

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Essex Finney

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Finney, Essex E.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney,
Dates:	July 13, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:15:10).
Abstract:	Agricultural engineer Essex Finney (1937 -) a pioneer in the field of agricultural engineering, led a thirty-year career with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Finney was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_154
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Agricultural engineer Essex E. Finney was born in Powhatan County, Virginia on May 16, 1937. As a child, he worked on his family farm growing tobacco, wheat and corn as well as raising farm animals. Finney became interested in agricultural engineering when his family acquired a tractor. After graduating from Pocahontas High School in 1954, he enrolled at Virginia State University. In 1956, Finney transferred to Virginia Polytechnic Institute, where he was one of the first African American students to integrate the university. Finney earned his B.S. degree in agricultural engineering in 1959 from Virginia Polytechnic Institute. He went on to earn his M.S. degree in 1961 from Pennsylvania State University, and in 1963, he was the first African American to receive his Ph.D. degree from the Department of Agricultural Engineering at Michigan State University. Between 1963 and 1965, Finney served as an officer in the United States Military.

In 1965, Finney accepted a position with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Beltsville Research Center in the instrumentation research laboratory. He was appointed assistant director of the center in 1977 and became director in 1989. For one year, Finney served as associate director of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) twelve-state North Atlantic Area. In addition, from 1980 to 1981, he was hired as a senior policy analyst in the Office of the Science Advisor to Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. In 1992, Finney went to work at the USDA headquarters in Washington, D.C. where he served as the associate administrator for the ARS. Finney worked with the USDA until his retirement in 1995. In addition to his administrative duties, Finney also conducted research. His early research investigated methods of drying cereal grains like wheat, rice, and barley, and his later research focused on techniques and instruments that measure food quality.

Finney was named a fellow of the African Scientific Institute. He was a member of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers and the National Academy of Engineering. In 1985, the College of Engineering at the Pennsylvania State University presented Finney with their Engineering Alumnus Award.

Essex E. Finney was interviewed by the *The HistoryMakers* on July 13, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Essex Finney was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Agricultural engineer Essex Finney (1937 -) a pioneer in the field of agricultural engineering, led a thirty-year career with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

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:

Finney, Essex E.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Finney, Essex E.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Dept. of Agriculture.

Occupations:

Agricultural Engineer

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 Essex Finney, July 13, 2012. 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 Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_001, TRT: 1:29:46 ?
Essex Finney describes his family background in Powhatan County, Virginia. Finney's mother, Etta Burton, was born in December of 1916 in Michaux, Virginia. The Burton ancestry traces back to the American Civil War era; her

family was well known for their service in church. Etta Burton grew up on the Lazy Oaks Plantation in Michaux. She completed her high school education in Powhatan, and spent her life caring for her family. Finney's father, Essex Eugene Finney, was born in July of 1912 in Macon, Virginia. His ancestry traces back to 1845 in Amelia County, Virginia, to his paternal grandmother, Susan Epps, who worked as a nurse on the Lodge plantation.

African American families--Virginia.

African Americans--Family history--Virginia.

Plantations--Virginia.

African American nurses.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_002, TRT: 2:29:38 ?

Essex Finney describes his father's family background. Finney's paternal ancestry can be traced back to plantations in Powhatan County and Amelia County, Virginia in the mid-1800s. Finney's father, Essex Eugene Finney, was born in 1912 to John Finney, who was a farmer, and Fannie Finney, who was a school teacher. He worked on his family's farm throughout his life, and supplemented his income by working for the U.S. Department of Highways. Finney was his parents' only child, and was raised on his family's farm in Macon, Virginia. He describes spending his childhood around his parents and grandparents.

African Americans--Family history--Virginia.

Family farms--Virginia.

Only child.

Farm life--Virginia.

Childhood--Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_003, TRT: 3:29:23 ?

Essex Finney spent his childhood on his family's farm in Macon, Virginia. His interest in science and nature stemmed from his experiences on the farm. Finney began his studies at Pine Hill Elementary School in 1943, where he was taught by his grandmother, Fannie Finney. In 1946, after completing the sixth grade, Finney transitioned to a newly-established middle school, where he began to receive his first formal instruction in science. Finney describes the serenity of the Powhatan countryside, and talks about racial relations in Powhatan County in the 1940s and 1950s.

Childhood--Virginia.

Farm life--Virginia.

African American grandmothers--Virginia.

Teacher-student relationships.

Race relations--Virginia—Powhatan County.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_004, TRT: 4:29:38 ?

Essex Finney graduated from Pocahontas High School in Powhatan, Virginia, in 1954. The advent of technology in farming sparked Finney's interest in pursuing a degree in agricultural engineering, and with help from his cousin and high-school vocational teacher, Edward Finney, he enrolled in a two-year agricultural training program at Virginia State College. Finney describes his mother's death as a huge personal loss that came soon after he began his undergraduate studies. After completing his basic training at Virginia State in 1956, Finney transferred to Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), where he was mentored by Phillip Mason. He received his B.S. degree in agricultural engineering in 1959.

Finney acknowledges his aunt, Novella Ambrose, as having played an important role in supporting his education.

Agricultural engineering--Study and teaching--United States.

Agricultural engineering--Vocational guidance.

Mothers--Death--Psychological aspects.

Mentoring in engineering--United States.

Aunts--Family relationships.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_005, TRT: 5:30:19 ?

Essex Finney received his B.S. degree in agricultural engineering from Virginia Polytechnic Institute/Virginia Tech in 1959. He married his high school classmate, Rosa Ellen Bradley, in June of 1959, and soon after, began studies towards his master's degree in agricultural engineering at Pennsylvania State University. Guided by his mentors, Frank Peikert and Nuri Mohsenin, Finney earned his M.S. degree in 1960. He then enrolled at Michigan State University, and under the tutelage of Carl Hall, completed his dissertation research on the viscoelastic behavior of the potato. Soon after earning his Ph.D. degree in 1963, Finney served in the military for two years, at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Denver. In 1965, Finney joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in Beltsville, as a research engineer in the instrumentation research laboratory. He became the director of the agricultural marketing research institute in 1972. Finney served for thirty years at the USDA.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Agricultural Engineering Department.

Married students--United States.

Mentoring in engineering--United States.

Viscoelastic materials--Thesis and dissertation.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_006, TRT: 6:29:05 ?

Essex Finney joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Beltsville Research Center in 1965, as a research scientist in the instrumentation research laboratory. Finney was appointed as the director of the agricultural marketing institute of the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) in 1972, and as the assistant director of the ARS Beltsville Research Center in 1977. Finney became the director of the Beltsville Research Center in 1989, and the associate director of the ARS in 1992. At the time of his retirement in 1995, Finney had served at the USDA for thirty years. Finney also served at the White House in 1979, as a member of the advisory staff to the Office of Science and Technology during the Carter and Reagan administrations.

United States. Department of Agriculture.

Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

United States. Office of Science and Technology--Officials and employees.

Video Oral History Interview with Essex Finney, Section A2012_154_001_007, TRT: 7:17:21 ?

Essex Finney married his high school classmate, Rose Ellen Bradley, in 1959, and they have two children. Finney reflects upon his hopes for the African American community and on how he wants to be remembered. Finney also describes his photographs.

African American families.

High school students--Marriage.

Photographs.