

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Matthews

PERSON

Matthews, John, 1910-2013

Alternative Names: John Matthews; John A. Matthews

Life Dates: March 7, 1910-March 28, 2013

Place of Birth: Panama, Panama

Residence: New York, NY

Occupations: Labor Activist

Biographical Note

Labor activist and union organizer John Alderman Matthews, Sr. was born on March 3, 1910 in the Panama Canal Zone to Theresa and Christopher Sylvester Matthews, a homemaker and a school teacher from Jamaica. One of seven siblings, Matthews grew up and attended high school in Kingston, Jamaica. After high school, Matthews moved to New York City, where over the years, he studied at New York University, the New School of Social Research, City Colleges of New York, and Bronx Community College.

Matthews began working in the field of civil rights in 1935 when he and four other workers formed the first picket line against the Transport Workers Union. At the same time, he became a founding member of the Harlem Labor Union, forcing the union to accept African American as bus drivers. In 1943, Matthews attended military school in New Jersey and served in the 92nd United States Infantry Division in Europe.

After returning from the war, Matthews went to work as a salesman, but continued his community activism. He founded a bartenders' and restaurant workers' union that broke open employment barriers in Harlem and the rest of New York City in the mid-1950s. In 1963, he worked as a campaign secretary to U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell. In the mid-1960s, Matthews spearheaded efforts that ended discriminatory hiring or membership practices by Bond Clothing Stores, Bronx State Hospital, Park Sheraton Hotel, Borden's, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. This work culminated in Matthews, who had earlier become the first Vice President of the New York Chapter of the NAACP, being named chairman of the NAACP Labor and Industry Department in 1967.

Throughout the late 1960s, Matthews continued his political activism, founding the

Kennedy Democratic Club. He was recognized for his accomplishments in Newsweek magazine in 1995. Throughout his life, Matthews continued to organize communities under tenants and youth organizations.

Matthews was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on December 17, 2006.

Matthews passed away on March 28, 2013.

Related Entries

Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing & Visual Arts [STUDENTOf]
[from ? to ?]

Local 2 [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

Founder

[EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

Campaign Secretary

NAACP [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Vice President

NAACP [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Chairman

Francis Delafield Hospital Community Board [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

156th Street Tenants and Friends Block Association [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Founder

Bottle and Cork Club [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Robert F. Kennedy Democratic Club [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

