

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Curtis Harris

PERSON

Harris, Curtis, 1924-2017

Alternative Names: Reverend Curtis Harris;

Life Dates: July 1, 1924-December 10, 2017

Place of Birth: Denron, Virginia, USA

Work: Hopewell, VA

Occupations: Mayor

Biographical Note

Curtis West Harris was born on July 1, 1924 in Denron, Virginia. His father left the family when he was a young boy and his mother moved the family to Hopewell, where she worked as a domestic. There, Harris earned his high school diploma from Carter G. Woodson High School in 1944. After graduation, he went to work for a cotton plant called Hercules. Knowing he wanted more out of life, he convinced his older sister to pay for tuition at Virginia Union University in Richmond.

Harris attended Virginia Union from 1945 until 1946, when he married his high school sweetheart. The young couple moved to Norfolk but soon returned to Hopewell where he began working as a janitor at Allied Chemical. During this time Harris became active in the civil rights movement. In 1959, he became the pastor of Union Baptist Church.

Harris was active in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He participated in the famous march from Selma to Montgomery and volunteered to serve as a human shield for Martin Luther King, Jr., during the march. In 1963, he successfully fought the Ku Klux Klan and the city of Hopewell to prevent the city from building a landfill in the African American community. In 1964 Harris' two sons helped integrate Hopewell High School.

Beginning in the 1960s Harris unsuccessfully ran for a seat on the Hopewell city council seven times. Finally, in 1983, he forced the city to switch from its at-large system to a ward system and became the second African American to serve on the Hopewell city council. In 1996, Harris became the second African American Vice-Mayor of the city and eventually became the first black mayor in 1998.

He continues to work vigorously on civil and human rights issues in Virginia. He is a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In 2004, Harris' formerly segregated school, Carter G. Woodson, named a library in his honor.

Harris passed away on December 10, 2017 at age 93.

Related Entries

Carter G. Woodson High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Carter G. Woodson Middle School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Virginia Union University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Allied Chemical [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 2007 to ?]

Janitor

Union Baptist Church [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1981 to ?]

Pastor

Hopewell City Council [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1983 to ?]

Councilman

City of Hopewell, Virginia [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 2011 to ?]

Vice-Mayor

City of Hopewell, Virginia [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1998 to ?]

Mayor

Hopewell Improvement Association [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

President

Southern Christian Leadership Conference [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

President, Virginia State Unit

United States Commission on Civil Rights [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Local President