluation guidelines were developed into a checklist form. These new guidelines addressed a variety of issues, and in 1990, a more extensive and expanded Statement of Principles and Standards was adopted at the November OHA 1990 meeting. These revised standards included evaluative tools for addressing ethical issues as well as the impact of race, gender, class culture and

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<sup>7</sup> Fetner, Gerald L., *Immersed in Great Affairs: Allan Nevins and the Heroic Age of American History*. (Albany : State University of New York Press, 2004.)

ethnicity on the interview process. The widened perspective of these new standards also addressed the impact of oral history projects on communities. Attention was also placed on updating technical standards for new media, particularly the Internet, and the ethical issues presented with the new technology.

The HistoryMakers believes that the value of oral history far outweighs its limitations. Oral history provides the historian with new knowledge and the potential for new interpretive perspectives. It provides information about everyday life and makes a case for the “active agency” of the individual. It provides further insight into the thoughts and motivations and previously unrecorded life experiences of well-known persons, as well as evidence of the responses, coping strategies and sometimes the heroism of those often ignored by conventional histories—women, minorities, the economically dispossessed, the “inarticulate” of the new social history. These are men and women whose papers will never be collected, who left no memoirs or autobiographies and whose obituaries will never be published in the New York Times. But oral history can also provide a way of contextualizing history, of making the personal experience social, of reclaiming social memory. This is the essence of The HistoryMakers collection.

### **The HistoryMakers Collection: Scope and Content**

The life stories of the individual HistoryMakers represent the diversity of the African American experience: they span a broad range in terms of education, economic and social status, political affiliations and religious beliefs; having origins ranging from New England to Hawaii and sharing personal memories stretching from the first decade of the 1900s to the present. The interviews also provide a wealth of information and perspectives on the earlier African American past, through interviewees’ relating their own families’ oral history dating back to the times of American slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Reconstruction and its aftermath (“the nadir of American race

relations”—a phrase coined by the African American historian Rayford Logan<sup>8</sup>), a period in which many of The HistoryMakers’ parents grew up.

Although some notable individuals of middle age have been interviewed (and if possible will be re-interviewed in the future, to cover the later period of their lives), the majority of those interviewed are elderly, due to the urgent need to record our elders’ memories in their own voices. A list of some of the centenarian and nonagenarian HistoryMakers conveys an idea of the great scope of this collection: singer and actress Etta Moten Barnett; chemist Katie Booth, printmaker and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett; Georgia agriculturalist Robert Church; dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham; journalist Thomas Fleming; historian John Hope Franklin; 105-year-old Junious “Red” Gaten, who witnessed the Chicago Riot of 1919; social activist Dorothy Height; civil rights attorney Oliver Hill; radio personality Hal Jackson; blues guitarist (and stepson of blues legend Robert Johnson) Robert Lockwood, Jr.; theologian Richard McKinney; John Murphy III, publisher of the Baltimore African American; tap dancer Fayard Nicholas; photographer, writer and filmmaker Gordon Parks; physician and Harlem community activist Dr. Muriel Petioni; the oldest living black cowboy, Alonzo Pettie; Negro League baseball player Ted “Double Duty” Radcliffe; organizer of the first black electricians’ union in the U.S., Charles Stewart; and Tuskegee Airman Colonel William Thompson.

The scope and size of the collection, presently 1400 interviews, with a goal of 5000 interviews eventually, affords researchers a valuable resource for analyzing both the differences and the similarities among African Americans’ experiences and ideas. The interviewees’ mannerisms and speech patterns are resonant of specific locales, including communities no longer in existence. Their accounts, often moving and sometimes eloquent, document lives, work, families, communities, and personal views, providing evidence of the complexity of historical events and the broad range of African Americans’ responses and coping strategies.

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8 Logan, Rayford, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*. (New York: Collier Books, 1965.)

Since African American history is inherently woven into the fabric of American history, studying the experiences of this minority group can provide a window to the beliefs, attitudes and social structure of the broader dominant culture. This collection has the capacity to help Americans better understand the major themes of their country's past and its present; and provides a resource for exploring significant, albeit little known, events and issues in our nation's history and culture.

