

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Col. James Stith

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Stith, James, 1941-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith,
Dates:	July 14, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:22:41).
Abstract:	Physicist, academic administrator, and colonel (ret.) Col. James Stith (1941 -) was the first tenured black professor at the United States Military Academy in 1976, and served as the vice president of the Physics Resources Center at the American Institute of Physics from 1998 to 2008. Stith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 14, 2010, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_083
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Physicist and Retired U.S. Army Colonel James Stith was born on July 17, 1941, to Ruth Stith in Brunswick County, Virginia. Stith had three step-sisters—Wilma, Aldrena, and Joyce—and one half-sister, Juanita. Stith attended Oak Grove Elementary School and he graduated from James Solomon Russell High School in 1959. It was in high school that Stith decided he wanted to pursue a career in physics.

Stith went on to graduate from Virginia State College to earn his B.S. and M.S. degrees, both in physics, in the years 1963 and 1965, respectively. During his time at Virginia State College, Stith joined the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and worked as an instructor. In 1965, he was called to active duty in the U.S. Army for two years. Then, after a two-year term working with the Radio Corporation of America, Stith continued his education at Pennsylvania State University, where he earned his D.Ed. degree in physics in 1972. Following his graduation, Stith was recalled to active duty, and so he joined the faculty at the United States Military Academy at West Point. In 1976, Stith became the first tenured African American professor at the United States Military Academy, where he continued to work until he retired from his post in 1993. Stith retired from the United States Military Academy as a full professor of physics and from the military at the grade of Colonel. Stith then worked as a full professor of physics at Ohio State University until 1998. Following his time at Ohio State University, Stith was hired as the vice president of the Physics Resource Center of the American Institute of Physics, a position he would hold for ten years. Stith also served on the board of the Triangle Coalition from 1999 to 2006, and he joined the advisory board for Project Kaleidoscope in 1990. Additionally, Stith has served on several advisory committees of the National Research Council throughout his career.

Stith has played an important role in increasing the role of African Americans in the physical sciences and has been recognized by the Academy for his work. In 1990, he was elected Vice President of the American Association of Physics Teachers, and in 2004 he was recognized as one of the “50 Most Important Blacks in Research Science.”

Stith is married to Alberta Hill, and they have three adult daughters: Adrienne Yvette, Andrea Lynn, and Alyssa Joy.

James Stith was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 14, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Col. James Stith was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 14, 2010, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Physicist, academic administrator, and colonel (ret.) Col. James Stith (1941 -) was the first tenured black professor at the United States Military Academy in 1976, and served as the vice president of the Physics Resources Center at the American Institute of Physics from 1998 to 2008.

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:

Stith, James, 1941-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stith, James, 1941- --Interviews

African American educators--Interviews.

African American college professors--Interviews.

African American scientists--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Ohio State University U.S. Military Academy, West Point Pennsylvania State University Radio Corporation of America

Occupations:

Physicist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 Col. James Stith, July 14, 2010. 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 Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_001, TRT: 0:27:54 ?

James Stith slates his interview and shares his favorites. He begins by talking about his mother's family background, which he can trace back to his great-grandfather, Wally Stith, who was a slave. Stith's maternal grandparents were Martin Stith and Dinah Macklin Stith. He explains that his family name came from white slave-owners traced back to William Stith, a member of the faculty at The College of William & Mary. Stith describes life on the Stith family's farm in Brunswick County, Virginia. His mother was Ruth Stith Morgan. Stith was never told his father's name, but his mother remarried a man named Griffen Pierpoint Morgan. Although Stith had a rocky relationship with his stepfather, he got along with his three stepsisters. Stith does not remember his grandmother, Dinah Macklin Morgan, who raised him until he was four years old, but he can recall her funeral.

African American families--Virginia.

Genealogy.

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_002, TRT: 0:27:27 ?

