

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Pearson, Jr.

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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>	Pearson, Willie, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 13, 2011
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2011
<b>Physical Description:</b>	14 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:36:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Sociologist and sociology professor Willie Pearson, Jr. (1945 - ) was a sociologist whose research centered on the U.S. scientific and engineering workforce and increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in science and engineering. Pearson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 13, 2011, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2011_014
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Sociologist Willie Pearson, Jr. was born on June 29, 1945 in Rusk, Texas. In 1968, Pearson graduated with honors from Wiley College with his B.A. degree in Sociology. Three years later, Pearson earned his M.A. degree in sociology (Presidential Scholarship) from Atlanta University. He received his Ph.D. degree in sociology in 1981 from Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

After graduating from college, Pearson moved to Kansas City, Missouri where he worked as a benefits claims examiner at the Department of Health Education and Welfare and as an administrative and legal specialist for the United States Army. In 1972, Pearson was hired as an assistant professor in the sociology and anthropology departments at Grambling State University where he was named an outstanding teacher. Pearson moved to North Carolina where he worked as an assistant professor at Wake Forest University in 1980 while completing his dissertation. In 1985, Pearson completed his first book, *Black Scientists, White Society and Colorless Science: A Study of Universalism in American Science*. In 1988, Pearson was awarded a Congressional Fellowship from the Office of Technology Assessment, Congress and received tenure at Wake Forest University. In 2001, Pearson joined the faculty at Georgia Institute of Technology as a sociology professor and chair of the School of History, Technology and Society. During the same year, Pearson was named a National Associate (life-time appointment) of the National Academy of Sciences.

Most of Pearson's research has centered around the U.S. scientific and engineering workforce and on broadening participation of underrepresented groups in science and engineering. In addition to having published numerous articles in newspapers and academic journals, Pearson has authored and co-authored seven books and monographs, including *Blacks, Education and American Science*, *Who Will Do Science?: Educating the Next Generation*, *The Role and Activities of American Graduate Schools in Recruiting, Enrolling and Retaining United States Black and Hispanic Students*, and *Beyond Small Numbers: Voices of African American Ph.D. Chemists*. Pearson has served on numerous committees, advisory boards and panels at the National Institutes of Health, National Science

Foundation, American Sociological Association and many more. He has a love of teaching, research and community service and he has mentored numerous undergraduate and graduate students throughout his career. Pearson has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Schoonmaker Faculty Prize for Community Service from the Wake Forest University Alumni Council and the Distinguished Lecturer award from Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society.

Willie Pearson, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 13, 2011.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie Pearson, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 13, 2011, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 14 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Sociologist and sociology professor Willie Pearson, Jr. (1945 - ) was a sociologist whose research centered on the U.S. scientific and engineering workforce and increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in science and engineering.

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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:

Pearson, Willie, 1945-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Pearson, Willie, 1945- --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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Georgia Institute of Technology

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## Occupations:

Sociologist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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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 Pearson, Jr., April 13, 2011. 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 Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:05  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. was born on June 29, 1945 in Rusk, Texas to Odessa Price Pearson and Willie Pearson, Sr. His maternal great-grandfather migrated from Milledgeville, Georgia in 1853, and settled in Cherokee County, Texas, where Pearson's mother was born in the mid-1910s. Although they had little education, Pearson's maternal ancestors became Methodist ministers, and bought three hundred acres of land in Rusk, which was unusual for an African American family at the time. Pearson's mother married at a young age and gave birth to Pearson's sister, Vassie V. King, who was fifteen years older than him. His mother managed the family's land holdings in Rusk, and used her inheritance to provide for Pearson and his sister. She also occasionally sold timber to fund his sister's college tuition. Pearson's father was born in Marion, Louisiana, and moved to Texas later in life. Pearson remembers accompanying his father to Louisiana, and briefly attending school there.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:40  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. was two years old when his family moved to Tyler, Texas. There, his father, Willie Pearson, Sr., worked in the pulpwood industry. When Pearson was four years old, his parents divorced; and, from that time, he was primarily raised by his mother, Odessa Price Pearson. Pearson grew up in a racially mixed middle class neighborhood, where he enjoyed watching cartoons with his friends on the family's television set, and attending the community's Juneteenth celebrations. He began reading his older sister's books at a young age, and became interested in anthropology. He also read the newspaper at his mother's insistence. Pearson was an inquisitive child, and often explored the creeks at the nearby Butler College, where he encountered snakes and other wildlife. Pearson attended the Bethlehem First Baptist Church with his mother each Sunday; and, on Saturdays, accompanied a family friend to a Seventh day Adventist church.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:11  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. attended the Bethlehem First Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, where he joined the Boy Scouts and baseball team. He also served as president of the youth group, and attended Baptist camp during the summers. Pearson began his education at W.A. Peete Elementary School in Tyler, where he enjoyed drawing, and was paid to design bulletin boards for his teachers. He was mentored by his baseball coach, Mr. Clewis, and teacher Mrs. Williams, who sparked his interest in history and geography. At W.A. Peete Intermediate School, Pearson was selected to join the honors program. He went on to attend Emmett J. Scott High School, where many of his teachers had advanced degrees. He was mentored by the school's principal, Asa Grant Hilliard II, who was the father of psychology professor Asa Hilliard, III. Pearson also played basketball, baseball and ran track. At this point in the interview, he reflects upon his early understanding of gender roles.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_004, TRT: 4:33:33  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. developed an interest in the social sciences at an early age by reading his older sister's anthropology books. He was also influenced by his experiences of social hierarchy at the Bethlehem First Baptist Church in Tyler,

