

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jessica B. Harris

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Harris, Jessica B.   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris,  |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | August 18, 2004  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2004   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:30:17).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Culinary historian and english professor Jessica B. Harris (1948 - ) served as a lecturer in the department of romance languages and associate professor in the English department at Queens College. Harris also authored several books on foods from around the world, with a focus on African and Caribbean flavors, including <i>The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking</i> , and <i>Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking</i> . Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 18, 2004, in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2004_133  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Educator and culinary historian Jessica Harris was born in Queens, New York on March 18, 1948. Harris attended the United Nations International School from 1953 until 1961, and then went on to the High School of the Performing Arts, where she graduated in 1964. After high school, Harris attended Bryn Mawr

College, earning her A.B. degree in French in 1968. While there, she spent her junior year abroad in Paris. She returned to France in 1968, attending the Universite de Nancy for a year, and then earned her master's degree from Queens College in 1971. Harris earned her Ph.D. from New York University in 1983.

After returning from the Universite de Nancy, Harris began working as a lecturer in the department of romance languages at Queens College in 1969. She has remained there throughout her career, now working as an associate professor in the English department. Harris has also devoted her career to cuisine, writing on foods from around the world, often with a focus on African and Caribbean flavors. She has written several books, including *The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking* and *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking*. She has also contributed to numerous other books as well as written articles for *Food & Wine* and *The New Yorker* among others.

Harris has been honored numerous times for spreading the word of African and Caribbean cuisines around the world. Some of her awards include an appreciation award from Walt Disney World Epcot Center, the Heritage Award from the Black Culinarians, and the Food Hero award from *Eating Well Magazine*. She has also appeared on numerous television programs, including *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show*.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jessica B. Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 18, 2004, in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Culinary historian and english professor Jessica B. Harris (1948 - ) served as a lecturer in the department of romance languages and associate professor in the English department at Queens College. Harris also authored several books on foods from around the world, with a focus on African and Caribbean flavors, including *The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking*, and *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking*.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The

## 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:

Harris, Jessica B.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, Jessica B.--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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Queens College (New York, N.Y.). Dept. of English

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## **Occupations:**

Culinary Historian

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English Professor

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

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 Jessica B. Harris, August 18, 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 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section  
A2004\_133\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:23 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris was born on March 18, 1948 in New York, New York. Her mother, Rhoda Alease Jones Harris, was born into a large family in 1913. She trained as a dietician at Pratt Institute in New York City, worked at Bennett College in North Carolina and for families in Plainfield, New Jersey before returning to New York where she married and worked as an administrative assistant at Queens College. Harris' maternal grandfather was a learned minister who studied Hebrew, and her maternal grandmother documented family history. Harris' maternal great-great-grandfather received farmland while still enslaved and was able to buy his wife's freedom. Her maternal great-grandfather was born into slavery in the 1830s and his mother's parting words when sold inspired him to become a minister. Her father, Jesse Brown Harris, was born in 1913 in Napier, Tennessee. His ancestors migrated from Georgia after Emancipation. In the 1950s, Harris's paternal grandmother traveled extensively and visited the Holy Land.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section  
A2004\_133\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:55 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris's paternal great-grandmother was a former slave who became a fruit seller near Napier, Tennessee. Her father, the oldest child of his mother's second marriage, attended a one-room schoolhouse before