The main value of the HistoryMakers archive is its study of African American history and culture. Because these are life oral histories rather than being limited to a particular topic or period in a person's life (such as participation in the civil rights movement), the inclusion of substantial information about areas such as interviewees' childhood and youth will make this a particularly useful source for study of that part of life. Due to major 20<sup>th</sup> century wars and the draft, many interviewees served in the armed forces, and thus this collection has become a rich source of anecdotal evidence about African Americans' experience in the U.S. military, during both the periods of segregation and integration.

In addition to its value in study of African Americans specifically, the broad subject matter covered will also make this a valuable primary resource to combine with documentary evidence in many other areas of research—such as the study of a particular field or industry, the local history of particular cities or counties, or the examination of dialects.

## **The HistoryMakers' Interview Procedures**

### *Selection of HistoryMakers*

Potential interviewees are sourced through consultation with The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant Corps, The HistoryMakers National Advisory Board and a variety of outside sources including scholars, industry experts, librarians, community and fraternal organizations, Internet nominations, referrals from HistoryMakers themselves and staff research. The HistoryMakers has established a network of "friends" to help in the sourcing of potential candidates. Twice a year, The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant

Corps meets via conference call to review, prioritize and comment on the list of candidates based on age, health, historical significance, geographical location, subject matter and the existence of prior documentation, using the following definition: “A HistoryMaker is African American by descent and is defined as someone who has made significant accomplishments in his or her own life and/or is someone who is associated with a particular movement, organization, association, event or time period that is important to the African American community.” This definition resulted from a 2000 NEH Consultation grant that gathered together a group of historians, academics, curriculum specialists and Internet professionals for discussions to help guide The HistoryMakers’ earliest work. “Time period” and “event” are included because sometimes capturing a person’s vivid memories of African American life in the very early 20<sup>th</sup> century and/or of important events is in itself a compelling reason to interview the individual. (An example is 105-year old Junious “Red” Gaten, who describes growing up in the 1900s and escaping from a white mob during the 1919 Chicago Riot.)

When The HistoryMakers and its Scholar/Consultant Corps identify a potential interviewee, The HistoryMakers contacts the person by mail, sending a letter of introduction/explanation along with a release form and biographical questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed with the assistance of Tony Burroughs, a noted African American genealogist and a member of The HistoryMakers National Advisory Board; they are used by interviewers to prepare for the interview and to augment the information about each interviewee in the archive. Since 35% of the interviewees fail to complete the questionnaire, The HistoryMakers interviewers are now required to include these questions as part of the interview record. This process was suggested by scholar and historian Darlene Clark Hine during a meeting of The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant Corps.

#### *Recruitment and training of interviewers and videographers*

Dr. Michael Frisch, noted Buffalo/SUNY oral historian, scholar and author along with Erin McCarthy, oral historian at Columbia College, played instrumental roles in helping The HistoryMakers develop its training protocols. A comprehensive oral history

recruitment and training program was instituted in September, 2003, to identify, hire, and train interviewers and videographers. This resulted in six trained interviewers and three trained videographers. The staff now includes trained oral historians and scholars Robert Hayden, Larry Crowe and Reginnia Williams. The interviewer is trained to do an effective interview, to listen carefully and to ask questions guiding the subject through a discussion about his or her life. Videographers must be experienced Betacam operators and capable of working solo (requiring experience with sound recording and lighting, and preferably credits as a director of photography and/or gaffer). Particularly important for this collection is an understanding of the special requirements in lighting, background and camera settings for dark skin tones. The HistoryMakers guidelines adhere to the standards set forth in the Oral History Association's Oral History Evaluation Guidelines.

