

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Lee Harris, 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>	Harris, Robert L., 1943-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 22, 2013 and October 24, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	12 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:03:07).
<b>Abstract:</b>	African american history professor Robert Lee Harris, Jr. (1943 - ) taught at Cornell University for over thirty-five years, and served as the director and vice provost of Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 22, 2013 and October 24, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_287
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Professor Robert L. Harris, Jr. was born on April 23, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois to Robert and Ruby Harris. Growing up in Chicago, Harris attended St. Finbarr Elementary School and St. Philip High School. He graduated with his B.A. degree in history in 1966, and then his M.A. degree with honors in history in 1968; both from Roosevelt University. Harris went on to receive his Ph.D. degree from Northwestern University in 1974.

Harris was hired as a sixth grade teacher at Chicago's St. Rita Elementary School in 1965. Then, in 1968 and 1969, he worked at Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama, as an instructor of social science. In 1972, Harris was hired as an assistant professor of American history at the University of Illinois, where he taught until 1975. He went on to work as an assistant professor of African American history at the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University from 1975 until 1982, when he was promoted to associate professor. Harris also served as the director of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University from 1986 until 1991, and then as special assistant to the provost of Cornell University from 1994 through 2000. He then was named vice provost for diversity and faculty development in 2000, and served in that position until 2008.

In 2004, Harris was promoted to full professor of African American history at Cornell University, and, in 2010, he was again hired as director of the Africana Studies and Research Center. In 2013, Harris was made both a graduate school professor of African and African American Studies and professor emeritus of African American history, American studies, and public affairs.

Harris authored *Teaching African-American History*, published by the American Historical Association, in 2001. He also co-edited *The Columbia Guide to African American History Since 1939*, which was published in 2006. In all, Harris has written thirteen individual book chapters, thirty scholarly articles, and eight dictionary entries. He has served on boards and committees of numerous organizations, including the De Witt Historical Society of Tompkins County, the New York Council for the Humanities, the American Historical Association, the Council for

International Exchange of Scholars, the Organization of American Historians, the Society for History Education, and the National History Center. Harris also served as the president of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History from 1991 until 1992. He has been awarded fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University. Harris also received the James A. Perkins Prize in 2000 and the Cook Award in 2008 from Cornell University. In 2003, he was awarded the Carter G. Woodson Scholar's Medallion for Distinguished Research, Writing and Activism from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Harris is also National Historian for Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Robert L. Harris, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 22, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 22, 2013 and October 24, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 12 uncompressed MOV digital video files. African american history professor Robert Lee Harris, Jr. (1943 - ) taught at Cornell University for over thirty-five years, and served as the director and vice provost of Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center.

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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:

Harris, Robert L., 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Harris, Robert L., 1943- --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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## Occupations:

African American History Professor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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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 Robert Lee Harris, Jr., October 22, 2013 and October 24, 2013. 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 Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_001, TRT: 1:09:39 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:15 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. was born on April 23, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois to Ruby Watkins Harris and Robert Lee Harris, Sr. His paternal great-grandfather was born in Virginia to an enslaved woman and a white plantation owner, and became a farmer in Silver Creek, Mississippi. Harris' paternal grandfather, Lee Harris, worked as a cobbler and raised Harris' father in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Harris' maternal family also came from Mississippi, where his great-grandfather served as a newspaper illustrator and minister. Harris' mother was born in Purvis, Mississippi. She grew up in Hattiesburg, where her mother worked as a teacher and her father worked as a custodian. After her parents divorced, she was raised by her great aunt. She moved with her family to Chicago, Illinois during the 1940s, and graduated from Englewood High School. She then moved to the West Side with Harris' father. Harris' early interest in African American history was influenced by his maternal grandfather, who read the Chicago Defender.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:17 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr.'s parents, Ruby Watkins Harris and Robert Lee Harris, Sr., met as schoolchildren in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. During World War II, his father served in the U.S. military at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and his mother lived with her relatives on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. Harris' father went on to found a shoe repair business in the Chicago Board of Trade Building. His parents married and moved to the West Side of Chicago, where they raised Harris and his younger sisters, Sharon Harris Reed and Sandra Harris Carter. Due to discriminatory redlining practices, his parents did not qualify for a mortgage, and purchased their house through a land contract instead. Upon the advice of Harris' maternal great aunt, Harris' parents enrolled him and his sisters in Catholic schools. His mother attended beauty school while Harris was in high school. At this point in the interview, Harris talks about the history of the wealth and achievement gaps.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:44 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. grew up on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois, where his mother, Ruby Watkins Harris, organized a block club in the neighborhood. Harris attended the St. Malachy School and St. Finbarr School, where he developed an aspiration to teach history. He was influenced by historian J.A. Rogers' 'Your History' comics in the Chicago Defender, and a biography of Bishop James Augustine Healy that he received from one of his teachers. He also participated in the local boys clubs, including the Boys' Brotherhood Republic and the Off the Streets Club. Harris went on to attend St. Philip Basilica High School, where he joined the debate team, glee club, school newspaper and yearbook staff. After class, he worked at a neighborhood grocery store and his father's shoe repair business, which was located in the Chicago Board of Trade Building. Harris stopped visiting his family in Mississippi after

