

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Helen McDowell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McDowell, Helen, 1903-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Helen McDowell,
Dates:	July 30, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:35:05).
Abstract:	Lodging entrepreneur and high school english teacher Helen McDowell (1903 - 2010) has owned and operated Newberry House, a boarding house for Howard University students, as well as a wedding boutique. McDowell was also a teacher in the Washington D.C. area for over 47 years. McDowell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 30, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_179
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on September 28, 1903, in Abingdon, Virginia, Helen Newberry McDowell was the fourth of fourteen children. Her mother, Caroline, was orphaned in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised by her uncle Frank Donahue in Abingdon, where her mother met her father, Samuel.

McDowell attended Morristown Industrial School, where her mother taught, and went on to Bennett College. Graduating in 1924, she attended Teacher's College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. McDowell then attended Howard University from 1928 to 1931, earning her M.A. in education.

McDowell began teaching in 1925, and after earning her M.A. went on to teach at Morgan State University in Baltimore. In the 1940s, McDowell bought six houses in Washington, D.C., and converted them into rooming houses for students. These buildings became known as the Newberry House and from 1949 to 1973, was the home to hundreds of students from Howard University's School of Religion. McDowell also ran a wedding salon out of Newberry House. McDowell began teaching at Phelps Vocational High School in Washington, D.C., in 1950, and taught English there until her retirement in 1973. She then moved to California with her husband but relocated to Washington D.C. in 1993. McDowell continues to teach.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Helen McDowell was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 30, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lodging entrepreneur and high school english teacher Helen McDowell (1903 - 2010) has owned and operated Newberry House, a boarding house for Howard University students, as well as a wedding boutique. McDowell was also a teacher in the

Washington D.C. area for over 47 years.

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:

McDowell, Helen, 1903-2010

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McDowell, Helen, 1903-2010--Interviews

African American teachers--Washington (D.C.)--Interviews

Landlords--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

High School English Teacher

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Helen McDowell, July 30, 2003. 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 Helen McDowell, Section A2003_179_001_001, TRT: 0:31:10 ?
Helen Newberry McDowell talks about her family and early childhood memories. Her mother, Lucy Ellison Newberry, orphaned as a child, was sent to boarding school by relatives and became a teacher. She began teaching in Tazewell, Virginia in 1898, but was kept from continuing this career by her husband, McDowell's father, Samuel Newberry. Despite her disappointment, McDowell's mother continued her educational work by teaching her children, and McDowell recalls her many lessons fondly. McDowell believes that her own career as a teacher helped fulfill her mother's dream. She also talks about her

father's side of the family. McDowell recalls her sadness when her father's cousins moved from Abingdon, Virginia to Los Angeles, California, yet also reminisces about a joyful reunion when visiting those relatives in 1934. She recounts her father's work as a cook, both for Southern Railway and for a family named Bell. She describes the sights, sounds, and smells of childhood, including a close escape from a burning lamp.

African American teachers--Washington (D.C.)--Interviews.

Landlords--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen McDowell, Section A2003_179_001_002, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Helen Newberry McDowell recalls early childhood memories, including a word game she played with her family that she later used when teaching. She attended Kings Mountain School in Abingdon, Virginia, where her favorite subjects were Math and English and her favorite teacher was Ms. Ellen Wiley. After completing her elementary education, she attended Morristown College in Morristown, Tennessee, which was then a teacher training institution. Although she feared she would be unable to afford the tuition at Morristown, her brothers surprised her by giving her their collected wages so she could go to school. In 1924, she began teaching third-grade at a Rosenwald School in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, and found many of her students unable to read, which motivated her to pursue a career in educational administration. She later attended Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she met her future husband. After five years, he proposed to her and they married on Armistice Day, November 12, 1925.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen McDowell, Section A2003_179_001_003, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Helen McDowell recalls her marriage to her husband and their time working together in an elementary school in Liberty, North Carolina. She shares fond memories of living with her in-laws and attending Bennett College in North Carolina in 1927. After McDowell's mother died in 1931, she was responsible for raising many of her younger siblings. This proved challenging since McDowell was also determined to complete her Master's Degree, which she was pursuing at Howard University. Despite financial obstacles, and with the help of her brother, Marvin Newberry, she was able to bring her siblings to Washington, D.C. so she could continue her at Howard. Although she was able to obtain her Master's degree and teach at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD, she was unable to pursue her PhD at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. McDowell remembers her mentors at Howard University, and she reflects on her religious beliefs, which provided strength and comfort when faced with dilemmas about her family and education.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen McDowell, Section A2003_179_001_004, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Helen McDowell explains how she began running the Newberry House, a boarding house, in Washington, D.C., where many famous people associated with Howard University stayed. She reminisces about some of the luminaries she encountered, including Dr. Thomas Wright, Howard Thurman, Dr. Benjamin Mays, and Dr. William Leo Hansberry. She recalls how Dr. Mays inspired her with a poetic quotation and Dr. Hansberry conducted a slide-show lecture at Newberry House. She mentions Dr. Ernest Everett, Dr. E. Franklin Frazier, and Dorothy Height in passing, and reflects on the legacy of Mary McLeod Bethune and George Washington Carver. While she acknowledges her membership in the National Council of Negro Women and her many charitable donations, she explains why she does not like to join too many organizations. In recalling the highlight of her educational career, she mentions the students she was able to inspire and educate at Phelps Trade School (later Phelps Architectures,

Construction, and Engineering High School).

Video Oral History Interview with Helen McDowell, Section A2003_179_001_005, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Helen McDowell shares stories about former students as she reflects upon her legacy and her life. She talks about providing guidance and support for her students from Phelps Trade School (later Phelps Architecture, Construction, and Engineering High School, Washington, D.C.), especially those who ran into trouble. She describes advising a former student and his family. In explaining her philosophy of teaching, McDowell emphasizes the need to ensure student learning. While reflecting on living to be a hundred, she attributes her longevity to her disciplined and religious life. In discussing her hopes and concerns for the African American community today, she notes the lack of religion among younger generations as a concern. She shares a regret of acting selfishly when she denied her father's request to live with her, but she ultimately feels that her legacy of acting generously towards others will result in her being remembered as someone who always tried to help people achieve their goals and dreams.