#### *Interview preparation and recording of interviews*

The HistoryMakers has developed specific procedures for its interviews, based on the Oral History Association's guidelines.<sup>9</sup> To quote past president of the Oral History Association, Linda Shopes,

The best interviews have a measured, thinking-out-loud quality, as perceptive questions work and rework a particular topic, encouraging the narrator to remember details, seeking to clarify that which is muddled, making connections among seemingly disconnected recollections, challenging contradictions, evoking assessments of what it all meant then and what it means now. The best interviewers listen carefully between the lines of what is said for what the narrator is trying to get at and then have the presence of mind, sometimes the courage, to ask the hard questions...an interview can be a history lecture, a confessional, a verbal sparring match, an exercise in nostalgia, or any other of the dozens of ways people talk about their experiences.<sup>10</sup>

Before an interview, The HistoryMakers interviewer must research the interviewee's life, becoming familiar with the interviewee's biographical questionnaire, published work, sound recordings, films, art, etc., as well as what others have written or said about him

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<sup>9</sup> Oral History Association. Guidelines and Principles of the Oral History Association. Los Angeles, CA.: Oral History Association, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Shopes, Linda, "What is Oral History?" published in the History Matters: U.S. Survey on the Web webpages. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/what.html>

or her. The HistoryMakers' own archive is becoming an increasingly valuable source for pre-interview research, with candid remarks from friends, colleagues and others who have lived through the same events or in the same place and time. The HistoryMakers' researchers prepare a timeline of the interviewee's life, which is used in conjunction with other timelines for various subject areas and geographical locations, tools being developed in consultation with The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant Corps in order to help interviewers to frame questions placing the interviews within the context of time, place and fields/topics.

The HistoryMakers' interviews average 3-4 hours in length with the shortest interview lasting 1½ hours (Illinois state legislator Charles Morrow) and the longest 15 hours (Reverend Jesse Jackson). The average interview is conducted during one or more sessions at the interviewee's home or office, at The HistoryMakers' national headquarters or at one of its regional facilities in Atlanta, Washington, D.C. or San Francisco. The HistoryMakers staff works to ensure that the atmosphere is congenial and the process is as unobtrusive as possible. Each interviewee is sent a VHS or DVD copy of his/her interview.

The HistoryMakers takes care to develop a consistent body of work, at the same time understanding that the interviewees represent a myriad of subject matters, geographical locations and historical time periods. As life oral histories, The HistoryMakers interviews are divided into five basic parts: family history, childhood, youth/coming of age, education/training, and career. Questions in the early parts of the interview (i.e. "What sights, smells and sounds remind you of your childhood?") are designed to reawaken memories. Each interview ends with some philosophical/speculative and legacy questions (e.g., thoughts about spirituality, the future of the African American community, how they would like to be remembered). The interviewee has the option (explained in advance) of sharing a selection of photographs and narrating as they are videotaped. This sometimes reawakens additional memories and leads to more stories being recorded; in addition, the tape is a record of information that can be referred to when creating captions. Recently, The HistoryMakers began to

also shoot the photos using a digital still camera to obtain higher resolution copies in addition to the narrated videotaped copies.

The HistoryMakers' provides its interviewers with a set of sample questions developed with The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant Corps, but emphasizes that interviewers should not rigidly adhere to the list without regard to the flow of the interviewee's thoughts. Interviewers are encouraged to respond to an interviewee's statements in ways that help to contextualize the narrative of the individual experience, increasing the value of this primary source for historical research. (For example, when interviewee John H. Johnson talks about his shame as a child when his family had to go on welfare, the interviewer asks how many other people he knew were also on relief and what others' attitudes were toward it at that time.) Without interrupting, the interviewer may sometimes ask for explanations of references that have been made, another means of providing context and enriching the content. (For example, in talking about her childhood neighborhood, Ella Jenkins mentions the "policy people"; after Jenkins has finished her thoughts, the interviewer returns to that reference, asking her to explain it for those who may not know, which leads to a discussion about that form of urban gambling.

### *Interview quality control*

The HistoryMakers follows the guidelines of the Oral History Association in evaluating its interviews<sup>11</sup>. Quality control for interviews is an important, albeit expensive, process. The HistoryMakers has held mandatory training sessions at which both experienced and newly recruited interviewers and videographers meet with professional historians and other staff from The HistoryMakers. At these meetings, interviewers and videographers discuss interview evaluations and watch samples from previous interviews, including their own, identifying and analyzing positive and negative examples of interviewing technique, lighting, videography and sound recording. Experienced personnel provide one-on-one training, and participants conduct, record

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11 Oral History Association, "Oral History Evaluation Guidelines," [http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub\\_eg.html](http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html)

and critique practice interviews with one another. Presentations by visiting scholars explore current research in the areas of African American history and literature and American studies. The HistoryMakers' archival staff members explain how interviewers can help them to make interviews accessible to researchers—for example, by attempting to clarify, during or immediately following the interview, dates, locations and names mentioned. In post-summit questionnaires, interviewers and videographers rated these seminars and training sessions as extremely valuable for improving their skills and techniques and increasing their historical knowledge.

