

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Bobbie Steele

---

## 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>	Steele, Bobbie, 1937-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 1, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:08:57).
<b>Abstract:</b>	City commissioner The Honorable Bobbie Steele (1937 - ) was the longest serving African American female county commissioner in Cook County history. In this role, she worked to ensure minority and female participation in all county contract bids. Steele was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 1, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_109
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cook County Commissioner Bobbie L. Steele was born October 18, 1937, in Cleveland, Mississippi, to Mary and Abraham Rodgers. Steele has served as a commissioner since 1986, making her the longest serving African American woman in the history of Cook County government.

The oldest of seven siblings, Steele left her hometown after graduating from high school in 1954. She attended Alabama A&M University in Huntsville before moving to Chicago. Marrying Robert P. Steele in 1956, Bobbie Steele completed a

bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1966, attending night classes at the Chicago Teachers College (now Chicago State University). She immediately went to work in the Chicago Public Schools. Returning to studies of her own, Steele earned an M.A. degree from Roosevelt University in 1982.

With significant community and political organizing experience under her belt, Steele sought election to the Cook County Board of Commissioners with the support of Mayor Harold Washington. In 1986, Steele won in a landslide and has worked since that time to ensure minority and female participation in county contract bids. Steele also co-sponsored Cook County's human rights and ethics ordinances and is the first and only African American woman to serve as chairperson of the Finance Committee of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

Steele has served nationally in leadership positions, chairing the National Association of Counties' Deferred Compensation Advisory Committee and serving as president of the National Association of Black County Officials. Locally, she has served on the Women's Committee of Chicago, the Chicago Women's Center, Operation Brotherhood, the Aids Foundation of Chicago and numerous other organizations. Steele and her husband have seven adult children and twelve grandchildren.

On July 19, 2006, Steele was named the interim president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, replacing John Stroger who had to resign because of poor health. In December of 2006, Steele retired as interim president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

Steele was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 1, 2002.

---

## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 1, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. City commissioner The Honorable Bobbie Steele (1937 - ) was the longest serving African American female county commissioner in Cook County history. In this role, she worked to ensure minority and female participation in all county contract bids.

---

## **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:**

Steele, Bobbie, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Steele, Bobbie, 1937---Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Cook County (Ill.)

---

## **Occupations:**

City Commissioner

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

PoliticalMakersl

---

## **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 Bobbie Steele, July 1, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

## 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 Bobbie Steele,  
Section A2002\_109\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:23 2002/07/01

Bobbie Steele's mother, Mary Laney Rodges, was born in 1914 in Greenwood, Mississippi. Her father, Abraham Lincoln Rodges, was born in 1904 in Florence, Mississippi. Rodges was given to white landowners named Hilton in 1912 to pay his family's debt, so he was raised on the Hilton family farm outside of Skeene, Mississippi. Rodges learned to read and write, and later became a local teacher. He married his student, Mary Laney, in 1931. The couple settled in Cleveland, Mississippi, where they were sharecroppers. They had five children, including Bobbie Steele on October 18, 1937. Steele enjoyed stargazing and playing with insects as a child. Her family raised the foods she ate, including smothered pork chops and crowder peas. While Steele excelled at Cleveland Colored Consolidated High School, she was not treated well by teachers who preferred light-skinned students. Steele graduated around 1955, and attended Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University for two years before moving to Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele,  
Section A2002\_109\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:26 2002/07/01

At Cleveland Colored Consolidate High School in Cleveland, Mississippi, Bobbie Steele was influenced by her spelling and algebra teachers, as a well as her basketball coach. She graduated in 1955, and enrolled in

Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University in Huntsville, Alabama after her father told her about the school. Steele played the trumpet for the swing band, and pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1956. She was influenced by her science and Greek literature professors, as well as the university librarian. In the summer of 1956, Steele went to Chicago, Illinois in search of a summer job. She met Robert P. Steele, but did not find work until the start of the school year in September. As a result, she decided to get married and settle in Chicago. Steele enrolled in Chicago Teacher's College while her husband worked for Jefferson Electric Company. At the time, Steele was made aware of civil rights tensions in the South due to her parents' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele,  
Section A2002\_109\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:17 2002/07/01

Bobbie Steele moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1956. She realized that discrimination existed in the city, but it was more covert than what she experienced in the South. She attended night school at Chicago Teacher's College for a decade. She graduated with her B.S. degree in elementary education in 1966 and began teaching in the Chicago Public School system in 1969. In 1956, Steele worked as a poll watcher, where she witnessed political corruption for the first time. This inspired her to increase her community involvement. She was a community organizer during the War on Poverty, a delegate for the Chicago Teacher's Union, and a political campaign worker. Steele helped organize the West Side of Chicago for Mayor Harold Washington's 1983 mayoral campaign. In 1983, she ran as Alderman of the Chicago's 24th Ward, but lost to Alderman William "Bill" Henry. This experience motivated Steele to run for public office in county government. Steele comments on black-on-black violence and blacks' reliance on public support.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele,  
Section A2002\_109\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:07

After taking some time to understand the county government, Bobbie Steele ran for a seat on the Cook County Board of Commissioners in 1986. As a full-time

teacher, Steele enlisted the support of her community to help her campaign. She ran for one of ten seats, and won. Some of Steele's goals as a new Cook County Commissioner included: reopening Provident Hospital of Cook County; having more women in high level positions in county government; establishing a daycare center for county employees; and educating people about county government services. In 1988, Steele spearheaded an amendment to the Cook County Purchasing Ordinance to include support of minority and women vendors. She also played a pivotal role in renaming the county hospital the John H. Stroger, Jr. Hospital of Cook County. Steele talks about her current programs and shares the triumphs and challenges of being an elected official. Steel also talks about her legacy, and closes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Bobbie Steele,  
Section A2002\_109\_001\_005, TRT: 0:07:44 2002/07/01

Bobbie Steele narrates her photographs.