

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leon Bridges

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Bridges, Leon, 1932-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges,
Dates:	August 16, 2004 and June 29, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:00:30).
Abstract:	Architect Leon Bridges (1932 -) formed his own firm, Leon Bridges AIA, in 1963, and became the first registered African American architect in Maryland. Bridges later became a partner in The Obsidian Group, and co-founded the AIA/Ford Minority Scholarship fund, which has provided millions of dollars in college scholarships for needy students. Bridges was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 16, 2004 and June 29, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_091
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Leon Bridges was born on August 18, 1932 in the East Los Angeles, California barrio of Boyle Heights. His mother was a postal worker and his father worked various jobs. There, he attended Foshay Elementary School in Los Angeles. As a youngster he enjoyed drawing floor plans and building designs and knew early on that he wanted to pursue a career in architecture. While a student at Adams Junior High School he met his mentor, famed African American architect, Paul Williams. Bridges earned his high school diploma from Dorsey High School in 1950 where he was a member of the track team.

After graduation he attended East Los Angeles Junior College, Los Angeles City College and the University of California, Los Angeles. While a student at UCLA, Bridges was drafted into the military in 1952, and was stationed in Japan. While a soldier, he continued to study architecture. He also began to pursue an acting career and appeared as an extra in several movies and toured with the Griffith Park Greek Theatre Light Opera Company from 1950 through 1952. He earned his bachelor's of architecture from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1960.

While still a student at the University of Washington, Bridges received his first job in 1956 as a draftsman. During the summer of 1957, he worked as an intern for California architect Alan Morris and supervised the construction of a house. From 1959 through 1961, he worked for a small architecture firm designing houses. His first design was for a home that was just 1350 square feet. From 1961 through 1963, Bridges worked for the architecture firm Gotteland and Kocarski as a draftsman and designed Catholic churches and buildings in Seattle. In 1962, Bridges became a registered architect.

Bridges formed his own architecture firm, Leon Bridges AIA in 1963, and his first project was designing a building for the Seattle YMCA. In 1966, he formed a partnership with colleague Edward Burke and they worked

together until 1972 when Bridges relocated his firm to Baltimore, Maryland. He was the first registered African American architect in Maryland. In 1971, he served as National Director of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Bridges co-founded the AIA/Ford Minority Scholarship fund, which has provided millions of dollars in college scholarships for needy students, in 1976, and in 1984 he was nominated as a Fellow of the College of Fellows, AIA. That same year he also earned his MBA from Loyola College of Maryland.

Bridges is the recipient of more than twenty national, regional and local awards for design excellence including the restoration of Baltimore's Penn Station and Baltimore City College High School. Bridges is also a member of the counsel of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), for which he has served in every national office, including president.

Currently, Bridges is a partner in The Obsidian Group, an architectural, design and planning firm with offices in Baltimore, New York and North Carolina. He is also very active as a mentor in the NAACP's ACT-SO national mentoring program.

Bridges was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 29, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leon Bridges was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on August 16, 2004 and June 29, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Architect Leon Bridges (1932 -) formed his own firm, Leon Bridges AIA, in 1963, and became the first registered African American architect in Maryland. Bridges later became a partner in The Obsidian Group, and co-founded the AIA/Ford Minority Scholarship fund, which has provided millions of dollars in college scholarships for needy students.

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:

Bridges, Leon, 1932-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Bridges, Leon, 1932---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Architect

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Leon Bridges, August 16, 2004 and June 29, 2004.
The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 6/7/2022 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 Leon Bridges, Section A2004_091_002_001, TRT: 0:29:43
2004/08/16

Leon Bridges was born on August 18, 1932 in the East Los Angeles, California neighborhood of Boyle Heights. His mother, Agnes Bridges, was born on October 23, 1910 in Los Angeles to an itinerant preacher and a seamstress. A vibrant woman, his mother loved dance and designing clothing. His mother's family can be traced back several generations to Clinton, Kentucky where an Irishman had a child with a Native American woman. That child married an African slave and they fled to California. His father, James Bridges, was born in Los Angeles, and his paternal background is a mix of French, Creole, black, and Indian. His paternal grandparents were named Alonzo and Onorelle. Bridges' father could not fulfill his dream of being a farmer because he suffered from epilepsy. After Bridges' parents divorced when he was nine years old, he grew up in a household of women that included his beloved Aunt Ivy. He remembers suffering from a debilitating childhood illness, catching trapdoor spiders, and making Christmas pancakes with food coloring.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section A2004_091_002_002, TRT: 0:31:17
2004/08/16

Leon Bridges talks about his childhood illness and growing up on Cheesbrough Lane in Los Angeles, California where his extended family lived. Bridges remembers the barren yards full of fruit trees, the sound of Spanish being spoken, and the smell of the ocean. Bridges attended Foshay Elementary School and John Adams Junior High School in Los Angeles. His family attended an A.M.E. church. As a child, Bridges was smart, frail, and mischievous. He enjoyed drawing floor plans and building designs and knew early on that he wanted to pursue a career in architecture. While a student at Adams Junior High School he met his mentor, famed African American architect, Paul Williams. Bridges earned his high school diploma from Dorsey High School in 1950, where a drafting teacher discouraged him from pursuing a career in architecture. Undeterred, Bridges attended junior colleges prior to enrolling at the University of California, Los Angeles. Bridges was drafted into the military in 1952 and was stationed in Japan.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section A2004_091_002_003, TRT: 0:30:11
2004/08/16

Leon Bridges attended radio shows as a teenager in Los Angeles, California, where he saw Louis Armstrong, Jack Benny, and Frank Sinatra. Bridges pursued an acting career and toured with the Griffith Park Greek Theatre Light Opera Company from 1950 through 1952. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1960, where he was the only black architecture major. Bridges held his first job as a draftsman in 1956. During the summer of 1957, he was an intern for California architect Alan Morris. From

1959 to 1961, he worked for a small architecture firm designing houses. From 1961 to 1963, Bridges worked for the architecture firm Gotteland and Kocarski and designed Catholic churches in Seattle. In 1962, Bridges formed his own architecture firm, Leon Bridges AIA. In 1966, he formed a partnership with Edward Burke and later opened a branch of their firm in Baltimore, Maryland where he was the first registered African American architect in Maryland.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section A2004_091_002_004, TRT: 0:28:33
2004/08/16

Leon Bridges describes being an architect on the Penn Station rehabilitation project and his pride in seeing his designs built. In 1976, Bridges co-founded the American Institute of Architects (AIA)/Ford Minority Scholarship Fund. In 1984, Bridges was the first black architect in the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows. Bridges talks about becoming a partner in The Obsidian Group, an architectural, design and planning firm with offices in Baltimore, New York, and North Carolina. He is also very active as a mentor in the NAACP's ACT-SO national mentoring program. Bridges comments on the under-representation of African Americans in architecture and the importance of black history. Bridges reflects upon his career, his regrets, and his wife's unwavering support. Bridges reflects upon his legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section A2004_091_002_005, TRT: 0:05:54
2004/08/16

Leon Bridges narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_001, TRT: 0:29:32
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_001E, TRT: 0:29:32
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_002, TRT: 0:30:48
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_002E, TRT: 0:30:48
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_003, TRT: 0:30:30
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_003E, TRT: 0:30:30
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_004, TRT: 0:26:36
2004/06/29

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Bridges, Section B2004_091_001_004E, TRT: 0:26:36
2004/06/29