



# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Luther Williams

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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>	Luther Williams
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 11, 2011
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2011
<b>Physical Description:</b>	14 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:53:52).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Biologist and academic administrator Luther Williams (1940 - ) studied the properties of the cellular enzymes aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases. He was named the provost and vice president for academic affairs at Tuskegee University in 2010. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 11, 2011, in Tuskegee, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2011_012
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Biologist and academic administrator Luther Williams was born on August 19, 1940 in Wedgeworth, Alabama to Mattie Wallace Williams and Roosevelt Williams, the third of nine children. Williams grew up fascinated by living systems and was encouraged by his fifth grade math and science teacher to pursue his interest in science. After graduating from Hale County Training School in Greensboro, Alabama, Williams attended Miles College, earning his B.S. degree in biology in 1961. Two years later, Williams received his M.S. degree from Atlanta University, where he studied under Dr. Mary Logan Reddick. Williams was awarded an NIH pre-doctoral fellowship to study at Purdue University in 1966, enabling him to work with Dr. Frederick C. Neidhardt and earn his Ph.D. degree in molecular biology in 1968.

Within the next decade, Williams continued his work at Purdue University by 1979, he was named a full professor of biology at Purdue University. Williams conducted a significant amount of his scientific research while at Purdue University, Washington University (while serving as the Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences) and the University of Colorado, at which he served as the vice president for academic affairs of the University of Colorado system. His research focused on the properties and cellular regulation of aminoacyl-transfer ribonucleic acid synthetases, key enzymes in the biological process of translating the genetic code to usable proteins.

In 1984, Williams was named the president of Atlanta University. He then served as the chair of the White House Biotechnology Science Coordinating Committee, the deputy director of the National Institute of General Medical Science of the National Institutes of Health, and assistant director of education and human resources at the National Science Foundation. After serving as the William T. Kemper Director of Education and Interpretation at the Missouri Botanical Garden from 2001 to 2005, Williams was invited to join the faculty of Tuskegee

University as the dean of graduate studies and research and then provost and vice president of academic affairs. He was subsequently reappointed to provost and vice president for academic affairs at Tuskegee University in 2010.

Williams has been recognized for his leadership and his dedication to creating opportunities for minorities in the sciences. He received the Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Award by President Clinton in 1993. He was also named distinguished alumnus of the School of Science, Purdue University in 1997. In addition, he received the William A. Hinton Research Training Award from the American Society for Microbiology in 2000, and a number of honorary doctorate degrees. He has contributed to over seventy academic papers and professional scientific journals and more than twenty articles concerning the status of science education in the United States. He was also named one of the fifty most important Blacks in science research by "Spectrum" magazine in 2005, and was appointed a member of the Council of Councils, Office of the Director, the National Institutes of Health in 2009.

Williams lives with his wife, Constance Marion. The couple has two adult children, Mark and Monique Williams.

Luther Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on April 11, 2011.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Luther Williams was conducted by Crowe, Larry on April 11, 2011, in Tuskegee, Alabama, and was recorded on 14 Betacam SP videocassettes. Biologist and academic administrator Luther Williams (1940 - ) studied the properties of the cellular enzymes aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases. He was named the provost and vice president for academic affairs at Tuskegee University in 2010.

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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:

Williams, Luther

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Luther Williams--Interviews

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African American biologists--Interviews

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African American college administrators--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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Tuskegee University

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### **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ScienceMakers

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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 Luther Williams, April 11, 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 8/15/2011 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, April 11, 2011

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:34  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams slates the interview and shares his favorites. Williams was named after a friend of his paternal grandfather who was a bishop of the C.M.E. Church. Williams then recalls his family history. His mother, Mattie Wallace Williams was born in 1915. She was raised by her parents, Nathan and Ellen Wallace in Akron and then Uniontown, Alabama. Williams' father, Roosevelt Williams was also born in 1915 to Robert and Emma Williams, who had inherited sixty acres of land from his father, Jonas Williams, who was white. Both Williams and his father were raised by Annie Ellis, Williams' great-grandmother. Williams says that he is "70 going on 150" because he always heard the stories of his great-grandmother and her friends as he grew up. Williams talks about the town of Wedgeworth, Alabama, and the importance of Tuskegee Institute in the lives of his grandparents and great-grandparents.

Employment--Missouri Botanical Gardens

African American families--Alabama

Wedgeworth (Ala.)

Tuskegee Institute--History

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_002, TRT: 2:27:15  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams talks about the roles of family and education in his childhood. His great-grandmother and caretaker, Annie Ellis, lived to be 114 years old—old enough to see Williams receive his Ph.D. degree from Purdue University. Williams attended Flatwoods Elementary School and Hale County Training School, the same schools as his father, Roosevelt Williams. Roosevelt Williams worked as a farmer and a logger. Williams discusses how he learned he had to internalize his curiosity and his knowledge of literature and science in order to protect himself, although his great-grandmother encouraged him to succeed in school. Williams discusses how his great-grandmother learned how to read and how she would provide books and newspapers for Williams. Jackson closes this section of the interview reflecting on one of his favorite teachers, Mr. Sterling Wallace, who taught fourth through sixth grades at Flatwoods Elementary School and gave Williams his first science book.

