

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leatrice McKissack

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McKissack, Leatrice
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack,
Dates:	March 13, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:12:36).
Abstract:	Architect Leatrice McKissack (1930 -) won the contract for the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. She was the CEO of McKissack & McKissack architectural firm. McKissack was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 13, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_087
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Architect Leatrice B. McKissack was born Leatrice Buchanan to Catherine Brummell Buchanan and Archie Buchanan on July 27, 1930 in Keytesville, Missouri. McKissack was raised by her mother and stepfather, historian Dr. Alruthens A. Taylor, who was assistant to Dr. Carter G. Woodson and a dean at Nashville's Fisk University. McKissack began her education at Marceline Elementary School in Missouri, attended Washington Junior High School in Nashville and graduated from Pearl High School in 1948. At Fisk University, she majored in chemistry and mathematics and was inspired by a faculty that included Aaron Douglas, Arna Bontemps, John W. Work, III, Langston Hughes and school president, Charles S. Johnson. In 1949, McKissack married William DeBerry McKissack, son of Moses McKissack, the 1905 founder of McKissack & McKissack, a historic African American architectural firm. McKissack graduated from Fisk University with her B.S. degree in mathematics in 1951. In 1957, she earned her M.S. degree in psychology from Tennessee State University.

McKissack began teaching elementary and junior high school students in Nashville's segregated school system in 1952. However, poor health compelled her to resign in 1969. During her recuperation, McKissack collected the work of black artists and served on the Amistad II Art Advisory Board and the American Institute of Architects Auxiliary. McKissack assumed the management of the family-owned 216 unit College Hill Apartments in 1979. In 1983, after her husband suffered a stroke, she became the CEO of both McKissack & McKissack and McKissack Contracting Company. In 1984, McKissack sued the City of Nashville for racial discrimination and merged her firm with Thompson-Miller, becoming McKissack & McKissack & Thompson. In 1987, she was awarded the design contract for the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. That same year, McKissack landed a \$50 million contract from Howard University and won the National Female Entrepreneur of the Year Award. In 1993, McKissack won the firm's first contract with the TVA. She also recruited her three daughters, all professional engineers, back to the firm and expanded offices to Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., New York and Chicago. In 1991, she formed McKissack Development Corporation to build affordable housing.

McKissack has been a member of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, the Tennessee Board of Economic Growth and President Clinton's 1994 Design Award Jury. She is a board member of Fisk University, United Way, Cheekwood Fine Arts Center and the Nashville Symphony. McKissack's many awards include the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Female Entrepreneur Award in 1990 and the Human Relations Award from the Nashville chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1996. The firm of McKissack & McKissack has been honored by the National Park Service by the listing of four of its buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

McKissack was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 13, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leatrice McKissack was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 13, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Architect Leatrice McKissack (1930 -) won the contract for the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. She was the CEO of McKissack & McKissack architectural firm.

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:

McKissack, Leatrice

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
McKissack, Leatrice--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

McKissack & McKissack

Occupations:

Architect

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Leatrice McKissack, March 13, 2007. 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 Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_001, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Leatrice McKissack was born on July 27, 1930 in Keytesville, Missouri to Catherine Buchanan Taylor and Archie Buchanan. Her maternal grandfather was the son of a Dutchman and Native American woman, and her maternal grandmother was born in Fowler, Indiana. McKissack's father had Scottish and African ancestry, and was raised on his family's farm in Keytesville. McKissack and her four brothers were also raised there, among the sounds of farm animals and the smells of their mother's cooking. She recalls the icy trip to Marceline Colored School during the cold Missouri winters, and how the climate damaged her mother's health. When McKissack was seven years old, her father died. McKissack's mother later married A.A. Taylor, a Harvard University graduate. She moved with her family to Nashville, Tennessee, where Taylor was the dean of Fisk University. McKissack and her brothers played with the other children on the university campus, including Tubby Johnson, and the children of head librarian Arna Bontemps.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_002, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

