

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Florence M. Rice

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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>	Rice, Florence M., 1919-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 14, 2006 and June 29, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:20:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Consumer activist and consumer educator Florence M. Rice (1919 - ) founded the Harlem Consumer Education Council, fighting discriminatory practices by businesses and corporations with protests and boycotts. In the 1990s, Rice was responsible for the Bell Atlantic Technology Center in Harlem. Rice was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 14, 2006 and June 29, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_169
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Florence M. Rice was born on March 22, 1919, in Buffalo, New York. She is the founder of the Harlem Consumer Education Council. During her childhood, Rice spent several years in the Colored Orphan Asylum and in several foster homes in New York. Upon completion of the eighth grade, Rice left school for work as a domestic seamstress where she became a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Rice spoke out against the discriminatory practices against African American and Latino workers. She participated in Harlem

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s 1962 congressional hearing, which probed dressmaker union's policies, and after testifying, she was blacklisted.

In the 1960s, Rice founded the Harlem Consumer Education Council, waging a war against corporations who discriminated against African Americans and other minorities. The Council organized many successful New York City boycotts and picket lines against grocery stores, furniture stores, and individuals found to be overcharging minorities. Rice's biggest victory was against the New York State Public Service Commission, forcing New York Telephone to stop charging low income residents pre-installation fees. The Harlem Consumer Education Council investigated over 100,000 complaints.

Appointed Special Consultant to the Consumer Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Board in the 1970s, Rice also taught consumer education at Malcolm-King College and has lectured to thousands at her workshops and seminars. In the 1990s, Rice was responsible for the Bell Atlantic Technology Center in Harlem. The center is dedicated to educating business people, students, senior citizens and other customers about the latest advances in telecommunication technologies. She has lectured in several countries, including South Africa where she was named a delegate in the first World Consumer Congress. Rice continues to work in consumer affairs in New York City where she lives.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Florence M. Rice was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 14, 2006 and June 29, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Consumer activist and consumer educator Florence M. Rice (1919 - ) founded the Harlem Consumer Education Council, fighting discriminatory practices by businesses and corporations with protests and boycotts. In the 1990s, Rice was responsible for the Bell Atlantic Technology Center in Harlem.

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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:

Rice, Florence M., 1919-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Rice, Florence M., 1919---Interviews

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African American women political activists--New York (State)--New York--Harlem--Interviews

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African American women civil rights workers--New York (State)--New York--Harlem--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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## **Occupations:**

Consumer Activist

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Consumer Educator

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers|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 Florence M. Rice, December 14, 2006 and June 29, 2006. 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 Florence M. Rice, Section  
A2006\_169\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:16 2006/06/29

Florence M. Rice was born on March 22, 1919 in Buffalo, New York to Amy Darby and Hubert Rice. At two years old, she was left at The Colored Orphan Asylum in New York City, and spent her childhood in foster homes in New York City and Peekskill, New York. Rice often ran away to her previous foster homes. Her first school was P.S. 040 Samuel Huntington, in New York City. In Peekskill, she attended Oakside Elementary School and Drum Hill Junior High School. Her mother reclaimed her from foster care once she was old enough to work. Although she graduated from eighth grade, Rice never finished high school. At age sixteen, she became pregnant and ran away to New York City, where she was briefly homeless. She worked as a domestic and was taken in by a couple who lived on 8th Avenue. Her daughter, Joyce Rice, was born in 1936. Rice left the baby with neighbors while she worked. A shortage of childcare workers during World War II forced Rice to place her daughter in foster care, but she visited her regularly.

African American women political activists--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

African American women civil rights workers--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section  
A2006\_169\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:16 2006/06/29

Florence M. Rice had difficulty retrieving her daughter from foster care after World War II, and only regained custody when her child was thirteen years old. Rice's political idols were Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Benjamin Jefferson Davis, Jr. She saw Lena Horne's films and Ethel Waters' performances at the Apollo Theater. Rice compares the legacy of Jackie Robinson to that of Stepin Fetchit, who she argues depicted African Americans poorly. She recalls department stores that prohibited African Americans from trying on clothes. Rice was briefly married to an abusive man who stabbed her during an argument. After her divorce in the 1940s, Rice worked in the garment industry. She joined the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, but noticed its disparate treatment of African American members. In 1962, she testified about the union's discriminatory practices at a congressional hearing arranged by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. She was subsequently removed from the union and barred from garment work.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section  
A2006\_169\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:11 2006/06/29

