

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles F. Harris

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harris, Charles F., 1934-2015
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris,
Dates:	August 2, 2005, July 28, 2005 and June 8, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:52:58).
Abstract:	Book publishing executive Charles F. Harris (1934 - 2015) was the founder of Amistad Press, known for its publication of works by John H. Johnson and Arthur Ashe, as well as the critically acclaimed Amistad Literary Series, which featured critical studies of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 2, 2005, July 28, 2005 and June 8, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_132
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pioneering book publishing executive Charles F. Harris was born on January 3, 1934 in Portsmouth, Virginia. During his elementary school days, Harris delivered newspapers in the community to make some extra money. His father insisted that he not deliver something that he did not read. Harris accepted his father's challenge and became an avid reader at an early age. Graduating in 1955, from Virginia State University with a B.A. degree, he served in the Infantry of the United States Army and received an Honorable Discharge as a First Lieutenant.

Harris began his publishing career in 1956 at Doubleday & Company where, in 1965, as editor of Doubleday's Publishing Division he launched the Zenith Book Series, which focused on African American history for elementary and high school students. He also acquired original manuscripts for publication and edited works by John Hope Franklin, Robert Weaver, Rayford Logan, and Jim Brown. Joining Random House in 1967 as senior editor, Harris edited *Amistad*, two volumes of writings on African American History and culture. This paperback magazine was launched in 1970 and was aimed at college humanities and social science courses. He also acquired *The Greatest* by Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham.

In 1971, Harris was recruited to create and manage the Howard University Press, where he served as the first chief executive, supervising all book publishing until 1986. He founded Amistad Press Inc. in 1986 to specialize in the works of African American themes. Its publishing program includes works by Arthur Ashe, John H. Johnson, Susan Taylor, Congressman William L. Clay, as well as the critically acclaimed Amistad Literary Series, which features critical studies of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

In 1999, Harris sold Amistad Press to HarperCollins Publishers, and he joined HarperCollins as Vice President

Editorial Director of this new imprint and as an executive editor for the HarperCollins General Books Group. Harris also authored a monthly column on Bet.com. In 2003, Harris left HarperCollins Publishers to once again start his own publishing company, Alpha Zenith Media Inc., where he continued to publish works critical to the African American community.

Harris passed away on December 16, 2015.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles F. Harris was conducted by Shawn Wilson on August 2, 2005, July 28, 2005 and June 8, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Book publishing executive Charles F. Harris (1934 - 2015) was the founder of Amistad Press, known for its publication of works by John H. Johnson and Arthur Ashe, as well as the critically acclaimed Amistad Literary Series, which featured critical studies of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

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, Charles F., 1934-2015

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harris, Charles F., 1934-2015--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Book Publishing Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Charles F. Harris, August 2, 2005, July 28, 2005 and June 8, 2005. 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 Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Charles F. Harris was born on January 3, 1934 in Portsmouth, Virginia. His mother, Annie Lawson Harris, was born in 1891 in King William County, Virginia to a large, well-to-do family who had their own farm, smokehouse, and animals. Harris enjoyed his aunt's cooking and spending time with extended family. His father, Ambrose Edward Harris, Sr., was born on February 14, 1889 also in Portsmouth. He worked as a clerk for Southern Railway and was a member of the African American union Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks, Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees. Harris grew up in a neighborhood called Mount Hermon where many black professionals lived. Harris and his brothers delivered newspapers and were encouraged by their father to read them. This sparked Harris' interest in journalism. As a child, he enjoyed fishing for crabs to steam and eat with fresh lemonade. From his childhood, he remembers grape orchards, tomatoes, and the smell of fried chicken and baked bread.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_002_002, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Charles F. Harris grew up in a close-knit community where blue-collar workers and well-to-do professionals lived side by side and people congregated at barbershops and churches. Harris and his family often attended Sunday afternoon teas where poems by Langston Hughes or Paul Laurence Dunbar were recited and music was played. Due to the segregated local library's limited selection and prohibition of certain materials, neighbors often shared books with one another. Harris regularly attended Mount Hermon Baptist Temple in Portsmouth, Virginia. His parents' decision to have him start school early meant that he was surrounded by older classmates, yet he did well academically. At Mount Hermon School, he learned about African American history through Negro History Week and encountered many dedicated teachers. Harris explains Virginia's discriminatory poll tax and the types of segregation he experienced while growing up.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_002_003, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Charles F. Harris' social circle expanded when Mount Herman School began incorporating students from other neighborhoods. At I.C. Norcom High School, named for a renowned local educator, his teachers held him to high standards. In his freshman year, Harris wrote sports articles for the school newspaper, the Norcom Gazette, and became editor his junior year. When The Portsmouth Star published his article about his school winning the Pennsylvania Relays, Harris earned his first professional byline. A devoted writer, he aspired to be a journalist. He was encouraged by his high school librarian and inspired by people like the Pittsburgh Courier owner, Robert L. Vann. When it was revealed that college basketball player Junius Kellogg, a Portsmouth native, turned down a \$1,000 bribe during the 1950 point shaving scandal, Harris spearheaded a fundraiser for Kellogg. Harris considered attending University of Minnesota and University of Oregon, but instead chose the nearby Norfolk Branch of Virginia State College.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_002_004, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Charles F. Harris attended his siblings' alma mater, the Norfolk Branch of Virginia State College. A local Ford Motor Company plant and other developing industry led to the college emphasizing technical skills and the area opening up to integration. Harris joined the newspaper The Trojan Echo, and became the