the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:39 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. attended St. Philip Basilica High School, a Catholic school on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. He was interested in history and politics, and participated in a lunch counter sit-in at the F.W. Woolworth Company in downtown Chicago. In 1961, Harris enrolled at Chicago's Roosevelt University, where he studied under political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, sociologist St. Clair Drake and historians Hollis Lynch and Lorenzo Dow Turner. He was also inspired by the scholarship of John Hope Franklin, who was history professor at the University of Chicago. Because of their influence, Harris decided to pursue a career in academia rather than as a high school teacher. He was a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and met his future wife, Anita Harris, at a party hosted by the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. At this point in the interview, Harris talks about the death of Emmett Till, whose funeral service was held at the A.A. Rayner and Sons Funeral Home in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:43 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. taught at the St. Rita School during his senior year at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. He went on to earn a master's degree from Roosevelt University. His thesis addressed freedmen's landownership opportunities during Reconstruction. Around this time, Harris participated in Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march for open housing, which took place in Gage Park on the West Side of Chicago. Harris also remembers the uprisings on the West Side in response to Dr. King's assassination in 1968. That year, Harris joined the faculty of Miles College, a historically black university in Fairfield, Alabama. He taught for one year in the school's freshman social science program, which was developed by John U. Monro. In 1969, Harris began a Ph.D. degree at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. His advisor was George M. Fredrickson, a white historian whose scholarship focused on study of racial ideologies.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_007, TRT: 7:27:44 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. earned a Ph.D. degree in history from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Under the direction of his advisor, George M. Fredrickson, Harris wrote his dissertation, 'The Free Black Response to American Racism, 1790-1863.' He analyzed the development of black identity prior to the Civil War, including the roles of religion and nationalism. Upon completing his Ph.D. degree, Harris became an assistant professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he taught undergraduate and graduate courses in U.S. history and African American history. One of his seminar students was Edna Greene Medford, who later became the chairperson of the history department at Howard University. Harris also received a postdoctoral fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which he used to expand his dissertation. At this point in the interview, he talks about the regional differences in racial categories, and the historical accounts of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_008, TRT: 8:28:50 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. joined the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History in 1972. At that time, Harris was a member of the history department at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he taught

courses in African American studies. In 1975, he joined the faculty of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, which was among the first black studies programs and served as a model for other universities. Through the recommendation of black historian Sterling Stuckey, Harris was selected to write a curriculum about the 'Roots' miniseries for Prime Time School Television. At this point in the interview, Harris talks about the historiography of slavery, including the scholarship of John W. Blassingame, Stanley M. Elkins, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman. Harris also describes the critiques against the Dunning School, a group of historians who promoted a white supremacist narrative of Reconstruction.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_009, TRT: 9:28:36 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. taught at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center in Ithaca, New York. His colleagues included J. Congress Mbata, Cheston Everett, William E. Cross, Jr. and James Turner, who was the center's founder. During his tenure, Harris published several articles on black historiography, including 'Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography' in 1982 and 'The Flowering of Afro-American History' in 1987. His article, 'The Afro-American Classics,' identified a canon that included W.E.B. Du Bois' 'The Souls of Black Folk,' Booker T. Washington's 'Up from Slavery' and Margaret Walker Alexander's 'Jubilee.' He also published an academic textbook called 'Teaching African American History,' and contributed to the anthology 'A Century of American Historiography,' which was edited by James M. Banner, Jr. Additionally, Harris remembers historian John Henrik Clarke, whom he met through the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_010, TRT: 10:28:22 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. began his career at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center in Ithaca, New York in 1975. He served as the center's director from 2010 to 2013. During that time, he worked to secure the institution's Title VI authorization in African studies from the U.S. Department of Education under the National Defense and Education Act. After his retirement in 2013, Harris continued to conduct academic projects. At the time of the interview, he was engaged in writing biographies of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the All-American football player and diplomat Jerome H. Holland. Harris remembers the first election of President Barack Obama, and talks about the success of the Obama administration during the global financial recession of 2008. Harris also shares his advice for students. He talks about the employment opportunities in STEM disciplines, and the representation of African Americans in the U.S. workforce.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_011, TRT: 11:29:34 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. served as the vice provost of the Africana Studies and Research Center (ASRC) at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York from 2000 to 2008. In 2010, he was appointed to serve as the center's director. At this time, the university provost decided to alter the structure of Cornell University. The ASRC was subsumed under the College of Arts and Sciences, and was forced to abandon its status as an independent body. Disappointed in the administrative restructuring, Harris retired from the directorship in 2013. At this point in the interview, he describes his hopes for African American youth, and his advice to aspiring historians and African American studies scholars. He talks about the

development of the Africana studies field, and the documentary series ‘The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,’ which was intended to create a national dialogue about race. Harris also reflects upon his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lee Harris, Jr., Section A2013\_287\_002\_012, TRT: 12:04:44 ?

Robert Lee Harris, Jr. participated in the inaugural Pan-African Conference on Reparations in Abuja, Nigeria in 1993. He delivered the Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture in Accra, Ghana in 2005, which was the fiftieth anniversary of Ghanaian independence. Harris also attended a conference held in Turin, Italy, where he gave a presentation on the human rights abuses faced by African Americans. Harris concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.