Interviews, especially those of newer interviewers, are viewed, analyzed and assessed by experienced interviewers and members of The HistoryMakers Scholar/Consultant Corps. In addition to these evaluators, The HistoryMakers has sometimes taken advantage of its other interview processing and/or quality control work to simultaneously obtain evaluations of interview content using a standard form. Although in these cases the majority of those doing the evaluating were not themselves experienced interviewers, they were nevertheless capable of noting whether particular questions were asked or making suggestions such as follow-up questions that might have been asked; the large number of interviews they have watched in the course of their work helps them in making such evaluations.

All interviews are checked for technical quality by trained video technicians during the duplication process. If any major problems are found, The HistoryMakers will make every effort to re-shoot the interview; however, this has been necessary in less than one per cent of interviews, due to malfunctions of recording equipment. An additional level of quality control occurred when interviews were processed for The HistoryMakers Digital Video Library; at that time the encoded videos were watched by cataloguers, who notified the video technicians of any problems so that they could determine whether the problem originated with the digital copy, the Betacam SP submaster, or the original Betacam SP video.

## **Current and Past Use of The HistoryMakers Collection**

The public, to date, has been made aware of The HistoryMakers' collection through the organization's website, press activities, printed materials, advertising, and through special events and public programs. The HistoryMakers has found that its intellectual content is of interest to a great variety of users, including academic scholars, K-12 students and teachers, biographers, filmmakers, genealogists, the media and other members of the general public. These groups, to a limited extent, are currently either visiting The HistoryMakers Resources Center, or, to a much greater extent, using The HistoryMakers website as a biographical and educational resource. True accessibility is limited to those who visit the physical archives or who are sent a videotape or transcript of a specific interview. While [The HistoryMakers' website](http://www.theHistoryMakers.com)<sup>12</sup> has become a popular biographical and educational reference source, access to interview content is limited. The website lists individual HistoryMakers by category and includes a keyword search function, a glossary, timeline, a reference section that links to other relevant websites, a biography and a biographical photo for each HistoryMaker. Many interview web pages have a few digital copies of photographs provided with permission of the interviewee. A much smaller number of interviews have short clips streamed on the site.

Google rated [The HistoryMakers' website](http://www.theHistoryMakers.com) as one of the top African American websites on the Internet. Data shows that The HistoryMakers website attracts users not only from the United States but from 100 foreign countries, 100 colleges and universities, government agencies (e.g., Department of Education, Department of Defense), and media companies including ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and the BBC. The HistoryMakers website generates 4 million hits per month, with 150,000 discrete users reviewing 4-59 pages per visit.

The HistoryMakers interviews have been used in the Buffalo, New York public schools in a Teaching American History-funded project. Randforce Associates

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theHistoryMakers.com>  
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(<http://www.randforce.com>) created a sample database of clips on the subject of coming of age from The HistoryMakers interviews. Buffalo history and social studies teachers learned to search and explore the video in this database and to compile video clips on themes of their choice such as “The Role of the Church in African American Life”, using these to create their own multi-media tools for use in community and classroom settings.<sup>13</sup> This is just one example of the many future uses of the collection made possible with digital technology.

### **Potential Use of Collection**

The HistoryMakers anticipates that increasing access to its collection will result in an increase of future use by all its user groups. Personal stories about the interviewees’ own childhood and youth experiences (such as the material from this collection used in the Buffalo public schools on the theme of ‘coming of age’) will be of interest to K-12 students, and the vital medium of video and first-person stories will provide a window to different periods of 20<sup>th</sup> century American history. Another possible use for this database in middle or secondary schools is as a resource for learning about different careers. The interviewees are grouped into broad categories such education, business, or politics; cataloguing the collection will help by providing more specific subject headings for different occupations, so that a search may be narrowed to segments about African Americans in banking or local government or radio. Their stories about on-the-job experiences will give young people a greater appreciation of the challenges faced by older African Americans in their work and will also give them an “inside look” into both the past and the present of various industries and professions they may be considering.