first editor when it was renamed The Spartan Echo. During his junior year, he transferred to the Petersburg campus of Virginia State College, pledged Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and joined ROTC in hopes of avoiding the draft. He also saw Thurgood Marshall speak on campus shortly before the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954. After graduating in 1955, Harris was called by the U.S. Army and assigned to the infantry. He reported for duty at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1956. Given the lack of black hotels, he stayed at rooming houses or with families he met while traveling to Fort Benning. Harris recalls his participation in the naming of Junius Kellogg Gymnasium at I.C. Norcom High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_002_005, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Charles F. Harris acquired discipline and survival skills during his U.S. military training at Fort Benning, Georgia, despite the segregation he encountered there. After finishing his military service, he returned home briefly. His brother, believing Harris should leave Virginia, lured him to New York City with the promise of job interviews. Although those never materialized, Harris was soon hired as a research assistant for Doubleday & Company Inc., where he gained insight into the publishing world. Following his manager's advice, Harris studied statistics at New York University. Harris's promotion at Doubleday made him one of the first African American editors at a major publishing company. As an editor, he met with members of the Association for the Study of African American Life & History, including HistoryMaker John Hope Franklin. He also met with HistoryMaker Maya Angelou and others at the Harlem Writers Guild. Harris recalls the discrimination he faced while traveling for Doubleday in the early 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_002_006, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Charles F. Harris met Sammie Jackson at Virginia State College. They married in 1956, and their first son, Francis Harris, was born in 1957. He was named for Harris' older brother, who died shortly after the birth of his namesake. As an editor at Doubleday & Company, Inc., Harris oversaw the successful reprinting of the original edition of 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.' Wanting to publish more books on African American history and culture, he visited historically black colleges around the country to contact leading intellectuals and authors. On these trips, Harris consulted with academics like Sterling A. Brown and Rayford Logan of Howard University and was able to tap into their expertise. Harris launched the popular 'Zenith Book' series to offer African American history books that would engage young people. Recognizing the dearth of African American athletes with autobiographies, Harris approached Jim Brown about writing his memoir, and 'Off My Chest' was subsequently published in 1964.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_003_007, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Charles F. Harris left Doubleday & Company following the success of the Zenith Books series in 1965 to work in educational publishing. He was vice president and general manager of John Wiley & Sons' Portal Press in New York City. Unhappy with the new position, Harris returned to trade publishing, and, in 1967, was hired as senior editor at Random House, where he negotiated the acquisition of Muhammad Ali's autobiography using contacts at the Nation of Islam and his experience from publishing Jim Brown's memoir, 'Off My Chest,' in 1964. He also published a newspaper for New York City Public Schools and the anthology Amistad featuring HistoryMaker Haki Madhubuti. He thought about starting his own publishing company in 1971, but instead became director of Howard University Press in Washington, D.C. at the urging of former

Howard professor HistoryMaker John Hope Franklin and the university's alumni association.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_003_008, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

Charles F. Harris, as founding director for Howard University Press, toured university presses across the country to study their operations. The press officially launched on April 8, 1974, the same day that HistoryMaker Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth's homerun record. HistoryMaker The Honorable Charles B. Rangel hosted a reception honoring both events. Harris acquired the rights to the North American edition of 'The Politics of Change' by Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, who hosted Harris in Kingston, Jamaica while they edited the book. After attending the Ile Book Fair in Lagos, Nigeria, Harris traveled to Kenya and the Ivory Coast to observe Africa's publishing industry. Upon his return, he issued a report to the U.S. Department of State recommending that a printing press be built in Nigeria to offer Anglophone Africans greater access to American publications. This plan interested the Harris Corporation. However, the collapse of Shehu Shagari's administration halted the project.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_003_009, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

Charles F. Harris describes his thwarted attempt to establish an American printing press in Africa. Harris joined the delegation of university press representatives sent to convince China to join the Copyright Convention. In 1986, Harris founded Amistad Press Incorporated in a joint venture with Warner Books. His first major publications for Amistad Press were Arthur Ashe and HistoryMaker John H. Johnson's autobiographies. When Amistad published Margaret Walker's biography of Richard Wright, his estate sued, leading to the landmark fair use case Wright v. Warner Books, Inc. Harris also published 'Dorothy Dandridge: A Biography' by HistoryMaker Donald Bogle. Amistad Press was acquired by HarperCollins in 1999 with Harris acting as vice president. When his plans to establish an online bookstore with BET and Microsoft failed due to the tech bubble bursting in 2000, Harris founded his Alpha Zenith Media Inc., a media holding company with content geared toward the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Harris, Section A2005_132_003_010, TRT: 0:27:06 ?

Charles F. Harris talks about the history of the words Negro and colored and their use in the African American community. He shares his concerns about media portrayals of African Americans, especially in regards to historical films. In describing the importance of history, Harris recounts the discrimination he faced while growing up in North Carolina and during his service in the U.S. military. Harris reflects upon his legacy and shares his concerns about the role of religion in the African American community. He concludes by narrating his photographs.