Texas. After graduating from Emmett J. Scott High School, Pearson received an art scholarship to attend the historically black Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. There, he was inspired by black sociologist Vattel Daniel, and changed his focus to sociology. Because of the strength of the sociology department at Wiley College, many of the students enrolled in Pearson's courses were whites from the nearby East Texas Baptist College. For his degree, he completed fieldwork and a thesis on the library holdings at three black institutions. Pearson also remembers the other faculty of Wiley College, including religious studies professor Inez Jenkins and President Thomas W. Cole, Sr., whose son was chemist Thomas W. Cole.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:52  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. attended Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, which was the alma mater of civil rights activist James Farmer, chemist Henry Cecil McBay and scientist Walter McAfee. Many of his classmates were involved in the sit-in movement in Marshall, and Pearson participated in protests against the college administration. Through his religious studies with Professor Inez Jenkins, Pearson learned about the role of the church in the Civil Rights Movement, and read the works of philosopher Paul Tillich. The small classroom setting enabled Pearson to have discussions with his peers, many of whom went on to study at the University of Chicago. After Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968, Pearson organized a vigil on campus, which was followed by a march in downtown Marshall. That same year, Pearson graduated from Wiley College with honors, and was hired by the U.S. Social Security Administration. Soon after, he was drafted into the U.S. Army.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:59  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to Fort Bliss in Texas, where he joined the Adjutant General's Corps and the softball team. Then, he was stationed in Germany, where he participated in a protest organized by a group of soldiers called the Black Baptists. After receiving an early discharge, Pearson enrolled in a master's degree program at Atlanta University, where he planned to study under sociologist Tilman C. Cothran, although Cothran left the school before Pearson's arrival. In addition to his sociology coursework, Pearson studied foreign language, economics and anthropology; and attended lectures by economist Gunnar Myrdal and mechanical engineer John M. Beattie. His master's thesis focused on racial stereotypes among students. Upon graduating in 1971, Pearson found work in the quality control division of the Kelly Springfield Tire Company in his hometown of Tyler, Texas. In 1972, he joined the faculty of Grambling College in Grambling, Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_007, TRT: 7:31:09  
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Willie Pearson, Jr. became a sociology professor at Grambling College in Grambling, Louisiana in 1972. He adjusted the curriculum to suit the needs of his students, who were struggling with the material. He also created a sociology club, and encouraged students to write and present research papers at professional meetings. During this time, Pearson taught additional courses at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, where his students included Roland Harper of the Chicago Bears and a distant relative from his father's family. After three years, Pearson decided to focus on research, and enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois.

