

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie McCray

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## 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>	McCray, Willie, 1942-2006
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 24, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:06:31).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Security manager and civil rights activist Willie McCray (1942 - 2006 ) served as a staff member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) under Ruby Doris Smith, and was later part of the movement toward Black Power in SNCC. McCray was also director of security for the Ohio Historical Society's National African American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio. McCray was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 24, 2006, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_051
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights organizer Willie Lawrence McCray was born on March 4, 1942, in Columbus, Georgia, to Willie Cedric McCray and Gussie Pearl Bussy McCray. Growing up near Fort Benning, McCray attended Jenson School and Carver Vocational High School. In 1960, he moved to Atlanta. Drawn into the Albany Movement by his cousin, McCray was arrested, and his life changed forever. Soon, he was hired as a staff member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Based at 360 Nelson Street in Atlanta and serving under the management expertise of Ruby Doris Smith, McCray's role was to get money to bail organizers out of jail. He retrieved and fixed the cars of the civil rights organizers at SNCC's motor pool at Interstate 20 and Spring Street. Each car was provided with a CB radio. McCray's first job was driving a load of books from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to Holly Springs, Mississippi. Witness to his share of traumatic events, McCray followed the movement through Freedom Summer in 1964 and 1965's March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

McCray was with Willie Ricks and Stokeley Carmichael (Kwame Toure) when they called for "Black Power." As SNCC moved towards Black Power, McCray ended up in jail for a year in 1966, and as the movement faded, McCray resettled in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He met fellow activist Hellen O'Neal at SNCC's New York Office and they were soon married.

McCray was director of security for the Ohio Historical Society's National African American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio. McCray has two grown sons and a grandson and a granddaughter.

McCray passed away on October 11, 2006 at the age of 64.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie McCray was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 24, 2006, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Security manager and civil rights activist Willie McCray (1942 - 2006 ) served as a staff member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) under Ruby Doris Smith, and was later part of the movement toward Black Power in SNCC. McCray was also director of security for the Ohio Historical Society's National African American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio.

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# 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®.

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# 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.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

McCray, Willie, 1942-2006

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McCray, Willie, 1942-2006 --Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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Museums--Employees--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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## 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 Willie McCray, March 24, 2006. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Willie McCray was born on March 4, 1942 in Columbus, Georgia to Gussie Bussy McCray and Willie C. McCray. Married in 1865, his paternal great grandparents were born into slavery. Both McCray's paternal and maternal families were sharecroppers who raised pecans, peanuts and cotton. His mother was born in Columbus in 1919, the youngest of five siblings. She worked in the cafeteria of a white public school. McCray's father was born in 1915 in Chattahoochee County, Georgia and worked as a laborer. He attended the Jenson School at Green Hill Missionary Baptist Church, where his family belonged to the congregation. McCray remembers his neighbors holding rent parties, and describes an experience of racial discrimination at a local grocery store. His father suffered a heart attack and a stroke during the 1950s, and subsequently moved to the family-owned farm near Fort Benning, Georgia, where he passed away in 1965. McCray left home to join the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Museums--Employees--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:08 ?

Willie McCray grew up without running water at his home in Columbus, Georgia. He attended the Jenson School, a two-room schoolhouse at Green Hill Missionary Baptist Church. In 1958, he transferred to Carver Vocational High School. McCray left school in 1960, shortly before graduation, and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he became an elevator operator at the Bank of Georgia. He was first introduced to the Civil Rights Movement when his cousin joined the Albany Movement. When McCray was jailed after police mistakenly believed he was a demonstrator, James Forman recruited him to work as driver on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He recalls the leadership of Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Robert Parris Moses and Bernice Johnson Reagon, as well as Ella Baker, who helped McCray seek a diagnosis for dyslexia. McCray's activism for SNCC included protests against Lester Maddox's segregated restaurant, and serving as a driver for the Freedom Singers.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Willie McCray joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as a driver in 1963. He recalls planning marches and sit-ins organized by SNCC leaders like Ella Baker and Robert Parris Moses. SNCC owned a building in Atlanta, Georgia that was not only a headquarters but included a print shop and facilities to repair cars and CB radios, which SNCC used for communications. SNCC funded some operations by trading in Top Value Stamps. McCray drove many movement activists, including musicians Dick Gregory and Bernice Johnson Reagon and white students from Ohio's Antioch College, whom he hid from police patrols under blankets in the back of his car. While conducting supply runs, McCray was often stopped by police; he was arrested in Selma, Alabama after the 1965 march, and avoided arrest in West Virginia by bribing a judge with butter beans. He was held at gunpoint by police while trying to integrate a Mississippi swimming pool in July 1964, and recalls the shooting of SNCC driver Jimmie Travis.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Willie McCray was recruiting for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at Western College for Women in June 1964 when he heard about the murders of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney, and he recalls how Robert Parris Moses and Dorothy Cotton responded to the news. McCray worked with SNCC to organize the Freedom Summer registration

drive in Mississippi, and traveled with organizers like Lawrence Guyot and Julian Bond to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey to demand representation. President Lyndon Baines Johnson refused their demands, despite a nationally televised speech by Fannie Lou Hamer. In 1965, McCray traveled to Selma, Alabama, where he brought people and supplies to the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, met leaders like James Bevel, Reverend Dr. C.T. Vivian and Andrew Young, and marched in front of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to provide protection. He reflects upon the organizational differences between SNCC and other civil rights groups.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:03 ?

Willie McCray moved to New York City in 1965 to continue his work with SNCC. He met his wife, Hellen Jean O'Neal-McCray, and learned more of the philosophy of Malcolm X. After leading a protest at the New York State Supreme Courthouse, McCray was convicted of assaulting a U.S. Marshall and placed on five years' probation, leading him to leave SNCC. He served nine months in jail at the Ohio State Reformatory, where he was severely wounded by inmates who suspected him of spying. Upon his release, he was monitored by the FBI who assumed him to be aiding SNCC leader H. Rap Brown. He moved to Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he became a printer at Ernest Morgan's Antioch Publishing Company and had two sons with his wife. McCray then became a security guard for the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center under director John Fleming, a former SNCC member. He describes his continued involvement in civil rights, his desire to return to the South and his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_006, TRT: 0:25:34 ?

Willie McCray joined the 1966 March Against Fear, launched by James Meredith from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. This was his last protest march in the Civil Rights Movement. He was present as Willie Ricks and James Forman approved the slogan "Black Power," which was later popularized by Ricks and Stokely Carmichael. McCray reflects upon the Black Panther Party, including the origin of the panther symbol and their early protests in Oakland, California. He recalls how the Panthers became more militant, eventually threatening the life of SNCC leader James Forman. After spending nine months in prison for assaulting a U.S. marshal, McCray settled in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he developed the curriculum for Antioch College's Institute for the Solution of Social Problems. He raised two sons, Malcolm McCray and Lawrence McCray, with his wife Hellen Jean O'Neal-McCray. McCray reflects upon his life and legacy, and describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie McCray, Section A2006\_051\_001\_007, TRT: 0:11:41 ?

Willie McCray narrates his photographs.