

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter

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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>	Porter, Kwame John, 1932-2019
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 10, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:01:02).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Community activist and minister Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter (1932 - 2019) was a founder of Operation PUSH, and taught at George Williams College and at Northeastern Illinois University's Center for Inner City Studies. Porter also served as graduate dean of the Chicago Center for Black Religious Studies and Vice President of Urban Affairs for Young Life International. Porter was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 10, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_293
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Minister and community activist Rev. Kwame John R. Porter, Ph.D. was born on April 2, 1932 in Mineral Springs, Arkansas to Steve Porter and Retha Hendricks-Porter. In 1939, when Porter was eight years old, his family moved to Kansas City, Kansas. He graduated from Douglass Elementary School in Kansas City in 1945, then from Northeast Junior High School in 1948, and subsequently from Sumner High School in 1951. Porter received his Associate Arts degree from Kansas

Community College in 1953. After attending Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa for one year, Porter enlisted in the U.S. Army in October 1954, and was stationed at Ft. Bliss in Texas, Ft. Smith in Arkansas, and Ft. Carson in Colorado. In 1955, Porter reported to Ulm, Germany, where he remained until receiving an honorable discharge in August 1957.

In September of 1957, Porter returned to the U.S. and enrolled at Iowa Wesleyan College in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. He graduated in 1959 with his B.A. degree in Sociology and minors in Religion, Philosophy and Education. Following graduation, Porter was awarded a three-year fellowship grant to explore the Christian ministry at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. In February of 1960, he co-organized the local CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) chapter. Under his leadership, the chapter protested Woolworth stores in support of the Southern Student Sit-In Movement. In 1961, Porter became the first African American elected as President of the Dempster League. In 1962, he received his M.A. degree in Divinity from Garrett Seminary. Following graduation, Porter was appointed as assistant pastor under Rev. Harry Connor at the Normal Park United Methodist Church (UMC) in Englewood, and then as full-time pastor at the Christ UMC in that community.

In August 1962, Porter joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of non-violent protesters at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) first mass anti-segregation demonstration in Albany, Georgia. Porter was jailed for six days following the event. In August 1963, Porter attended the March on Washington; and, in 1965, he assembled eighty Chicago residents to attend the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama. In the spring of 1964, Dr. King and the SCLC leadership gave Porter permission to launch SCLC's first Chicago chapter. Porter mobilized ten thousand Englewood residents for Dr. King's "Get Out the Vote Rally" on October 29, 1964. Porter's church in Englewood served as one of the rallying points for a series of anti-segregation marches into all-white neighborhoods, when the Chicago Freedom Movement invited Dr. King and his staff to spend summer of 1966 in Chicago.

From 1968 to 1970, Porter taught as Adjunct Professor at Northeastern Illinois University's Center for Inner City Studies. In 1970, he taught an African American History course at George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois. From 1971 to 1974, Porter served as Dean of the Chicago Center for Black Religious Studies. He then served as Urban Vice President for Young Life International from 1974 until 1979. He also earned his Ph.D. degree in Interdisciplinary Sociology from Union Graduate School (now Union Institute & University) in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1975.

Porter is the author of six books and has received numerous honors for his commitment to social and racial justice. Porter and his wife, June, reside in Chicago's Hyde Park community and have six children, thirteen grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

Porter passed away on April 7, 2019.

Kwame John R. Porter was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 10, 2003.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 10, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community activist and minister Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter (1932 - 2019) was a founder of Operation PUSH, and taught at George Williams College and at Northeastern Illinois University's Center for Inner City Studies. Porter also served as graduate dean of the Chicago Center for Black Religious Studies and Vice President of Urban Affairs for Young Life International.

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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:**

Porter, Kwame John, 1932-2019

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Porter, Kwame John, 1932-2019--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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United Methodist Church (U.S.)

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## **Occupations:**

Community Activist

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Minister

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|ReligionMakers

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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 Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter, December 10, 2003. 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 (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 Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter,  
Section A2003\_293\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter was born on April 2, 1932 in Howard County, Arkansas. His mother, Retha Hendricks Porter, was born in 1906 near Tollette, Arkansas. Porter has a family tree that traces his ancestry back to slavery. While growing up in Tollette, Porter heard many stories from his family about life during the Reconstruction era, folk hero Cleo Sockwell and folk healer “Aunt Caroline” Dye. When Porter was a young child, his father moved to California with another woman. His mother remarried Arthur Littleton, who was abusive. With the help of her sister Janie, Porter’s mother escaped with her children and stayed with an uncle, Levy Hendricks, in Kansas City, Kansas. Despite her strong religious beliefs, Porter’s mother worked as a cleaner in a brothel to support her family until she remarried again. Porter’s mother only had a sixth grade education, but was very discerning and had a “sixth sense”. She hoped Porter would become a preacher or fulfill her unrealized ambition of being a teacher.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter,  
Section A2003\_293\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter’s father, Steve Porter, was born in 1904 in Howard County, Arkansas. Porter describes the divisions within his paternal family and how his parents met. His father moved to California when Porter was four years old and he never saw his father again. In 1942, Porter, his mother and his two younger sisters moved from Arkansas to Kansas City, Kansas where he saw electric lights and tall buildings for the first time. He attended Douglass Elementary School where bullies extorted money from him. He then attended Northeast Junior High School. Porter played basketball at Sumner High School until he lost his starting spot to an inferior player his junior year; Porter quit Sumner’s basketball team and joined the Mason Memorial United Methodist Church’s recreation team. Porter recruited many of the best players to the church’s team. Some, including Porter, later joined the church and became ministers. As

