

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sister Francesca Thompson

---

## 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>	Thompson, Francesca, 1932-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sister Francesca Thompson,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 3, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:29:01).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Religious leader Sister Francesca Thompson (1932 - ) was an associate professor of African and African American studies and Director of Multicultural Programs at Fordham University, and was formerly chairperson of the Drama/Speech Department at Marian College. A Sister of St. Francis for over fifty years, she has been inducted to The College of Fellows of the American Theatre, and twice served on the nominating committee for Broadway's Tony Awards. Thompson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 3, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_107
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Sister Francesca Thompson was born on April 29, 1932, in Los Angeles, California. Thompson's parents were Evelyn Preer and Edward Thompson, who were founding members of the Lafayette Players in 1915. Her mother died at age thirty-five, when Thompson was just seven months old. Her father and grandmother raised her in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her lower middle class upbringing was atypical. Thompson's grandmother, Susan Knox, was a Democratic ward captain, so Thompson was exposed to the city's politicians, clergymen and judges who visited their home. Her father's friends, who included such entertainment luminaries as Paul Robeson, Ruby Dee, and Eubie Blake, also influenced her.

Though raised in the African Episcopal Church, Thompson became attracted to Catholicism while attending St. Mary's Academy, which in the 1940s was the only private secondary school in Indianapolis that would accept African Americans. Won over by the ritual and the drama of the Catholic faith, Thompson joined the Sisters of St. Francis of Odenburg, Indiana, in 1952. She received her B.A. degree in 1960 from Marian College and her M.A. degree in education from Xavier University. Thompson earned her PhD degree in speech and drama from the University of Michigan, writing her thesis on the Lafayette Players. She coached several budding actors while at the University of Michigan, including Gilda Radner and Christine Lahti.

Her doctoral dissertation helped Thompson become chairperson of the Drama/Speech Department at Marian College, where she taught from 1966 to 1982. In 1982, she began a twenty-four year association at Fordham University, where she was associate professor of African and African American Studies and assistant dean/director for Multicultural Programs. Thompson has celebrated her fiftieth anniversary as a Sister of St. Francis. She has twice served as a member of the prestigious nominating committee for Broadway's Tony Awards, and has been

inducted to The College of Fellows of the American Theatre. In 2002, Thompson received an honorary doctorate of fine arts at Fordham University's 157th commencement.

Thompson resides in New York City.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sister Francesca Thompson was conducted by Shawn Wilson on October 3, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Religious leader Sister Francesca Thompson (1932 - ) was an associate professor of African and African American studies and Director of Multicultural Programs at Fordham University, and was formerly chairperson of the Drama/Speech Department at Marian College. A Sister of St. Francis for over fifty years, she has been inducted to The College of Fellows of the American Theatre, and twice served on the nominating committee for Broadway's Tony Awards.

---

## 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:

Thompson, Francesca, 1932-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Thompson, Francesca, 1932- --Interviews

---

Acting teachers--Interviews

---

African American nuns--Interviews

---

African American women college administrators--New York (State)--New York--Interviews

---

African American women college teachers--Interviews

---

Marian College (Indianapolis, Ind.)--Faculty--Interviews

---

Fordham University--Faculty--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

---

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

---

Religious Leader

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

---

ReligionMakers

---

## 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 Sister Francesca Thompson, October 3, 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).

## 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 Sister Francesca Thompson, Section A2006\_107\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Sister Francesca Thompson was born April 29, 1932 to Evelyn Preer and Edward Thompson. Her mother was born in 1896 in Mississippi to Blanche Jarvis and Frank Jarvis, who died of pneumonia. Her maternal family then migrated to Chicago to escape racial discrimination. After her mother died from the same disease, Thompson was raised by her paternal grandparents. Her parents were actors in the Lafayette Players, the first African American dramatic stock company. Founded by Anita Bush as the Anita Bush Players in 1915, the group became known as the Lafayette Players at Harlem's Lafayette Theater in New York City. Her father joined in 1917, and acted alongside Carlotta Freeman and Charles Gilpin. At the University of Michigan, Thompson wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Lafayette Players. She conducted interviews of its members, including Anita Bush and Clarence Muse, who acted opposite her mother in 'Porgy and Bess.' Thompson describes her mother's looks, which garnered the admiration of Paul Robeson.

Acting teachers--Interviews.

African American nuns--Interviews.

African American women college administrators--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

African American women college teachers--Interviews.

Marian College (Indianapolis, Ind.)--Faculty--Interviews.

Fordham University--Faculty--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Sister Francesca Thompson, Section A2006\_107\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:27 ?

Sister Francesca Thompson's mother was hired by Frank Preer to perform at his night club in Chicago. Her mother married Preer, who introduced her to filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. In 1919, Thompson's mother starred in her first movie. Her parents met in Chicago in 1922 as members of the Lafayette Players, and married in 1924. In 1934, Thompson's mother passed away, and her father vowed never to return to stage acting. Unable to find work in films due to racial discrimination, he became a politician in Indianapolis, where his mother and stepfather lived. After his father's death, his mother, Susan Knox, married her childhood sweetheart, Elwood Knox, and moved to Indianapolis. There, Thompson's paternal grandmother was politically active, and became the first African American woman to serve as a juvenile court referee. Thompson was raised by her paternal grandparents in Indianapolis, where she enrolled at St. Mary's Academy after being rejected from two other Catholic schools due to her race.

Video Oral History Interview with Sister Francesca Thompson, Section A2006\_107\_001\_003,  
TRT: 0:29:16 ?

Sister Francesca Thompson converted to Catholicism at St. Mary's Academy in Indianapolis, and was baptized despite her family's protests. In 1952, she joined the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Ohio. In 1958, she made her final vows, and her father converted to Catholicism. Thompson describes her experience as an African American nun, and how it differed from those of others at the National Black Sisters' Conference. Thompson talked about racial discrimination at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1959, and at the University of Notre Dame. She received her bachelor's degree from Marian University in 1960, then completed her master's degree in education at Xavier University. She taught at St. Joseph Catholic School in Cincinnati, Ohio, and then at St. Mary's Academy. After six years, Thompson enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Michigan. She taught at Marian University until her paternal grandmother's death, then joined the faculty of New York City's Fordham University.

Video Oral History Interview with Sister Francesca Thompson, Section A2006\_107\_001\_004,  
TRT: 0:30:35 ?

Sister Francesca Thompson served as assistant director for multicultural programs and professor of African American studies at Fordham University. She founded its Office of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Americans in 1982. Thompson describes the content of her black drama class, *Shades of Value*. The course compared the works of black playwrights like August Wilson to those of white playwrights like Arthur Miller. At University of Michigan, Thompson taught an advanced acting class to students such as Gilda Radner. Thompson describes the celebration of her retirement from Fordham University in 2005, which was attended by students she taught over fifty years prior. She also talks about the honors she has received in her career as an educator, including a medal from the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Upon a colleague's recommendation, Thompson was appointed twice to serve on the Tony Awards Administration Committee. She also talks about her faith.

Video Oral History Interview with Sister Francesca Thompson, Section A2006\_107\_001\_005,  
TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Sister Francesca Thompson remembers her appointment to the Tony Awards Administration Committee. She describes an article about her that was published in *The New York Times* at the time of her appointment, and the reaction of her superiors in the Catholic church, including Cardinal John Joseph O'Connor. Thompson talks about the position of African Americans in theater at the time of the interview, emphasizing how it has stayed the same since the time of her parents' acting careers in the early 20th century. Thompson describes her hopes for the African American community. She reflects upon how she would like to be remembered, and recalls with pride her family's accomplishments in the face of discrimination. Thompson concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.