James Stith describes his childhood on his family's farm in Brunswick County, Virginia. He lived in an African American community and attended the Johnson Grove Reformed Zion Union Apostolic (RZUA) Church. He discusses his elementary school experience at Oak Grove Elementary School in Cochrane, Virginia. The school was segregated and consisted of three classrooms. Stith and a few of his classmates were responsible for teaching the material to the rest of the class. Stith recalls his early interest in reading, science and understanding how things work, explaining that it was not until his high school years that he was formally introduced to science.

Farming--Virginia.

African Americans--Religion--Virginia.

Reformed Zion Union Apostolic Church of America.

Segregation in education--Virginia.

African Americans--Education.

Science--Study and teaching (Secondary).

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_003, TRT: 0:28:14 ?

James Stith begins the interview session by talking about segregation in his community in Brunswick County, Virginia, in the 1950s. He then describes his high school experience at James Solomon Russell High School in Lawrenceville, Virginia. After representing the school in the State Science Fair, Stith's grades improved and he enjoyed school. His physics teacher, Evelyn Davis, pushed him to work hard, and his math teacher advised him to pursue a college education. Stith describes his admiration for his uncle, Theodore Stith, who served in the United States Air Force and was the first in his family to graduate from high school. Stith graduated as valedictorian of his high school class in 1959 and transitioned into college life at Virginia State College, where he studied under

Dr. John Hunter, Dr. T. Nelson Baker, Dr. Dickie Dunn and Ruben McDaniel.
During college, Stith pledged into the fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha.

Teachers--Influence.

African Americans--Segregation--Virginia.

Virginia State College.

Science--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_004, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

James Stith discusses the political climate of the 1960 presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Literacy tests and poll taxes were among the obstacles that prevented many African Americans from voting. Stith explains his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during his college years at Virginia State College, before going on to discuss his graduate school and teaching experiences. He then describes his participation in the United States Army, serving in both Korea and at Fort Lewis in Seattle, Washington. Following his service, Stith worked at the Radio Corporation of America where he worked with photodiodes, and he continued his graduate studies at Pennsylvania State University.

Military service, Voluntary--United States.

Korean War, 1950-1953.

Civil rights movements.

Virginia State College.

Radio Corporation of America

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_005, TRT: 0:28:46 ?

James Stith describes his graduate dissertation, "Stimulated Brillouin Scattering in Liquids at High Pressure," and shares stories of studying under the tutelage of Dr. David H. Rank. Stith earned his D.Ed. degree from Pennsylvania State University in 1972. After some difficulty finding a job, Stith elected to rejoin the United States Army and became a professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Stith recalls the push to recruit minority faculty and students, and he describes the efforts that he helped put in place to support both groups, including the Black Officers at West Point, the Kappa Upsilon Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha and the school's gospel choir. Stith closes this interview section by discussing how he received tenure at the United States Military Academy.

Minorities--Education (Higher)--United States.

Physics--Study and teaching (Higher).

Physics--Research.

United States Military Academy.

United States--Armed Forces--Minorities.

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_006, TRT: 0:31:59 ?

James Stith discusses some of the changes that took place when the United States Military Academy became a co-educational institution in 1976. Also that year, Stith was offered a tenured position at the United States Military Academy as well as a sabbatical year at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, where Stith recalls meeting Daniel "Chappie" James. Stith describes the shift in his research to physics education, and his participation in professional organizations like the American Association of Physics Teachers, which he led as president from 1992 to 1993. Stith also served as vice president for resources of the American Institute of Physics from 1998 to 2008. Stith closes the

interview by discussing the initiatives he helped direct at The Ohio State University, where he worked from 1993 to 1998, and his philosophy for physics education.

United States Military Academy--Coeducation.

United States Air Force Academy.

American Association of Physics Teachers.

American Institute of Physics.

Video Oral History Interview with Col. James Stith, Section A2010_083_001_007, TRT: 0:27:39 ?

James Stith talks about his hopes and concerns for the black community and he discusses the profile of black physicists on college campuses. He then talks about founding the National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP) in 1976 at Morgan State University. He then describes his wife and daughters, and reflects on how he wants to be remembered.

Minorities in science.

National Society of Black Physicists.

African Americans--Education.