Another area for use that will probably see an increase as more information is made available about this collection is in the area of documentary film/video. These first-person narratives, covering a wide range of subject matter, times and locations, are

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13 Frisch, Michael. Oral history and the digital revolution: toward a post-documentary sensibility. In Perks and Thompson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (in press)

an extremely valuable resource that can be combined with historical images to help tell non-fiction stories in a moving, personal way.

The newest development for use of the collection is a searchable digital video database currently containing 400 interviews (ca. 1100 hours of interview footage, divided manually by cataloguers at The HistoryMakers into 18,254 segments, which are the database's basic retrieval units.). This project was enabled through a 2003 National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and through collaboration and an in-kind donation of software and support from the Informedia Digital Video Library ("Informedia")<sup>14</sup> project at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Computer Science. Digitization and cataloguing were completed in December 2005. The HistoryMakers has been testing an alpha version of the client interface and working with Informedia to improve the software. Testing of a beta version will begin in late July or August 2006 at The HistoryMakers headquarters (with cooperation from the University of Illinois at Chicago), at SUNY-Buffalo (under the direction of Michael Frisch and Lillian Williams; one of the research topics will be the potential of collaboration of humanities and computer science departments) and at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (under the direction of Howard Dodson and James B. Murray).

Nonlinear media files allow users to move quickly from one point to another in the recordings. The audio track is aligned with words in the transcript text,<sup>15</sup> which allows the user to move directly to individual sentences within the video. Full text searching, complemented by segment level indexing, and the linking of audiovisual content to transcripts and metadata make possible new ways of exploring the material, as oral historian Dr. Michael Frisch, Professor and Senior Research Scholar at the State University of New York–Buffalo and member of The HistoryMakers' National Advisory Board, noted in a recent article:

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14 <http://www.Informedia.cs.cmu.edu/>

15 Duygulu, P., Wactlar, H., "Associating Video Frames with Text," 26th Annual International Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group in Information Retrieval Conference paper, Toronto, Canada, July 28-August 1, 2003, <http://www.Informedia.cs.cmu.edu/documents/ACM-SIGIR-2003.pdf>

Oral history audio and video can now be placed in an environment in which rich annotation, cross-referencing codes, and other descriptive or analytic “meta-data” can be linked to specific passages of audio/video content. By searching or sorting by means of these reference tools, the audio video materials themselves...can be searched, browsed, accessed, studied, and selected for use at a high level of specificity.<sup>16</sup>

Informedia's multimedia abstractions provide users with flexible views of keyframes, text, and metadata. Search results may be viewed in a map, in a timeline or in a graphic which plots the occurrences of search terms. The different views interact with an underlying XML representation of the set of segments, allowing the user to manipulate controls in the interface to see variations of the views.

For scholars, the ability to search across hundreds of long interviews, indexed at a fine level of specificity, will greatly facilitate serious research within The HistoryMakers' oral history collection and allow for further dissemination and analysis of the information it contains. A “Notes” field associated with each segment may be used by scholars to supply additional background information about a person or entity mentioned during the segment, suggesting future possibilities for cooperative study or cataloguing.

For teachers, this will be an extremely flexible resource for tailoring lessons on different topics or for different groups. Using different subject heading combinations, teachers could select stories about experiences of discrimination during childhood, about interviewees' memories of the neighborhoods they grew up in, or stories that provide a comparison of elementary school in different locations or decades. Teachers will be able to integrate selections from interviews into lessons to enrich the curriculum and may share lesson plans with other educators, similar to projects like the Kentucky Oral History Commission's “Civil Rights in Kentucky” online resource.<sup>17</sup> The Notes field, as mentioned above, may be used in many ways within a local network: for example, a teacher could recommend certain segments to students for independent research; or a school system could identify segments as appropriate for certain grade levels.

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<sup>16</sup> Frisch, M. Oral history and the digital revolution: toward a post-documentary sensibility.

