

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sharon Farmer

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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>	Farmer, Sharon, 1951-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 29, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:52:25).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photographer Sharon Farmer (1951 - ) served as a photographer for President Bill Clinton during his administration, and became the first African American female Director of White House Photography in 1999. In 2004, she was campaign photographer for Senator John Kerry's presidential bid, and has presented many exhibits at museums and cultural institutions nationwide. Farmer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 29, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_076
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former Director of White House photography Sharon Camille Farmer was born on June 10, 1951, in Washington, D.C. Farmer attended Ohio State University where she was a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and served as vice president of the student government. As a student, Farmer also served as editor for the school newspaper, *Our Choking Times*, and protested school policies that interfered with black and white student relations.

In 1974, after graduating with her B.S. degree from Ohio State University, Farmer began a career as a freelance photographer. She went on to work for the Smithsonian Institution, the *Washington Post* and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, shooting news stories, political campaigns, cultural events, conferences, and portraits. Farmer also lectured extensively on photography and served on the faculty for American University, Mount Vernon College, and Indiana University.

In 1993, Farmer was hired as a White House photographer and began traveling the world taking pictures of President Bill Clinton and the first lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton. Among the many famous images she captured were the handshake between the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat; and President and Mrs. Clinton witnessing the launch of the space shuttle Discovery with astronaut John Glenn. Then, in 1999, Farmer was promoted to Director of White House Photography and became the first African American and first woman to hold this position. Later, in 2004, she was the campaign photographer for Senator John Kerry's presidential election campaign.

Farmer has presented many exhibits at museums and cultural institutions nationwide, including: *Art against AIDS*, *Gospel in the Projects*, *Twenty Years on the Mall*, *Washington, D.C. - Beijing Exchange*, and *Our Views of Struggle*.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sharon Farmer was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 29, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photographer Sharon Farmer (1951 - ) served as a photographer for President Bill Clinton during his administration, and became the first African American female Director of White House Photography in 1999. In 2004, she was campaign photographer for Senator John Kerry's presidential bid, and has presented many exhibits at museums and cultural institutions nationwide.

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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:

Farmer, Sharon, 1951-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Farmer, Sharon, 1951---Interviews

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African American photographers--Interviews

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Women photographers--United States--Interviews

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Presidents--United States--Staff--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:**

Photographer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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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 Sharon Farmer, April 29, 2008. 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 Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:00 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer was born on June 10, 1951 in Washington, D.C. Her mother, Winifred Lancaster Farmer, was born in 1924 in Chapel Hill, Maryland. Her father, George Thomas Farmer, was born in 1921 in Cedar Grove, West Virginia. Farmer's father was a gunnery sergeant in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He met Farmer's mother while on shore leave in Washington, D.C. Both of Farmer's parents were educators who later became principals in Prince George's County, Maryland. Farmer's mother attended Bowie State University and earned her master's degree in education from New York University. Her father attended West Virginia State College, and then earned his master's in education from Springfield College in Massachusetts. Farmer describes her younger brother, her earliest memories, and the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood in the Benning Heights neighborhood of Southeast Washington, D.C. As a young girl, she enjoyed sports and later became interested in music, playing the bassoon, clarinet, and piano.

African American photographers--Interviews.

Women photographers--United States--Interviews.

Presidents--United States--Staff--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:40 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer attended public schools in Washington D.C. She began her education at Davis Elementary School, and graduated from Anacostia High School, an integrated school with black and white students and educators in 1969. Farmer's favorite subjects in high school were music and English. She played the bassoon and read the work of Lorraine Hansberry and Zora Neale Hurston. She also participated in the chess club and the D.C. Youth Orchestra. Farmer then went to Ohio State University (OSU) in Columbus, Ohio where she intended to major in music. She switched to photography after learning how few jobs were available for professional bassoonists. In college, Farmer became interested in jazz music and was active on the black student paper, Our Choking Times. She remembers campus unrest in 1970, institutionalized racism, and influential black faculty members at OSU. Farmer also describes the community formed between black students at colleges in Ohio and the first time she heard the "N" word.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer became interested in photography as a student at Ohio State University (OSU) in Columbus, Ohio from 1969 to 1974. She was inspired by photographers like HistoryMaker Roy Lewis who used photography as a form of activism. Her mentors included a local photographer named Valentine, and journalist Amos Lynch, editor of the Call and Post, a black newspaper in Columbus. At OSU, Farmer was friends with football stars like Cornelius Greene and Archie Griffin, and she photographed the team at the Rose Bowl in 1973 and 1974. During college, Farmer also had an internship with the Associated Press, where she faced discrimination from the head photographer. A significant event during Farmer's time at OSU was the founding of the Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center. After graduating in December of 1974, Farmer returned to Washington D.C. to begin her photography career. She eventually began freelancing for the weekly section at the

Washington Post. The section editor was Vivian Aplin-Brownlee.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:55 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer shot the artwork for Sweet Honey in the Rock's second album cover. The experience exposed her to dynamic black women like HistoryMaker Bernice Johnson Reagon with strong work ethics and an interest in activism. As a freelance photographer for thirteen years, Farmer worked for The Washington Post and also photographed weddings. She also taught for a few years as an adjunct professor of photography at Howard University and American University in Washington, D.C. In 1992, Robert McNeeley hired Farmer to work as a White House photographer. Farmer recalls being surprised that McNeeley was interested in her work because she describes herself as anti-government and has an F.B.I. record due to her activism in college. In 1999, Farmer became the Director of White House Photography. Farmer was impressed by the inclusiveness of the Clinton White House and generally felt positive about her experience, though she had to fight to be credited on some of her work.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:50 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer talks about the black photographers that she admires like Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and HistoryMaker Ernest Withers, but laments what she views as an "opaque" ceiling for female photographers. Farmer is proud of her inclusion in a volume of 'The Black Photographer's Annual,' and in a book on black photographers compiled by Deborah Wallis. As a White House photographer during the Clinton Administration, Farmer got to know President Clinton's personality, attended the 1994 inauguration of Nelson Mandela and watched President Clinton confer with Madeleine Albright about the conflict in Bosnia. She also faced numerous experiences of racial discrimination where police questioned whether she was a White House photographer. Other African Americans in the Clinton Administration included HistoryMakers Alexis Herman, Bob Nash, Hazel

O'Leary and Betty Currie. Farmer eventually became the Director of Official White House Photography. She talks about her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Sharon Farmer, Section  
A2008\_076\_001\_006, TRT: 0:26:20 2008/04/29

Sharon Farmer reflects upon on her life. While at one point her parents were afraid she would never leave the country, Farmer traveled all over the world in her role as President Bill Clinton's photographer. During her travels, she went to Africa twice and also met many people who have been influenced by African American culture. Throughout her life, Farmer's role models have been photographers Roland Freeman, Ricardo Thomas, and Roy DeCarava, as well as HistoryMaker Bernice Johnson Reagon. Farmer also talks about Hillary Clinton's advocacy on women's issues and health care during the Clinton Administration. Farmer describes her advice for young photographers, what she would do differently, her legacy, and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes her interview by narrating her personal photographs.