Initially, he studied the sociology of families under Herman Lantz and Lewellyn Hendrix. After meeting Professor Jerry Gaston, Pearson developed an interest in the sociology of science, and wrote a paper about women and minorities in science that he developed into a grant funded empirical study.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:51 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. published four academic articles as a master's degree student, and went on to pursue a Ph.D. degree at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. There, he served as president of the graduate club, where he organized research collaborations between his classmates. Through the mentorship of Professor Jerry Gaston, Pearson completed his dissertation, 'One in A Hundred: A Study of Black American Science Doctorates.' For the study, he surveyed African American scientists about characteristics like gender, marital status and religion; and interpreted the results using the theories of Robert K. Merton. Upon graduating in 1981, Pearson was hired as an associate professor at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. At the time, he was one of three African American faculty members, who were later joined by Professor Maya Angelou. Pearson continued to publish articles in sociological journals; and, within ten years, was promoted to a distinguished professorship.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_009, TRT: 9:31:11 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. served on the faculty of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina for twenty years. During his time there, he published the book 'Black Scientists, White Society and Colorless Science,' which he developed from his Ph.D. dissertation. Based on his survey data, Pearson found that only 1 percent of African Americans in scientific fields held Ph.D. degrees. In the book, he examined the factors that contributed to the underrepresentation, including lack of financial aid, absence of visible role models and poor mathematics education. In 1986, Pearson was elected as the first African American president of the Mid-South Sociological Association; and, in 1987, served on the editorial board of Contemporary Sociology, a peer reviewed journal produced by the American Sociological Association. In 1988, he was awarded a congressional fellowship from the Office of Technology Assessment, and began a study of the United States' competitiveness in the worldwide workforce.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_010, TRT: 10:28:39 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. contributed to numerous projects aimed at improving minority representation in science. These initiatives included the National Science Foundation's Studies in Science, Technology and Society in 1990, and the Association of Science Technology Centers' Project MOSAIC in 1992, which worked to diversify museums like the California Science Center in Los Angeles and the Discovery Place in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 1994, Pearson co-edited 'Who Will Do Science? Educating the Next Generation' with Alan Fechter, who was the director of the Office of Science and Engineering Personnel. In 1998, Pearson participated in a project developed by former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, which examined urban violence in five cities. For the project, Pearson worked with the local police and social workers to address the rising youth violence and gang activity in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He reflects upon the treatment of juvenile delinquents, and the consequences of defunding social programs.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_011, TRT: 11:30:50 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. joined the faculty of the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia in 2001, when he was named the first African American chairman of the School of History, Technology and Society. In the following year, he served on the Technical Advisory Committee of the Graduate Records Examination Board. In 2005, Pearson published 'Beyond Small Numbers: Voices of African American Ph.D. Chemists,' which was based on interviews of prominent scientists from schools like McGill University in Montreal, Canada. That same year, he wrote 'The Role and Activities of American Graduate Schools in Recruiting, Enrolling and Retaining United States Black and Hispanic Students' in collaboration with the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. For this study, he surveyed focus groups of minorities in the fields of psychology, criminology and biology at various institutions. Pearson also took part in President Barack Obama's White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_012, TRT: 12:29:17 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. published 'Beyond Small Numbers: Voices of African American Ph.D. Chemists' in 2004. The book featured the stories of African American scientists, who often experienced discrimination while contributing to their fields. In 2006, Pearson completed his five-year contract as the chairman of the School of History, Technology and Society at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, and decided to concentrate on his research and teaching. At the time of the interview, he was conducting an international study on the status of women in computer science, mathematics, statistics and chemistry. He also served as an advisor to the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, where he worked with Harvard College Dean Evelyn M. Hammonds and Melvin B. Tolson Foundation President Kenneth Tolson. Pearson reflects upon his family, life and career, including his decision to leave the Kelly Springfield Tire Company to become a professor.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_013, TRT: 13:17:40 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. was an acclaimed sociologist with a distinguished career in education and research. In sharing his advice to future scholars, he advocates for the use of quantitative methods, and emphasizes the importance of mentorship and interdisciplinary work with the physical sciences. Pearson also describes his concerns for urban communities, and shares his recommendations for the development of social programs. He concludes this part of the interview by talking about the utility of a sociology background for professionals of other disciplines, and the importance of making science accessible to individuals outside the field.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Pearson, Jr., Section A2011\_014\_001\_014, TRT: 14:14:08 ?

Willie Pearson, Jr. was a sociologist of science; and, throughout his career, studied the challenges faced by African American scientists and engineers. Through his research, he identified the barriers encountered by minority scholars, and developed policy recommendations to overcome them. At this point in the interview, Pearson talks about sociological research methods and the importance of peer review. He also remembers working with his wife, LaRue C. Pearson, who was a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology School of Public Policy in Atlanta, Georgia. Pearson concludes the interview by describing

how he would like to be remembered.