

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rowena Stewart

PERSON

Stewart, Rowena, 1932-2015

**Alternative Names:** Rowena Stewart;

**Life Dates:** March 6, 1932-September 19, 2015

**Place of Birth:** Jacksonville, Florida, USA

**Residence:** Jacksonville, FL

**Occupations:** Museum Chief Executive

## Biographical Note

Culturalist Rowena Stewart was nationally known as one of the foremost African American museum directors having led four major African American historical museum societies between 1975 and 2002 (The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Motown Historical Museum and the American Jazz Museum). She became one of the most sought after African American museum directors in the country.

Stewart was born on March 6, 1932 in Jacksonville, Florida, as the only child of Essie (Brozle) Rhodes and Oliver Rhodes. She grew up in New Berlin, Florida, and graduated in 1955 from Edward Waters College in Jacksonville. She began her career doing social work in settlement houses and reformist-minded community centers in Jacksonville and then in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1975, Stewart became the first director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in Providence. And then, from 1985 to 1992, Stewart served as the Director and Curator of Philadelphia's Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. She transformed what was a rather static museum into one that was interactive. In 1992, Stewart moved to Detroit to head the Motown Historical Museum and three years later, she was recruited to Kansas City, Missouri where she oversaw the development of the American Jazz Museum and became its executive director upon completion in 1997.

In 2002, Stewart retired and moved back home to Jacksonville where she served for a time as President of the A.L. Lewis Historical Society Board and Coordinator of the American Beach Community Center and Museum on Amelia Island north of Jacksonville. She worked as a consultant to museums utilizing historical preservation, presentations and educational programs.

Stewart was the mother of four - Gwendolyn, Clarence, Alvie and Wannetta Johnson.

Stewart was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on October 19, 2006.

Stewart passed away on September 19, 2015.

## Related Entries

**Boylan-Haven School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Edward Waters College** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**New Stanton High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Claffin University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Boston United South End Settlements** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Social worker**

**Motown Records** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Museum Director**

**18th and Vine Authority** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Museum Director**

**Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1985 to ?]

**Director**

**NAACP** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Member**

**Rhode Island Black Heritage Society** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to 1985]

**Founder & Director**

