

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Woods, Abraham, 1928-2008
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr.,
Dates:	March 23, 2007 and September 7, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:50:50).
Abstract:	Civil rights leader, american history professor, and minister Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. (1928 - 2008) was president of the Birmingham, Alabama chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and held sit-ins in Birmingham. Woods also helped in mobilizing the March on Washington. Woods was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 23, 2007 and September 7, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_107
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Abraham Lincoln Woods, Jr. was born on October 7, 1928 to Maggie and Abraham Woods, Sr. in Birmingham, Alabama. Woods attended Parker High School and was given a scholarship to attend Morehouse College. Completing one year at Morehouse, Woods became ill and returned home. During this time, he acknowledged his call to the ministry. Woods received his B.A. degree in theology from the Birmingham Baptist College, his B.A. degree in sociology from Miles College in Birmingham, and his M.A. degree in American history from the University of Alabama. He also completed all the credits needed for his Ph.D.

Woods became a charter member of the Alabama Christian Movement and served as the vice president alongside Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth. He served as the director for the Miles College Voter Registration Project and would later become President of the Birmingham Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Woods led the first sit-in at a department store in Birmingham and was jailed for five days. In the summer of 1963, he worked for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the deputy director for the Southeast and helped to mobilize the historic March on Washington. He was often asked to speak on behalf of Dr. King because of his oratorical skills.

Woods would later recruit African Americans, especially those with prior military police experience to take the exam for the Birmingham Police Department. He and Dr. Jonathan McPherson assisted them in preparing for the test.

In 1968, Woods was the first African American to teach American history at the University of Alabama. He lectured on Dr. King's non-violent and conflict resolution philosophy. Woods served for forty years as a faculty member at Miles College. He retired in 2002, and Miles College conferred upon him the Doctorate of Humane Letters. Woods has been the pastor of St. Joseph's Baptist Church in Birmingham for thirty-seven years. He is a member of the Trustee Board of Birmingham Bible College, the Baptist Ministers' Conference, the United States

Capital Historical Society and Phi Delta Kappa.

Woods passed away on November 7, 2008 at age 80.

Woods was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 23, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. was conducted by Denise Gines on March 23, 2007 and September 7, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights leader, american history professor, and minister Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. (1928 - 2008) was president of the Birmingham, Alabama chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and held sit-ins in Birmingham. Woods also helped in mobilizing the March on Washington.

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:

Woods, Abraham, 1928-2008

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Woods, Abraham, 1928-2008 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Minister

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 Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., March 23, 2007 and September 7, 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 Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_001_001,

TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. was born on October 7, 1928 in Birmingham, Alabama to Maggie Wallace Woods and Abraham Woods, Sr. His maternal grandmother died young, and Woods' mother was raised by her father, Reverend Colias Wallace, who was of Native American ancestry. Woods' paternal grandmother, Robina Frazier, married twice; and her second husband, Charles Frazier, died when Woods was a boy. Woods' father was born in Prattville, Alabama. In Birmingham, he worked at the McWane Cast Iron Pipe Company, while Woods' mother took in laundry from white families to earn additional funds. Woods was the oldest of ten siblings, four of whom were named after presidents. His parents relied on welfare to support the family. Woods often looked after the other children; stocked the stove while his mother made biscuits; and fed their hogs with scraps from local whites' garbage. On one occasion when his family ran out of coal, Woods saw his father praying, and a coal delivery arrived inexplicably a few days later.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_001_002,
TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr.'s family was evicted from their home in Birmingham, Alabama when he was young. Woods began his education at East Thomas Elementary School and the Lincoln School, where he excelled in memorizing poetry. He was dismissed from class for disruptive behavior, but was permitted to attend A.H. Parker High School, where he earned the student government presidency with a well delivered speech; and, in 1946, was awarded a scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. There, President Benjamin Mays' lectures developed Woods' sense of pride and self-worth. Although Woods initially hoped to study medicine, he disliked the sight of blood, and eventually heeded his neighbor's advice to pursue a career in ministry. Due to medical issues, Woods left Morehouse College after his first year. He attended the Birmingham Baptist Bible College and Daniel Payne College, and later earned a bachelor's degree in theology at Miles College in Fairfield, Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_001_003,
TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. worked at the McWane Cast Iron Pump Company in Birmingham, Alabama, until he sustained an injury while operating the furnace. He then found custodial positions at an insurance agency and a local department store. Later, Woods was working at the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, when he was called to pastor First Metropolitan Baptist Church. He studied at Birmingham Baptist Bible College, and graduated with a theology degree in 1953. In the late 1950s, the NAACP was outlawed in Alabama, and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Woods was a founding member of the organization, and its second vice president. He recruited local churches to host meetings, despite the danger of affiliating with the movement. Woods recalls the bravery of Colonel Stone Johnson, who guarded Shuttlesworth's church. Woods also talks about his wife, Marian Dowdell-Levette Woods, whom he met while speaking at her church.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_001_004,
TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. was active in the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which was led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, Alabama. Woods served with Reverend Edward Gardner on a