moving to New York City and attending Erasmus Hall High School. The school's practice of giving general rather than academic diplomas to African American students kept him from entering higher education institutions. However, Harris's father took night classes and continued to read avidly. He worked as a placement officer for the VA Hospital and met Harris's mother while studying at Pratt Institute. Harris recalls early childhood memories of South Jamaica Houses, visiting with her paternal grandmother, and reading. She attended the United Nations International School in New York as the first student without a U.N. affiliation. In 1956 her parents bought a home in Martha's Vineyard. Harris also notes the contrast in educational and religious backgrounds between her maternal and paternal families.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section  
A2004\_133\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:58 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris attended the United Nations International School (UNIS) in Queens, New York, New York from 1953 to 1961. The diversity of cultures at UNIS led Harris to develop an interest in travel, a cosmopolitan outlook, and lifelong friendships. Attending frequent potluck dinners at the school sparked her interest in cooking. Despite the school's international focus, Harris recalls a lack of awareness about Africa at the time. When the school relocated to Manhattan and began admitting more American students, Harris noticed an increase in racism and a loss of community. In 1961 Harris left UNIS for the High School of Performing Arts (PA) despite her parents' initial objections to her focus on drama. At PA, later depicted in the film 'Fame,' Harris encountered classmates who went on to illustrious careers, took classes in diction and had the opportunity to perform before Langston Hughes. She remembers notable teacher Vinette Carroll, who encouraged PA's African American students to succeed.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section  
A2004\_133\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:21 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris enjoyed her classes at High School of Performing Arts (PA) in New York, New York and appreciated the exposure PA provided in contrast to her

sheltered childhood. Although Harris was interested in drama, her parents urged her to pursue teaching college as a more secure career option. Harris applied to Sarah Lawrence College but ultimately attended Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania due to financial concerns. Harris was among the small number of African American students at Bryn Mawr alongside HistoryMaker Marcia Cantarella; while there she learned about the economic underpinnings of race in the U.S. Harris continued to be involved in theater and acted in a student production of 'Medea.' She majored in French and in 1966 studied abroad in Paris, France. She encountered racism when a French host refused to let her room in her house. She ended up staying with another host family and formed a lasting friendship with them. Harris and her mother continued to visit the family in Paris annually.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section A2004\_133\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:09 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris returned to France in 1968 to pursue a master's degree at the Université de Nancy in Nancy, France. In 1969 she returned to New York City to complete her master's degree at Queen's College in Flushing and teach French in its Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) Program, an open-access program for minority students. Although familiar with the college, Harris encountered resistance while trying to complete her dissertation and left the program. Harris amassed a portfolio of writing for a Black Arts publication which led to writing theater reviews for Encore Magazine and book reviews for Essence Magazine. This put her in contact with many writers including HistoryMaker Maya Angelou. She became travel editor for Essence in the late 1970s and traveled to Senegal. She obtained her Ph.D. from New York University in 1983. Although her first book was rejected, her cookbook 'Hot Stuff: A Cookbook in Praise of the Piquant' was published in 1985, just months after her father's death.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section A2004\_133\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:20 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris continued teaching at Queens College as

an associate professor of English. She has written many cookbooks based on culinary knowledge acquired from traveling in Africa, the Caribbean and the northern hemisphere. 'Hot Stuff: A Cookbook in Praise of the Piquant' focuses on the origins of chilies and recipes featuring hot peppers. Her second cookbook 'Iron Pots & Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking,' published in 1991, traces the culinary continuum between African food and the Americas. Additional cookbooks include 'Sky Juice and Flying Fish: Traditional Caribbean Cooking,' which features traditional Caribbean cuisine, and 'Tasting Brazil: Regional Recipes and Reminiscences,' which focuses on the Afro-Brazilian cuisine of Bahia. She focuses on American Southern cuisine in 'The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking' and 'The Africa Cookbook: Tastes of a Continent' explores the evolution of African foods throughout the globe. Harris also recalls her travels to Haiti.

Video Oral History Interview with Jessica B. Harris, Section  
A2004\_133\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:11 2004/08/18

Jessica B. Harris's cookbook 'Beyond Gumbo: Creole Fusion Food from the Atlantic Rim' focuses on the etymological, cultural and culinary origins of Creole. She was motivated to explore Creole identity by writing 'Iron Pots & Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking' and her belief that a global identity would benefit the African American community. Her holiday cookbook 'A Kwanzaa Keepsake,' published in 1995, incorporates Kwanzaa as a teaching tool to understand and honor African heritage and ancestors. She reflects upon the symbolism of the table for African Americans specifically and world citizens generally and the importance of conversation. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and reflects upon her life and legacy. She concludes by describing how she would like to be remembered and narrating her photographs.