

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thomas W. Cole

## 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>	Cole, Thomas W. Jr., 1941-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas W. Cole,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 15, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:26:10).
<b>Abstract:</b>	University president and chemistry professor Thomas W. Cole (1941 - 2022) was the president of Clark Atlanta University, whose formation from Clark and Atlanta Universities he oversaw. He was also president of West Virginia State College, Chancellor of the West Virginia Board of Regents, and a professor of chemistry at the former Atlanta University. Cole was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 15, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_173
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Thomas Winston Cole, Jr. was born the second of four children to Eva and Thomas W. Cole, Sr. on January 11, 1941, in Vernon, Texas. The Cole family moved to Marshall, Texas, where his father was appointed President of Wiley College from 1958 to 1971. During his childhood, Cole attended public school and was an active Eagle Scout.

Cole graduated from high school in 1958 and attended Wiley College where he was active in the Kappa Chi and Alpha Kappa Mu Honor societies. Graduating summa cum laude from Wiley College in 1961, Cole received his B.S. degree and the Southern Regional Fellowship. Cole attended the University of Chicago and earned his Ph.D. in organic chemistry in 1966; it was here that he studied with P.E. Eaton and they became the first chemists to synthesize the Cubane Carbon Skeleton System.

Cole began his professional career in 1966 as an assistant professor at the Atlanta University Center, in Atlanta, Georgia. During his tenure, Cole would serve as chairman of the department of chemistry between 1970 and 1979; the Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Chemistry between 1969 and 1979; Chair of the Atlanta University Center chemistry department; and Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs between 1979 and 1982. Cole also worked as a research scientist for Procter & Gamble and the Celanese Fiber Company. From 1982 to 1986, Cole was president of West Virginia State College. Following his presidency, Cole was appointed Chancellor of the West Virginia Board of Regents, one of four African Americans to head a state system of public higher education.

Cole returned to Atlanta to accept a position as president of Clark College in 1988, and led the oversight and planning for the consolidation of Clark College and Atlanta University. Cole served simultaneously as president of both institutions during the 1988-1989 academic years until his appointment as President of Clark Atlanta

University in 1989. Cole continued to serve as president until 2002.

After retirement, Cole lived in Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife, Brenda.

Thomas Cole was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 15, 2006.

Cole passed away on April 14, 2022, at the age of 81.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thomas W. Cole was conducted by Denise Gines on December 15, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. University president and chemistry professor Thomas W. Cole (1941 - 2022) was the president of Clark Atlanta University, whose formation from Clark and Atlanta Universities he oversaw. He was also president of West Virginia State College, Chancellor of the West Virginia Board of Regents, and a professor of chemistry at the former Atlanta University.

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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:

Cole, Thomas W. Jr., 1941-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Cole, Thomas W. Jr., 1941- --Interviews

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African American chemists--Interviews.

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African American college presidents--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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Clark Atlanta University

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## Occupations:

Chemistry Professor

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University President

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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 Thomas W. Cole, December 15, 2006. 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 Thomas W. Cole, Section A2006\_173\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

Thomas W. Cole was born on January 11, 1941 in Vernon, Texas to Eva Sharp and Thomas W. Cole, Sr. His paternal great-grandfather, Joseph Cole, was Choctaw, and his maternal grandmother, Josephine Redmond, was part Cherokee. Cole's mother was born in Center, Texas, where Cole's father was the principal of her high school. She attended Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and then earned a master's degree in education at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College in Prairie View, Texas. Cole's father also attended Wiley College, and became a principal at twenty years old. He later was elected president of his alma mater, and general president of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. Cole had three sisters, all of whom later became teachers. When Cole was three years old, his family moved to Bryan, Texas, where his father became the principal of Washington Elementary School. He remembers his teachers there, one of whom was also his babysitter. When Cole was in the fourth grade, his family moved to Marshall, Texas.

African American chemists--Interviews.

African American college presidents--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas W. Cole, Section A2006\_173\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Thomas W. Cole was in elementary school in Marshall, Texas when Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was decided in 1954, but attended the segregated H.B. Pemberton High School nonetheless. He played clarinet there, and met his future wife, Brenda H. Cole, at a regional band performance. He aspired to be a musician until he began studying chemistry, and was encouraged by his father's friend, Henry C. McBay, to pursue a career in science. From 1958, Cole attended Marshall's Wiley College, where his father was president. There, Cole joined Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity like his father. As his father was not vocal in supporting civil rights, Cole was assumed to be unsympathetic to student protests, and lost his bid for student body president. He went on to attend the University of Texas as a Southern Regional Fellow; but, after experiencing discrimination, transferred to the University of Chicago. There, as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, he assisted with Philip E. Eaton's research on cubane, a synthetic hydrocarbon.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas W. Cole, Section A2006\_173\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Thomas W. Cole's research with chemist Philip E. Eaton attracted job offers in the chemical industry, but Cole wanted to train young African American chemists. He became an assistant professor at Atlanta University; and, in 1966, became the chairman of the department. In 1967, Cole worked briefly as a research assistant for Procter and Gamble Company, where he was one of two African American employees. In 1968, Cole attended Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral on the Atlanta University campus, where he met Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's future mayor. That year, Cole was named Atlanta

University's Fuller E. Callaway Professor, and began applying for federal grants to expand the chemistry department. With these funds, Cole established Saturday academies for math and science in the Atlanta Public Schools. In 1973, Cole went on sabbatical to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and, in 1974, researched synthetic tobacco alternatives at the Celanese Fibers Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas W. Cole, Section A2006\_173\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Thomas W. Cole taught and conducted research at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1971. In 1974, the National Science Foundation awarded Cole a \$3 million grant to collaborate with Atlanta Public Schools in creating a Saturday science academy for students in Atlanta, Georgia. From 1978, Cole served three years as provost of Atlanta University. He was then appointed the president of West Virginia State College in Institute, West Virginia. In 1984, Cole reassured the campus of a nearby chemical plant's safety after the disastrous chemical spill in Bhopal, India. He was also selected as one of twelve African American scientists to participate in a delegation to China. Cole became the first African American chancellor of the West Virginia Board of Regents, and was invited to run for governor. In 1987, Cole was offered the presidency of Clark College, and the chance to assist in its merger with the financially struggling Atlanta University brought him back to Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas W. Cole, Section A2006\_173\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Thomas W. Cole accepted the presidency of Clark College in 1987, and facilitated the consolidation of Atlanta University and Clark College. He reflects upon the schools' successful merger, which increased enrollment from three thousand to six thousand students. The new Clark Atlanta University relied on federal funding, and Cole struggled when a Republican majority in Congress decreased those funds. Cole focused on developing the university as an international institution, and conducted outreach trips to Germany, Egypt and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Cole retired from his presidency in 2002; and, from that time, worked with Great Schools Atlanta for two years. Cole also contributed to Project Kaleidoscope, which focused on undergraduate education in science and math. Cole concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy; his concerns for the African American community; and how he would like to be remembered.