<sup>17</sup> Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky Online Digital Media Database [http://162.114.3.83/civil\\_rights\\_mvt/](http://162.114.3.83/civil_rights_mvt/)

The HistoryMakers hopes to eventually be able to make its entire collection available to a wide audience through this digital video library. This is estimated to be a \$12-15 million undertaking and it will be years before it is accomplished.

### **Current Level of Cataloguing**

Each interview is assigned an accession number based on the year of the interview and the order of interviews recorded during that year. The HistoryMakers has created lists of accession numbers and interviews. Paper records have been organized into folders inside archival boxes.

The HistoryMakers has developed an internal interview tracking system in a FileMaker Pro database; this tracks information such as personal contact information; dates contacted; biographical data (including information about family, schools attended and career); data about the production and processing of the interview (including names of interviewer, videographer, transcriber, date of transcription, interview observers, date and location of interview, number of tapes, accession number); and a biography, usually written by the interviewer. These biographies are also found on The HistoryMakers' website.

Video technician Frederick Adams made notes, some of which are quite detailed, of the content of the interviews for which he monitored the technical quality. These notes exist for ca. 150 interviews and will be useful in the creation of finding aids. The largest amount of cataloguing work to date at The HistoryMakers was for the 400 interviews included in The HistoryMakers Test Digital Video Library created in collaboration with the Infromedia Digital Video Library (described in preceding section). Resulting products include:

- 1) a proofread transcript, including, in addition to words spoken, additional bracketed information such as completed names and locations, spelled out acronyms, etc.;
- 2) an XML document for each 30-minute interview tape/digital file. The latter included:

- a) tape-level metadata including names of interviewee, interviewer, videographer, copyright year, date and location of interview and an abstract of what is on the tape;
- b) segment (video clips averaging 3 to 5 minutes)-level metadata, including time in/out marks, a concise title, a field for dates of events discussed; and terms from a controlled vocabulary including names, geographical locations and topical terms.

### *Subject indexing*

Segments in the Digital Video Library were indexed using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) combined with Lorene Byron Brown's Subject Headings for African American Materials ("Brown's").<sup>18</sup> Brown, an associate professor at Clark Atlanta School of Library and Information Studies, had assembled during the early 1990s an extensive listing of over 3,000 terms derived from 14 standard sources, including African American history publications and the LCSH. Most of the terms were either already existing LCSH or were later adopted, and the terms are presented in standard LCSH format. The HistoryMakers used a schema similar to OCLC's Faceted Application of Subject Terminology (FAST)<sup>19</sup>, a schema using LCSH vocabulary with a simplified syntax. The system uses topical subdivisions of topical terms but avoids geographical and chronological subdivisions of topical terms. This schema made possible the selection of terms from a finite drop-down list in the cataloguing software (rather than potentially limitless number of LCSH strings) and it facilitated coordination with Informedia's geographical and temporal query and search results visualization features.

Like the creators of the University of Southern Mississippi's Digital Civil Rights in Mississippi Archive<sup>20</sup>, The HistoryMakers saw that LCSH at times did not provide the specificity needed for their material and found it necessary to create new headings. This is due both to the difference in indexing at a much more granular level than that of an

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, Lorene B. *Subject Headings for African-American Materials*. Libraries Unlimited, Englewood, NJ, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Dean, R., "FAST: Development of Simplified Headings for Metadata", presented at Authority Control: Definition and International Experiences conference, Florence, Italy, 2003.; <http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/fast/>

<sup>20</sup> Graham, S. and Ross, D., "Metadata and Authority Control in the Digital Civil Rights in Mississippi Archive", *Journal of Internet Cataloguing*, Vol.6 Issue 1, Haworth Press, Inc., 2003.

entire book, and in some cases possibly to the inadequacy of existing LCSH for African American subject matter. The HistoryMakers wished to provide a means to distinguish between certain topics, e.g. “Integrated schools” (a school that is already integrated) and “School integration” (the process of a school becoming integrated.). It also foresaw a need for users of its database to be able to find sets of interview segments on topics that may be unlikely to have been the focus of entire books but were frequently discussed in interviews, e.g., racism in forms of address. In creating new terms, The HistoryMakers sometimes consulted other existing thesauri including ERIC, HASSET and UNESCO, and was guided by the standards in ANSI/NISO Z39.19-2003, “Guidelines for the Construction, Format and Management of Monolingual Thesauri” (superseded during the course of this project by Z39.19-2005.). Emphasis was placed on finding terms in use in reliable published works.