African American families--Alabama

African American education

African American farmers--Alabama

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:57  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams describes his chemistry teacher, Mr. Sanders, as well as his elementary school teacher, Sterling Wallace, who had given him a college biology textbook. Williams graduated from Hale County Training School in 1956, and began his college studies at Tuskegee Institute before transferring to Miles College, where both Wallace and Sanders had attended. Williams recalls three professors from Miles College: Artis Lark, Joseph McPherson, and Emmet Jones. He completed his studies and pursued his master's degree at Atlanta University in 1961 where he met his wife [Constance Marion] and studied under Mary Reddick. Williams then joined the faculty at Atlanta University for one year before moving to Purdue University, where he pursued his Ph.D. degree under advisor Frederick Neidhardt.

Education, Higher--Alabama

African American universities and colleges--Alabama--Fairfield

Atlanta University--Faculty

Purdue University. Graduate School

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:26  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams talks about the obstacles facing the black community in higher education. His Ph.D. dissertation from Purdue University was titled, "Control of Arginine-tRNA Synthetase in E. Coli." In 1969, Williams was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship by the American Cancer Society to study at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he assisted in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher strike. He was also involved in activities of the Civil Rights Movement throughout his undergraduate and graduate studies. Williams ends this section of the interview by discussing how he easily science and religion can be reconciled.

Purdue University. Graduate School

African American college students--Social conditions

State University of New York at Stony Brook

African American college students--Political activity

Biology--Study and teaching

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:05  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams discusses his career path that followed his year-long postdoctoral fellowship at the University of New York at Stony Brook in 1968. Williams taught and conducted research at Atlanta University for one year before joining the faculty at Purdue University. In 1973, he was offered tenure at Purdue University, eventually becoming a full professor in 1979. From 1980 to 1983, Williams worked at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri as dean of the graduate school of arts and sciences. In 1984, he taught briefly at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and between 1985 and 1987, Williams served as president of Atlanta University, leading the university to the merger of Atlanta and Clark Universities. After serving as the deputy director of the National Institutes of Health, Williams worked as an assistant director for STEM education with the National Science Foundation, where he worked to improve the quality of education for minority students.

African American college administrators

State University of New York at Stony Brook  
Washington University (Saint Louis, Mo.)--Faculty  
National Institute of Health  
Clark Atlanta University--History  
National Science Foundation

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section A2011\_012\_001\_006, TRT: 6:26:35  
2011/04/11

Luther Williams discusses his career at the Missouri Botanical Garden from 2000 to 2005. He served as director for STEM Education and established working relationships between the garden and public schools in St. Louis, Missouri. Then he helped to establish the graduate program in integrative biosciences at Tuskegee University, eventually becoming a distinguished professor and provost. Williams reflects on his scientific legacy and talks about the role of genetics in improving the prevention and cure of disease in medicine. His great-grandmother, Annie Ellis, saw him receive his Ph.D. degree from Purdue University, and his brother [Arthur Williams], who followed a similar course of study, ended up collaborating and conducting research with Williams. He closes the interview by reflecting on how he would like to be remembered.

Tuskegee University. College of Agricultural, Environmental, and Natural Sciences

African Americans--Education (Higher)

Science--Study and teaching--Activity programs--Missouri

Genetics, Medical

St. Louis, (Mo.)

Purdue University. Graduate School

African American college administrators

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP001, TRT: 0:01:24 2011/08/11

Yes there's a story and you could, you could impute it. My great-grandfather's father, who was white, gave the land to his son, that son. And he and my great-mother Mary, had four children. My grandfather, Uncle Ed who lived in Birmingham [Alabama] that I actually connected with later in my life when I went to Miles College [Fairfield, Alabama], and Uncle Sip who had a farm nearby. What had happened is that my grandfather purchased the land that had been appropriated to his three siblings, and that's how he expanded the venue. Because what my grandfather was to divide the property among the four of them. So his father, this unknown but very real person, despite how I feel about that, must have endowed him substantially. Because he must--it's a huge body of land. That's how it happened.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP002, TRT: 0:01:40 2011/08/11

