

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Isabel Powell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Powell, Isabel Washington, 1908-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Isabel Powell,
Dates:	August 9, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	3 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:02:55).
Abstract:	Dancer and teacher's aide Isabel Powell (1908 - 2007) was a dancer in Harlem night clubs during the Harlem Renaissance, in addition to acting, singing, and dancing in several Broadway productions. Later in her career, Powell was active in community life on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, serving as a social mover and shaker. Powell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_192
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Isabel Washington Powell was born in Savannah, Georgia, May 23, 1908, one of five children born to Hattie Washington, a dancer, and Robert T. Washington, a postal worker. At a young age, Powell was sent to a Catholic boarding school run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania. After finishing her formal education, Powell moved to New York City and followed in the footsteps of an older sister, Fredi Washington, to become a dancer and actress. Powell performed as a showgirl in the nightclubs of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance before dancing, singing, and acting in three Broadway shows in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1934, Powell married Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and assisted him in his election to the New York Council and as senior pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In 1944, Powell helped her husband become the first African American elected to the United States Congress from the east coast. In 1945, the Powells' marriage ended in divorce. Powell went on to serve as a teacher's aide in New York's Harlem community public schools for over thirty years.

From 1945 on, Powell had a significant social and community presence on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; she was noted for bringing together people of various races, ages, classes, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Powell was also recognized for promoting the political legacy of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Powell was the mother of one son, Preston Powell. Powell passed away on May 1, 2007, just shy of her ninety-ninth birthday.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Isabel Powell was conducted by Robert Hayden on August 9, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 3 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer and teacher's aide Isabel Powell (1908 - 2007) was a dancer in Harlem night clubs during the Harlem Renaissance, in addition to acting, singing, and dancing in several Broadway productions. Later in her career, Powell was active in community life on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, serving as a social mover and shaker.

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:

Powell, Isabel Washington, 1908-

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Powell, Isabel Washington, 1908---Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

African American women educators--Interviews

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Isabel Powell, August 9, 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 Isabel Powell, Section A2005_192_001_001, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

Isabel Powell was born on May 23, 1908 in Savannah, Georgia to Hattie Washington and Robert Washington. Her father was a post office worker, and her mother danced, a skill she passed on to Powell and her older sister, Fredi Washington. Powell called her maternal grandmother Big Mama. She helped her maternal grandfather build caskets by climbing in the children's caskets to check the dimensions. They lived in a mixed race neighborhood in Savannah, where she once organized a funeral for her pet mouse. Powell later attended Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, a Catholic boarding school. After graduating at seventeen years old, she moved to Harlem in New York City, where she saw Josephine Baker ride a motorcycle onstage and give perfume to the audience during her final performance in the United States. Following her sister's example, she pursued a career in singing and dancing. While performing at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, she met her future spouse, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

African American dancers--Interviews.

African American women educators--Interviews.

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Isabel Powell, Section A2005_192_001_002, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Isabel Powell met Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. after one of her concerts. They were married in 1934 after he graduated from Colgate University in Hamilton, New York and worked under his father, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., at New York City's Abyssinian Baptist Church. In 1937, the couple bought a home in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, where they spent summers fishing, crabbing and entertaining guests, such as explorer Matthew Henson and Powell's sister, Fredi Washington. Powell's husband was elected to the New York City Council in 1941 and became a U.S. Congressman in 1944. They had a son named Preston, who became a doctor. She met President William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton when he spoke at the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Office Building in New York City, and Joseph Carter visited her in Oak Bluffs. She remembers her good friends and highlights the importance of love. At the time of the interview, Powell enjoyed crocheting and making her famous Bloody Marys. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Isabel Powell, Section A2005_192_001_003, TRT: 0:03:50 ?