

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Curtis Harris

---

## 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>	Harris, Curtis, 1924-2017
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 23, 2004 and October 11, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	18 Betacame SP videocassettes (8:46:09).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Mayor and pastor Reverend Curtis Harris (1924 - 2017 ) was the first African American council member, vice mayor and mayor of Hopewell, Virginia. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 23, 2004 and October 11, 2004, in Hopewell, Virginia and Richmond, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_107
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Curtis Harris was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on July 23, 2004 and October 11, 2004, in Hopewell, Virginia and Richmond, Virginia, and was recorded on 18 Betacame SP videocassettes. Mayor and pastor Reverend Curtis Harris (1924 - 2017 ) was the first African American council member, vice mayor and mayor of Hopewell, Virginia.

---

## 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:

Harris, Curtis, 1924-2017

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, Curtis, 1924-2017--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Hopewell (Va.)

---

## Occupations:

Mayor

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

---

## 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 Reverend Curtis Harris, July 23, 2004 and October 11, 2004. 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 Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_001, TRT: 0:31:23 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris was born on July 1, 1924 in Dendron, Virginia. His mother, Thelma Washington Harris, was the daughter of a sharecropper and grew up in Nansemond County, Virginia. His father, Sandy Harris, was also born in Nansemond County and worked as a farmer, millworker and eventually at a tobacco plant in Richmond, Virginia. Sandy Harris abandoned his family in the summer of 1924, just before Curtis was born. Harris's oldest sister, Effie, decided in the late 1930s to seek out her father in Pennsylvania and brought him back to the family, but he only stayed for a month before leaving again. Harris's grandparents all lived in Surry County, Virginia, and his paternal grandfather lived with the family until his death. In the late 1920s, the family moved to Hopewell, Virginia so Harris's mother could pick up more work as a domestic servant. Harris recalls the odor of the runoff from the town's chemical plant seeping into Bailey Creek and his childhood interest in disassembling and reassembling devices.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_002, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris was the youngest of six children; his youngest sister Maria cared for him as a child. He attended Carter G. Woodson School in Hopewell, Virginia until eleventh grade, and was a good student despite having to attend school sporadically. Harris grew up in the Davisville neighborhood of Hopewell, and his family moved to a more prosperous community once his sisters began to work as domestics in addition to his mother. The family would often dine on possums that were trapped by the white families for which his mother worked. Harris wanted to be a fireman as a child but deemed it unrealistic when he realized he never saw African American firefighters. His family was not religious, but Harris converted to Christianity at fourteen while attending a tent revival. While in high school, he frequented the Harlem Night Club in Hopewell. After graduating in 1944, Harris was able to enroll at Virginia Union University with his sister Effie's financial support to study pre-med.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_003, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris dropped out of Virginia Union University and married his high school sweetheart, Ruth Harris. He returned to Hopewell, Virginia, and worked as a janitor for Allied Chemical and Dye Corporation for fifteen years, during which time the chemical company was sued for polluting the James River with kepone, a toxic insecticide. Harris played with the Hopewell All-Stars, a semi-pro team, against stars like Jackie Robinson, HistoryMaker Minnie Minoso and Willie Mays who were on offseason tours of the South. He taught Bible study at Union Baptist Church in Hopewell, and became the church's pastor in 1959. In 1963, Harris worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to protest building a landfill in a black neighborhood in Hopewell. He also participated in the Selma to Montgomery marches, which he recalls HistoryMaker Reverend James Bevel originally proposing with no support, and was present when marchers were barred from crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_004, TRT: 0:30:47 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris was in the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. After a judge ruled that Harris and the other marchers must be allowed by state authorities to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he volunteered to be a human shield to protect the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the march

continued. During the 1960s, Harris was investigated by the Virginia General Assembly's Committee on Offenses Against the Administration of Justice, but they dropped charges when he refused to give information. His two sons were a part of the class that integrated Hopewell High School in Hopewell, Virginia in 1964. Harris became active in politics, running for offices including the city council and the Virginia House of Delegates. In 1983, he successfully sued the City of Hopewell to change its council representation system from at-large seats to a ward system; in 1986, Harris was elected to the Hopewell City Council for the first time.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_005, TRT: 0:30:32 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris led a movement to fight workplace discrimination at Fort Lee, Virginia, a U.S. Army base. He led a protest march to Fort Lee, and the commander of the base agreed to offer promotions to women and minorities. When Harris returned for a second protest due to a lack of progress, he was confronted by armed soldiers. At the time of the interview, he was still involved in helping Fort Lee employees with discrimination cases. While on the Hopewell City Council, Harris led efforts to construct a memorial to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a statue was finally dedicated in April 2004 after he spent ten years advocating for the project. He shares his skepticism of recent developments in education for African American youth, especially the Standards of Learning guidelines in Virginia. Harris reflects on his life and legacy. He describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section A2004\_107\_002\_006, TRT: 0:12:32 ?

Reverend Curtis Harris narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_001E, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_002E, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_003E, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_004, TRT: 0:27:29 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_004E, TRT: 0:27:29 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_005E, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:08 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Curtis Harris, Section B2004\_107\_001\_006E, TRT:  
0:31:08 ?