committee to end segregation on public buses, and worked closely with ministers from Montgomery, Alabama, who were arrested during a meeting in Birmingham. Woods recalls Shuttlesworth's determination to continue the struggle, even after his home and church were bombed. The day after one of the bombings, Woods led a demonstration of civil disobedience on a bus in Birmingham. In 1962, the City of Birmingham adopted a mayor-council form of government, ousting the segregationist police commissioner Bull Connor. Shortly after, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights launched sit-ins, including one led by Woods at the Loveman, Joseph and Loeb lunch counter. At Woods' next sit-in, the demonstrators were arrested and jailed, while Woods and the other leaders were assigned to do manual labor.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_001_005,
TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. and his family took part in the student marches in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Police attacked the march with dogs and fire hoses, and Shuttlesworth was hospitalized, leading Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to consider suspending the demonstrations. However, Shuttlesworth ensured that they continued. In 1963, Woods served as the deputy director of the March on Washington, and coordinated transportation from the South to Washington, D.C. He describes the large crowd of demonstrators, and Dr. King's I Have A Dream speech. Woods continued his education at Miles College in Fairfield, Alabama, where he studied sociology, and helped the students organize the city's first selective buying campaign. He also briefly attended the nearly all-white University of Alabama at Birmingham. There, he excelled in his courses, and became the first African American to teach a class in the history department.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_002_006,
TRT: 0:27:50 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. earned a bachelor's degree in 1962 from Miles College in Fairfield, Alabama, and was hired by college president Lucius Holsey Pitts, Sr. to direct the school's voter education project. In this role, he coordinated students in teaching African Americans in rural Alabama how to vote. During this time, Woods also sat on the strategy committee of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, and facilitated the transition of the movement's headquarters from Bethel Baptist Church to 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Woods pursued his graduate degree at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he was a Ford Foundation scholar, and the only African American in many of his classes. He was asked to teach a class during a professor's sabbatical, thus becoming the first African American history professor on campus in 1968. Woods completed his master's degree in the 1970s at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_002_007,
TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. was a professor at Miles College in Fairfield, Alabama, when Frank Dukes and other students launched the first selective buying campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. Fire was set to a campus building to discourage student and faculty participation in the movement, and police commissioner Bull Connor prevented the college from raising funds for a new library. During this time, the SCLC tried to ally with people like Malcolm X and organizations like the communist-leaning Fellowship of Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement came under federal surveillance as a result. In 1963,

Woods recruited student demonstrators on behalf of SCLC, and held meetings at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Later that year, the church was bombed, and some congregants blamed the pastor, Reverend John H. Cross, Jr., for allowing SCLC to meet there. In response to the growing violence, Birmingham Mayor Alfred Boutwell appointed Woods to serve on the city's first interracial committee.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_002_008, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. hoped that Mayor Albert Boutwell's election would improve conditions in Birmingham, Alabama, but soon realized that Boutwell intended to maintain segregation. After images of civil rights violations in Birmingham were circulated worldwide, a group of prominent whites, including businessman Sydney Smyer, hired white lawyer David Vann to act as Boutwell's special assistant. Vann collaborated with the leaders of the SCLC, and helped organize committees of African Americans to desegregate the city. Woods also recalls the violent police reaction to demonstrators on Bloody Sunday; the success of the Selma to Montgomery march in prompting the Voting Rights Act of 1965; and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Woods was elected president of the SCLC's Birmingham chapter in 1978. In this role, he advocated for police accountability after the killings of an African American man in the Hueytown neighborhood, and Bonita Carter in the Kingston neighborhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_002_009, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. organized three thousand protestors to march on the city hall in Birmingham, Alabama, after Mayor David Vann sided with the police in the Bonita Carter shooting investigation. During the next mayoral election, Woods and other leaders convinced city councilman Richard Arrington, Jr. to oppose Vann, and rallied the support of the black community. In 1979, Arrington became Birmingham's first African American mayor. Woods also worked to secure justice for Maggie Bozeman and Julia Wilder, who were convicted of voter fraud in retaliation for their involvement in the voter registration movement. To bring attention to their cause, Woods led a march to Washington D.C. There, he learned of Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's presidential campaign, and became Jackson's campaign manager in Birmingham. Woods also drew attention to discrimination at the Shoal Creek Golf and Country Club when it was selected to host the PGA Tour in the early 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr., Section A2007_107_002_010, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Reverend Abraham Woods, Jr. generated media attention to force the Shoal Creek Golf and Country Club to end its segregation policies in the early 1990s. Clubs across the country followed suit, admitting African Americans and women for the first time. He was criticized by Minister Louis Farrakhan, who later apologized and applauded Woods' success with the golf industry. In the mid-1990s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation asked Woods and other civil rights leaders how to improve its relationship with African Americans. Woods asked that the bureau employ more African Americans, and reopen the investigation of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. Three suspects were found; and, at trial, all were convicted. Woods also served on the steering committee for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, alongside former Mayor David Vann and civic activist Odessa Woolfolk. The institute's community room was named in Woods' honor. Woods also reflects upon his legacy, and his

advice to future generations.