

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Herbert DeCosta, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	DeCosta, Herbert Alexander, 1923-2008
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr.,
Dates:	February 2, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:40:47).
Abstract:	Construction chief executive and architect Herbert DeCosta, Jr. (1923 - 2008) joined his family's business in 1947, a construction company that was in existence from 1899. DeCosta was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 2, 2007, in Charleston, South Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_041
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Architect and building contractor Herbert Alexander DeCosta, Jr. was born on March 17, 1923 in Charleston, South Carolina to Herbert A. DeCosta, Sr. and Julia Craft DeCosta. DeCosta's interest in architecture began when he was thirteen years old while working for the family construction business which was founded in 1899 by his grandfather Benjamin DeCosta. He graduated high school from the Avery Institute in Charleston in 1940 and went on to receive his B.A. degree from Iowa State College in architectural engineering in 1944.

Prior to joining the family business in 1947, DeCosta worked as an architectural

engineer for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA, now known as NASA). He returned to the DeCosta Company as Vice President and became President, serving there until his retirement in 1989. Under his leadership, the company undertook major renovation projects to preserve the historical landscape of Charleston and other areas. One of his most notable projects was the restoration of the Herndon Mansion in Atlanta, Georgia. This mansion was owned by one of the wealthiest African American men in America, Alonzo Herndon, founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company.

The H.A. DeCosta Company was named one of the top 100 black businesses in the nation by *Black Enterprise* magazine in 1979. Upon his retirement in 1989, DeCosta continued to be active in the field of preservation as a restoration consultant and project manager.

DeCosta's work has been featured in various magazines and newspapers across the country. He has received various awards and recognitions for his contribution to Charleston, including South Carolina's Governor's Award and the Frances R. Edmunds Award for Historic Preservation. DeCosta passed away on December 28, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr. was conducted by Denise Gines on February 2, 2007, in Charleston, South Carolina, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Construction chief executive and architect Herbert DeCosta, Jr. (1923 - 2008) joined his family's business in 1947, a construction company that was in existence from 1899.

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

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:

DeCosta, Herbert Alexander, 1923-2008

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

DeCosta, Herbert Alexander, 1923-2008--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Architect

Construction Chief Executive

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 Herbert DeCosta, Jr., February 2, 2007. 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).

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 Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_001, TRT: 0:28:45 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. was born on March 17, 1923 in Charleston, South Carolina to Julia Craft DeCosta and Herbert DeCosta, Sr. His maternal great-grandparents, Ellen Craft and William Craft, were born into slavery in Macon, Georgia; and escaped to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with his great-grandmother, who was half-white, disguised as a white man. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Crafts migrated to England, where they taught at a manual training school, and had five children, including Charles P. Craft, DeCosta's maternal grandfather. The family returned to Georgia after the Civil War, and operated a farm and school. DeCosta's maternal grandfather worked as a postal clerk in Charleston, where he married Emeline Kinloch Craft, a native of Georgetown, South Carolina. DeCosta's mother was born and raised in Charleston. The Crafts were related to the Healy family, including Bishop James Augustine Healy of Portland, Maine, and President Patrick Francis Healy of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_002, TRT: 0:28:37 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr.'s paternal grandfather, Benjamin DeCosta, was a building contractor in Charleston, South Carolina. His father, Herbert DeCosta, Sr., served in the U.S. Army during World War I, and then returned to Charleston to found the H.A. DeCosta Company, a contracting firm. DeCosta's mother, Julia Craft DeCosta, attended high school at the Avery Normal Institute in Charleston; and, in 1919, graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C. She worked as a schoolteacher before marrying DeCosta's father. DeCosta grew up in an integrated neighborhood of Charleston, where the city's mayor was his neighbor. He attended a Catholic kindergarten at the Immaculate Conception

School, although his family worshipped at St. Mark's Episcopal Church. He later enrolled at the Avery Normal Institute. At twelve years old, DeCosta began working for his father's company. His father had an extensive career as a contractor, and built the Seven Oaks Plantation house on James Island, South Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_003, TRT: 0:28:19 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. attended kindergarten at the Immaculate Conception School in Charleston, South Carolina, and then enrolled at the Avery Normal Institute in the first grade. During his tenure there, his paternal uncle, Frank DeCosta, succeeded Benjamin F. Cox as the school principal. The curriculum emphasized vocal training, and DeCosta was introduced to opera music by one of his teachers. During his high school years, DeCosta played basketball, and worked for his father's business, the H.A. DeCosta Company, as a carpenter on Saturdays. He graduated from high school in 1940; and, at that time, aspired to study architecture. He enrolled at the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in Ames, Iowa, where he experienced racial discrimination. DeCosta was not allowed to live on campus, and was initially offered a small, dilapidated basement apartment in town. He eventually decided to live with Archie Martin and Nancy Martin, an African American couple who provided housing to black students.

Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_004, TRT: 0:28:13 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. came from a wealthy family that employed servants during his childhood in Charleston, South Carolina. However, his mother still assigned him chores, like polishing the brass and waxing the floors. Later, DeCosta attended the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, where he lacked social outlets due to the majority white student body. He, however, befriended the few black students, like Alonzo M. Myster. In 1944, DeCosta graduated with an architectural engineering degree. He obtained a position as an engineer at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in Cleveland, Ohio; and then worked at

Langley Field in Virginia, where he met his wife, Emily Spencer DeCosta. They married and moved to Charleston in 1947, where DeCosta joined his father's construction firm, the H.A. DeCosta Company. DeCosta's projects in Charleston included the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance building and renovations of historic homes, including the president's house at the College of Charleston.

Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_005, TRT: 0:28:29 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. was named the president of the H.A. DeCosta Company in 1960. He led many projects at the firm, including the renovations of a home once owned by planter Peter Manigault in Charleston, South Carolina, and of the Herndon Home in Atlanta, Georgia. He frequently worked with blacksmith Philip Simmons, who was known in Charleston for his wrought ironwork. During the 1960s, DeCosta joined the Citizens Committee of Charleston County, led by activist Esau Jenkins. He served as its liaison to Charleston's business community, including white businessmen Bob Ellis and Morris Kalinsky. DeCosta was also active with the NAACP, which was led in Charleston by Joe Brown. He belonged to the Athenians Club, Owl's Whist Club and the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission; and was a brother of both the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity. DeCosta raised two daughters, Margaret DeCosta and Gail DeCosta, the latter of whom married South African politician Sipo Mzimela.

Video Oral History Interview with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., Section A2007_041_001_006, TRT: 0:18:24 2007/02/02

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. married Emily Spencer DeCosta in 1946. She was an alumna of Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Together, they raised two children, Gail DeCosta and Margaret DeCosta. DeCosta's wife initially worked as a schoolteacher, and later joined DeCosta's contracting business, the H.A. DeCosta Company. In 1990, DeCosta retired from the company, and sold it to his two partners. He continued to work for the firm as a consultant until its closure. DeCosta describes his advice

to future generations, and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.