Florence Rice met Florynce Kennedy while working in the garment industry, and the two pressured New York Telephone Company to stop unfairly charging African Americans for installation fees. She describes this as economic racism, and explains that schools for freed slaves never taught economics or personal finance. She explains the importance of consumer education in the modern world. Rice founded the Harlem Consumer Education Council in 1967 to help protect African Americans and other minorities against economic racism and corporations' discriminatory practices. In the 1970s, she began teaching classes in consumer education at Malcolm-King College, and taught there for nearly a decade. In 1995, the Bell Atlantic Technology Center opened under Rice's direction, with the mission of providing access to technology to small businesses and consumers. Rice speaks fondly of union leader Roger

Toussaint, and describes other influential members of New York City's Harlem community, like Beverly Grisby and Sam White.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section A2006\_169\_001\_004, TRT: 0:24:43 2006/06/29

Florence Rice was mentored by Lugenia Gordon, who inspired her to attend the Original Gullah Festival in South Carolina. She recalls her fight against direct deposit policies as one of her most notable activities, and explains that many of the same banks that took direct deposits would not give loans to African Americans. She reflects on the changes in the education system since she was a girl, and argues that consumer education should be taught in all public schools. She received a number of awards from consumer protections groups for her activism. Rice shares that her proudest accomplishments are these awards, as well as her role in establishing the Bell Atlantic Technology Center. At the time of the interview, Rice was advocating for the rights of senior citizen tenants who were forced out of rent controlled housing. She hopes to be remembered for providing poor people with consumer education, and aspires to establish an international school to continue her work.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section A2006\_169\_002\_005, TRT: 0:29:55 2006/12/14

Florence M. Rice became involved in activist work in 1962, when she testified against the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union at Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s congressional hearing. She took a job at a furniture store, where she began to notice similarities between the union's history of giving higher paying jobs white women and other economic schemes that targeted poor African Americans. Hoping to spread information to poor families, she collaborated with Sister Mary Christopher from Elizabeth Seton College to create 'Shopping,' a guide for smart consumption. Rice shares some of the tips from her book. In the 1970s, Rice became a prominent community activist, and Mattie Cook invited her to teach consumer education at Malcolm-King College. She shares her hopes and concerns for the American education system, and describes changes in the country's labor force. Rice also

talks about other trailblazers in the field of consumer education, including Fred Fleischman and Florynce Kennedy.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section A2006\_169\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:27 2006/12/14

Florence M. Rice took classes at the Henry George School of Social Science. She led consumer education conferences and joined the International Organization of Consumers Unions. Rice also shared information on her show on WLIB Radio and on her cable show, '30 Minutes With Florence Rice.' At a hearing, she met the president and CEO of Verizon, and asked him to creating a technology center in Harlem. In 1995, the Bell Atlantic Technology Center opened. Rice also met influential politicians in Washington, D.C. through her peer Florence Mason. Another colleague, Dorothy Garret, opened a library in Columbia, South Carolina named in Rice's honor. At the time of the interview, Rice had won back access to her apartment, but was dealing with the consequences of the fighting her landlord. Rice shares the story of her nephew's business to explain why she fought against direct deposit policies. She expresses her concerns regarding direct deposits and police brutality. Rice also talks about her daughter, Joyce Rice.

Video Oral History Interview with Florence M. Rice, Section A2006\_169\_002\_007, TRT: 0:27:59 2006/12/14

Florence Rice wrote a resolution on behalf of Charles B. Rangel to petition to establish Son-In-Law Day to celebrate African American men and combat negative stereotypes. Rice talks about Marjorie Moore's Harlem Senior Tenants and Landlords Reconciliation Center, and describes her concerns for senior tenants' rights. Rice recalls the work she did with the Harlem Consumer Education Council to help families pay their electric utility bills to Consolidated Edison, Inc. She hopes that young people will continue her work at the Harlem Consumer Education Council and with consumer education in general. Rice shares her concern about gentrification in Harlem and the lack of African American business owners in the community. She talks about the Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project, and how the



group supported her activism. Rice offers advice about the value of kindness, and describes how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.