

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wharton, A C, Jr., 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr.,
Dates:	April 26, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	3 uncompressed MOV digital video files (1:30:48).
Abstract:	Mayor The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr. (1944 -) was elected Mayor of the City of Memphis, Tennessee in 2009. He was also the first black mayor of Shelby County, Tennessee and the first African American law professor at the University of Mississippi. Wharton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 26, 2014, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_126
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Mayor A C Wharton, Jr. was born on August 17, 1944 in Lebanon, Tennessee. In 1966, he graduated from Tennessee State University with his B.A. degree in political science. Wharton then received his J.D. degree in 1971 from the University of Mississippi School of Law, where he graduated with honors and was one of the first African American students to serve on the Moot Court Board and the first to serve on the Judicial Council.

Wharton first worked in Washington, D.C., at the Office of General Council of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for two years, and then for a year at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, where he headed the Public Employment Project. In 1973, Wharton moved to Memphis, Tennessee and was hired as executive director of Memphis Area Legal Services, a nonprofit organization providing civil legal assistance to low-income citizens. Then, in 1974, he became the University of Mississippi's first African American professor of law, a position that he would hold for twenty-five years.

In 1980, then-Shelby County, Tennessee mayor, Bill Morris, appointed Wharton as Shelby County's Chief Public Defender. Wharton chaired the county's Jail Overcrowding Committee; and, in 1982, wrote and saw passed one of the first state laws in the United States to combat domestic violence. In addition to his role as a public defender, Wharton and his wife established the law firm of Wharton and Wharton in 1980.

In 2002, Wharton was elected as the first African American Mayor of Shelby County, and was re-elected in 2006. As Shelby County Mayor, he established Operation Safe Community, the area's first comprehensive crime-fighting plan, developed the community's first smart growth and sustainability plan, and tackled education and early childhood development issues with programs like "Books from Birth" and "Ready, Set, Grow." Wharton also improved the management and accountability of the County's Head Start program. His reforms attracted the attention of the United States Congress, where he was called to testify before the House Committee on Education.

In October of 2009, Wharton was elected as the Mayor of the City of Memphis, and was re-elected in 2011. He is a member of the Mayors Against Illegal Guns Coalition, and has addressed major policy institutions and conferences of the Brookings Institute, CEOs for Cities, and the National Association for Counties.

Wharton lives in Memphis with his wife, Ruby. They have raised six sons.

A C Wharton was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 26, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 26, 2014, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 3 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Mayor The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr. (1944 -) was elected Mayor of the City of Memphis, Tennessee in 2009. He was also the first black mayor of Shelby County, Tennessee and the first African American law professor at the University of Mississippi.

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:

Wharton, A C, Jr., 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Wharton, A C, Jr., 1944---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Mayor

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr., April 26, 2014.
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 The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr., Section A2014_126_001_001, TRT: 1:29:42 ?

The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr. was born on August 17, 1944 in Lebanon, Tennessee to Mary Seay Wharton and A.C. Wharton, Sr. His father was born in 1913 in Smith County, Tennessee. His mother was born three years later in Wilson County, Tennessee to sharecroppers Dessie Manning Seay and Frank Seay. Because of her father's gambling habit, her family moved frequently throughout the county. Even so, Wharton's mother completed the eighth grade. As an adult, she studied to become a barber, but was unable to obtain her license after the local school closed. Wharton's parents met and married in Lebanon, where they raised five children, including Wharton. He spent the summers with his maternal grandparents and great aunt, Tennie Seay, on their farm in Wilson County. At this point in the interview, Wharton talks about the use of initials as a first name, which was a common practice in the South during his childhood. He also describes the origin of his nickname, Bully, which was given to him by his father's employer.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr., Section A2014_126_001_002, TRT: 2:28:50 ?

The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr.'s father, A.C. Wharton, Sr., was born in 1913 in Smith County, Tennessee. Wharton's paternal grandfather, James Wharton, died when his father was thirteen years old, forcing him to enter the workforce to support his mother, Estella Hearn Wharton, and younger siblings. He became a farmer, and eventually opened a grocery store and restaurant in Lebanon, Tennessee, where Wharton worked as a delivery boy. When his business partner decided to find other employment, Wharton's father closed the store and bought a fireworks stand. He later opened another grocery store called the A.C. Wharton Market. Throughout this time, Wharton's father also worked as a janitor at a garment factory and supply store, in addition to tending the family's small farm. On the weekends, Wharton's mother, Mary Seay Wharton, worked as a barber, although she was never able to obtain her licensure. Wharton also remembers attending Lebanon's Market Street Church of Christ with his family.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr., Section A2014_126_001_003, TRT: 3:32:16 ?

The Honorable A C Wharton, Jr. was raised in a four-room house in the segregated farming community of Lebanon, Tennessee. He began working with his father, A.C. Wharton, Sr., at four years old, and disliked the lack of structure when he entered the first grade at Market Street Elementary School. There, he was taught by Marie Burton and Alberta Sanders Ballard, who was married to the school's principal, William A. Ballard. From an early age, Wharton was encouraged to read newspapers and magazines, and he later sold the Baltimore Afro-American. His mother, Mary Seay Wharton, also bought the Funk and Wagnalls Standard Encyclopedia for the household. At this point in the interview, Wharton talks about the decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954, and the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. He also describes the history behind the naming of Lebanon's Tater Peeler Road, and the early telephone systems of the 1950s. In 1958, Wharton enrolled at the Wilson County Training School in Lebanon.