#### *Names*

For proper names, Library of Congress Name Authorities was consulted, followed by OCLC Authorities then other sources such as Who’s Who Among African Americans. Where no established version was found, new headings were created based on a standard format, with more than one source required, one of which could be the interviewee’s statement and spelling of their name in the interview.

#### *Controlled vocabulary software*

Although not a part of the IMLS grant project, The HistoryMakers also purchased an open-architecture software called Webchoir<sup>21</sup> to manage its controlled vocabulary and name authorities. Based on a fully integrated web-based architecture, Webchoir permits easy maintenance and management of controlled vocabularies and in a more powerful version, allows the sharing of these vocabularies by simultaneous users over the Internet. The HistoryMakers has begun to enter some of its terms into Webchoir, although to date it has not had the financial resources to do this for more than ca. 300 of its 5400-term list.

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21 <http://www.webchoir.com/>  
UIC Great Cities Institute

## **The HistoryMakers' Public Programs**

The HistoryMakers initiative includes a strong public history component. Since its inception, it has held a series of humanities-based public programs: 3 Artists, Three Lives, Three Stories (featuring Dawoud Bey, Richard Hunt and Allen Stringfellow), Sounds of Experience (featuring classical, blues, doo wop and jazz musical genres through the personal stories of classical music composer Regina Baiocchi, jazz drummer Isaac "Redd" Holt, blues vocalist Lonnie Brooks and doo-wop performer, Don Porter), Black & Red: The Little Known History of African American and Native American Heritages (in collaboration with the Field Museum of Natural History and the DuSable Museum of African-American History), Selma to Montgomery (featuring interviews on the 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March), Showtime: Black Theatre in Chicago (featuring black theatre founders Val Gray Ward, Jackie Taylor, Douglas Allan Mann and Okoro Harold Johnson), WVON: The Good Ol' Days of 60s Radio (featuring the original deejays of the influential Chicago-based radio station WVON), and Personal Reflections (featuring the interviews of Harry Belafonte, Julian Bond and Katherine Dunham), among others.

Since 2000, The HistoryMakers' An Evening With...celebrity interview series for PBS-TV has aired nationally in millions of U.S. households. This series includes: An Evening With Harry Belafonte (interviewed by Danny Glover, 2000); An Evening With Dionne Warwick (interviewed by Diahann Carroll, 2001); An Evening With Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee (interviewed by Angela Davis, 2002); An Evening With BB King (interviewed by Isaac Hayes, 2003); An Evening With Della Reese (interviewed by Lorraine Toussaint, 2004); An Evening With Russell Simmons (interviewed by Cathy Hughes, 2004); An Evening With Diahann Carroll (interviewed by Gwen Ifill, 2005); An Evening With Nikki Giovanni (interviewed by Pearl Cleage, 2005); An Evening With Denyce Graves (interviewed by Angela Bassett, 2005); An Evening With Colin Powell (interviewed by Juan Williams, 2006); and An Evening With Andrew Young (interviewed by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, 2006). In 2004, Simmons Lathan Media Group produced a three part documentary series: The HistoryMakers on Faith, The HistoryMakers on Success and The HistoryMakers on Courage, featuring excerpts from 40 different

interviews from The HistoryMakers archives edited with re-enactments similar to those in the PBS-TV series, *Slavery and The Making of America*.

Its other initiatives include The HistoryMakers Education Institute, a year-long educational program piloted for the past four years in over twenty Chicago public schools and expanded in 2005 to Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Prince Georges County, Maryland. Teachers and students are taught how to do oral histories, individual HistoryMakers are assigned specific schools and classrooms, and curriculum has been specifically developed to enhance teacher and student access to The HistoryMakers archives and to meet state teaching standards. The HistoryMakers Education Institute has developed into an important literacy, reading, and writing initiative with particular attention placed on the humanities, and has won high praise from teachers and students alike. The HistoryMakers Speakers' Bureau has the potential of becoming the largest African American speakers' bureau in the country. Currently, 700 HistoryMakers have signed on to participate.