Leatrice McKissack attended Marceline Colored School in Marceline, Missouri; and, after moving to Nashville, studied at Washington Junior High School and Pearl High School. She received the Harris Medal for excellence in science, and graduated salutatorian. McKissack met her future husband, William McKissack, through her stepfather, A.A. Taylor, and the couple began dating in college. In 1947, she matriculated at Fisk University with plans to study chemistry, but later switched to mathematics. McKissack was a good student, and nearly always made straight A's. During her freshman year, Charles S. Johnson became the first African American president of Fisk University. Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Josephine Baker all regularly visited the campus, and author William J. Faulkner lived across the street from her family. McKissack graduated from Fisk University in 1951. She taught school briefly; and, from 1954, sought a master's degree from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_003, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

Leatrice McKissack graduated from Fisk University in 1952, and then taught for seventeen years at Meigs Junior High School and Wharton Elementary and Junior High School in Nashville, Tennessee. Although McKissack often accompanied her husband, William McKissack, to business dinners and events, she knew little about his architectural firm. She was a friend of his uncle, Calvin McKissack, who ran the company at the time. He introduced McKissack to Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays, and took her and her husband on lavish vacations, including one to Mexico City. In the 1950s, McKissack and McKissack was contracted by Haitian President Francois Duvalier to build the University of Haiti. McKissack accompanied Calvin McKissack, her husband, and her brother and sister in law to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where they attended a party at dancer Katherine Dunham's home. From 1966, McKissack underwent three surgeries, which ended her teaching career. She also cared for her mother, who suffered a heart attack.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_004, TRT:
0:30:05 ?

Leatrice McKissack's underwent an operation that ended her teaching career in 1969. She was still recovering from the surgery when her mother died in 1971, and her oldest brother died later that year. During her recovery, McKissack helped her husband, William McKissack, with his company, McKissack and McKissack. Her husband suffered a stroke in 1983, and she was left in control of their businesses, including an architectural firm, a construction company and two apartment complexes. While caring for her husband, McKissack took on several projects for Tuskegee Institute, including the renovation of a historic plantation home as the new president's mansion. The City of Nashville passed over McKissack and McKissack in favor of a white firm for two construction projects; and, in 1984, when the city hired a company from Florida to build the airport, McKissack sued on the basis of discrimination. As a reprisal, many local banks refused her loan applications.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_005, TRT:
0:29:26 ?

Leatrice McKissack encountered challenges when she took over McKissack and McKissack for her sick husband, but soon demanded that banks treat her like their white clients, and commanded the respect of the male-dominated company. She recognized potential in a female secretary, and promoted her to assist with finances. McKissack also discovered corruption in some of the firm's partners, and had to be wary of other stakeholders taking advantage of her. She eventually sold the construction company in order to terminate the employment of an executive who refused to report back to her. She also sold the Devonelle apartments, where a dishonest bookkeeper stole money from the company. McKissack acquired full control of the company when her husband died in 1988, and set the company on a positive course. Through her daughter Deryl McKissack, she met James Cheek, the president of Howard University, and was hired to design its next building. Her daughter Cheryl McKissack soon joined McKissack in running the firm.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_006, TRT:
0:29:50 ?

Leatrice McKissack's family worked together to restructure the firm of McKissack and McKissack after her husband, William McKissack's death. She talks about her success, which she credits to her talent as a manager. She recalls her husband's permissive leadership style, and her more scrupulous response to an employee who tried to take advantage of her. McKissack worked with civil rights activist D'Army Bailey to create the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee in memory of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and on construction projects at Tuskegee University, Howard University and Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. She describes the City of Nashville's relationship with its black businesses; the atmosphere of the Fisk University campus; and racial discrimination in greater Nashville, Tennessee. McKissack also reflects upon her life, legacy and hopes for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Leatrice McKissack, Section A2007_087_001_007, TRT:
0:13:40 ?

Leatrice McKissack describes her plans for the future of her company, McKissack and McKissack, and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.