an adult, Porter ran into the woman who broke up his parents' marriage.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter,  
Section A2003\_293\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:20 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter enjoyed reading stories of successful African Americans as a child. He also enjoyed sports and had the opportunity to see both Satchel Paige and Joe Louis. He had several important male role models in his youth, including his father-in-law T.C. McIntosh and other local businessmen and teachers. After graduating from Sumner High School in 1951, Porter earned his associate's degree from Kansas City Kansas Community College in 1953. He then went to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa for a year and played basketball for an intramural team sponsored by a Jewish fraternity. Then he joined the U.S. Air Force and was eventually stationed in Ulm, Germany. After being inspired by the emerging Civil Rights Movement, Porter left the Air Force and returned to the U.S. He entered Iowa Wesleyan College where he studied sociology, religion, philosophy, and education; and, studied under Dr. Warren Steinkraus who introduced him to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Tom Mboya.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter,  
Section A2003\_293\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:03 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter was skeptical of preachers as a child but, inspired by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he entered Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. At Garrett, Porter was the student body president and organized the local chapter of CORE. In 1962, he became assistant pastor at the Normal Park United Methodist Church and then pastor at Christ United Methodist Church in Chicago, Illinois. The same year, Porter was arrested participating in a civil rights demonstration in Albany, Georgia, which Dr. King had personally invited him to get involved in. Galvanized by this experience, Porter organized protests against the poor condition of public schools in Chicago's black communities and eventually organized a Chicago SCLC chapter. Porter remembers attending the March on Washington along with Chicago activist HistoryMaker

Reverend Willie T. Barrow. Porter explains how the Baptist and Methodist churches vary in their approach to social issues.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter, Section A2003\_293\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:20 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter helped establish the Chicago, Illinois of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with the help of HistoryMaker Reverend Dr. C. T. Vivian in 1963. He participated alongside Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin and HistoryMaker Reverend James Bevel in the Get out the Vote Rally during President Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign; and traveled to Alabama for the Selma to Montgomery March, in 1965. Porter was involved in Operation Breadbasket, run by HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. Porter hopes to set the record straight regarding SCLC leadership's flaws, Reverend Jackson's loyalty to Dr. King, and the credit due to the Gangster Disciples for ensuring that Englewood did not experience the riots following Dr. King's assassination. In 1968, Porter began teaching at the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies at Northeastern Illinois University. From 1971 to 1974, Porter left his church to head the Chicago Center for Black Religious Studies.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter, Section A2003\_293\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:30 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter and the Chicago chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference helped organize nonviolent protests and support for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. During that time, Porter joined the Chicago Freedom Movement headed by HistoryMaker Bishop Arthur Brazier. In the 1970s, Porter began teaching African American history, first as part of Communiversy and then at George Williams College in Downers Grove, Illinois. In 1980, Porter was involved in the founding of the Black United Front. He began the Will Feed Organization in 1982 and that same year, led the prayer at Harold Washington's mayoral campaign announcement event. In the 1990s, his organizing efforts included the P.E.A.C.E. (People Educating Against Crime in Englewood) organization and the Chicago Alternative



Policing Strategy (CAPS) program to help address needs in the Englewood community. Porter details his wife's and children's professional accomplishments and his interest in preserving history.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter, Section A2003\_293\_001\_007, TRT: 0:30:30 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter's theological philosophy centers on experiencing what he calls the ultimate reality. He describes the impact of several influential African American theologians and ministers, including HistoryMakers Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Reverend Dr. Gardner Taylor, and Dr. James H. Cone. Porter notes the impact of hierophants, or revealers of religious experience. He believes Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X fulfilled that role in the past and that Reverend Jasper Williams and HistoryMaker Bishop Vashti McKenzie fill that role currently. Porter mentions Malidoma Patrice Some's book 'Of Water and Spirit' and stories he has heard about African shamans and African American folk healers as examples of the power of the ultimate reality. He believes African American churches should embrace black theology and describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter, Section A2003\_293\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:59 2003/12/10

Reverend Dr. Kwame John R. Porter and others helped HistoryMaker Bobby Rush hide from Edward Hanrahan after Fred Hampton's assassination in 1969. Porter left his ministry and began teaching African American History at George Williams College in 1970. From 1974 to 1975 he was vice president for Young Life International. Upon receiving a call from HistoryMaker Father George Clements, Porter came to the aid of HistoryMaker Louis Farrakhan when he was attacked in the press. After the death of Dr. Elmer Fowler in 2003, Porter decided to form the New Englewood Historical Society of Chicago, Illinois with the help of his son John T. Porter. He reflects upon his legacy as a father to six children and grandfather of twelve, as a supporter of Civil Rights and the African American community, and as a pastor. He talks about the need for the type of determination and concern that

HistoryMaker Haki Madhubuti embodies. Porter considers what he would have done differently and describes how he would like to be remembered.