There's, there's no doubt it did because, and I say that because I--my life is, I'm seventy and I jokingly--when you asked me earlier if I have a favorite expression, it's not favorite. But in recent years I, I find myself often using this expression and I mean it several-fold. I'm seventy going on a hundred and fifty. And part of what I'm referring to is that I, I grew up in both in terms of knowledge base and experiences, in both the 19th and 20th century. And what I mean by that, by growing up with a person who was when I was ten, was eighty-two, she had a few friends who would come to visit her and they were

also eighty-two, and their conversation was about a world that I couldn't even fathom. But I learned it deeply because I understood, I mean I heard it. Fast forward, I learned life at another level from my grandparents, both sides, and then my parents [Mattie Wallace Williams and Roosevelt Williams], and then myself and my peers. And all of that took place from about age two until about age seventeen when I left home to go to school. And so to answer your question, this process of collaboration and thinking through productive survival strategies, almost (unclear) what I learned from my grandmother and her friends, almost all of that started after slavery, right after slavery. Almost all of it.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP003, TRT: 0:01:19 2011/08/11

Early on, I must confess I became fascinated with science, which also I think helped me grow up in that place because after a period of time, I didn't live there any longer. I mean I wanted to understand why the leaves left, the trees lost the leaves. And people would say it's fall, and that's nonsense. I want to understand why it happened. I wanted to understand why I can stand in the water in a little stream and feel this incredible force and someone says well that's because the water is running down the hill or whatever. I wanted to understand why I could see in this rather open pond, lake I could see the fish swimming patterns and whatever. And the horses can't do that, you know and other farm animals, these can. And their breathing patterns. So I just, I just became fascinated with, with living systems and, and that, that became my, if you will my world, my escape mechanism.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP004, TRT: 0:01:16 2011/08/11

Mr. Wallace gave me his college biology book because from talking with me, my predominant interest had to do with living things. So I struggled to read it and--but discovered two things. I, I really liked the analytic part of it, the inquiry. And the second finding was that's when I was introduced to the, the scientific method. How do you solve a problem? From hypothesis formation to results, and then whether the results confirm the hypothesis. So the, the logic if you will, of scientific thinking. So I extracted that from the book and I decided geeze, this matches perfectly, this is what I want to do. And I also am not going to deny the fact that I also consciously thought that this was a, it was going to be an escape mechanism. That I'm going to think and do science, I'm not going to deal with America in its expressions.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP005, TRT: 0:01:18 2011/08/11

That's e coli, any coli, right. What control refers to is the following: All living systems have X genetic capacity encoded in individual genes. But genes are not necessarily expressed continuously. Let me give a simple example. In the human body at birth, we have a total set of genes that controls, that results in the production of a whole series of hormones. From birth until puberty, only those genes that have to do with juvenile development are turned on. Post-puberty, in fact what triggers puberty is the beginning of the expression of genes that calls for hormones that will not produce until then. Then as one transitions into adulthood, there's a decline in the puberty specific hormones you turn on other genes. At the final end, not final, but at the end of the, the continuum as the aging process begins to occur, a whole series of genes that were on through young, mid, late adulthood, are shut down. Perfect example of a cyclic process.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP006, TRT: 0:01:17 2011/08/11

ignoring for the moment my own career, my own scientific accomplishments. I think the two most important things I've done in my career are one training large numbers of African American biomedical scientists per se. The reason that's so powerful, I trained one African American Ph.D. who over a thirty year career, is touching hundreds of young people. The multiplier is, is incredible. And I would also say this without apology; in a non-minority institutional setting that is in the majority institution, I don't anyone else who, at least in the biomedical sciences have done this. And the awards and acknowledgements would seem to support it. The second most important thing I did in my career that I think from the point of view of the culture, point of view of the country, is the work that we did at NSF.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP007, TRT: 0:01:29 2011/08/11

Missouri Botanical Garden as you know with all botanical gardens, there's a whole series of themed gardens. Dr. Raven and I had the idea that we should have one such garden focused on an African American. So we decided it should be George Washington Carver. So we built, raised the money and built a George Washington Carver Garden at the Missouri Botanical Garden. And in the Fall of 2000-, October of 2005, we opened it. And it consists of a six foot statue of Carver at the edge, standing at the edge of a reflecting pool, and the entrance too has--is a literal from his childhood to end of his death, famous quotes by Carver. So imagine you walk around, along this serene pathway up to the statute and you're hopefully overwhelmed by it and, and this reflecting pool. But at the periphery of the reflecting pool is an outdoor laboratory. So it's a teaching center. And the students come and very much like what I was doing when I was growing up as a kid, collect samples of materials and do real time experiments.

Video Oral History Interview with Luther Williams, Section  
A2011\_012\_Williams\_Luther\_06\_MED\_WEBCLIP008, TRT: 0:00:58 2011/08/11

I'm reasonably certain the training of, just give one example, the training of physicians will have to be changed to either the following. Medical education is premised on the notion that there's an absolute continuum between prevention, diagnosis, treatment and cure. The bulk of medicine only really deals with the first two, I'm sorry, the second and the third one, diagnosis and treatment, not cure and not prevention. The challenging parts are the first and the last one, and that's where the bulk of my work and the work of others has its placement.