

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Watson

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## Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watson, John A., Ph. D.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Watson,
Dates:	March 7, 2011
Bulk Dates:	2011
Physical Description:	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:24:28).
Abstract:	Biochemistry professor and biochemist John Watson (1940 - ) researched the regulation of cholesterol and other sterols in metabolic pathways as a professor at the University of California, San Francisco for more than thirty years. Watson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 7, 2011, in Daly City, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2011_004
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Biochemist and biochemistry professor John A. Watson was born on May 21, 1940 in Chicago, Illinois, the first of eight children. His mother, Catherine P. Berkley-Watson, was a homemaker and his father Hosea Watson, worked as a U.S. Postal Service supervisor. Watson grew up in Chicago’s south side, attending Oakland Public Elementary School and graduating from Parker High School in 1957. After studying at the University of Illinois Navy Pier, he was hired by the American Institute of Baking, where he worked as a research assistant in nutrition research. It was there that his interest in biochemical studies truly crystallized. Watson returned to college to receive his B.A. degree in biology with an option in biochemistry from Illinois Institute of Technology in 1964. After receiving a pre-doctoral USPH Fellowship from the University of Illinois, Chicago Medical Center, Watson earned his Ph.D. degree in biochemistry from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1967. With a post-Doctoral USPH Fellowship, Watson continued his two-year postdoctoral training at Brandeis University.

In 1969, Watson was hired by the University of California, San Francisco as an Assistant Professor of Biochemistry and Biophysics and Medical school Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. Watson’s research focused on the regulation of metabolic pathways, particularly on the regulation of cholesterol and isopentenoid biosynthesis. He demonstrated that the apparent lack of control of cholesterol synthesis is not a marker for cancer cells, that essential non-sterol isopentenoid synthesis is a post-transcriptionally regulated process, and that excess mevalonic acid production in fruit fly cells is shunted through a novel degradation pathway. Watson became a full Professor of Biochemistry in 1984 and Professor Emeritus of the University of California, San Francisco in 2001.

Watson holds memberships in numerous renowned professional societies, including the American Association of Oil Chemists, the National Institute of Science, and the American Heart Association. He is also a founding member of the Coalition for the Advancement of Blacks in Biomedical Sciences. Winner of the 1985 Henry McBay Outstanding Teacher Award from the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE) and the 1994 Lifetime Mentor Award from the American Association for the

Advancement of Science (AAAS), Watson has been recognized for his work as a research scientist as well as an educator.

John Watson is married to Valerie M. Watson, and they are the parents of four adult children: Lisa, Susan, Katherine, and John.

John Watson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 7, 2011.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Watson was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 7, 2011, in Daly City, California, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Biochemistry professor and biochemist John Watson (1940 - ) researched the regulation of cholesterol and other sterols in metabolic pathways as a professor at the University of California, San Francisco for more than thirty years.

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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:

Watson, John A., Ph. D.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Watson, John A., Ph. D.--Interviews

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African American chemists--Interviews.

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African American educators.

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African American biologists--Interviews.

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African American chemists.

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University of Illinois at Chicago.

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Educators—California—San Fransisco.

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African American scientists--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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University of California, San Francisco

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**Occupations:**

Biochemist

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

ScienceMakers

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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 John Watson, March 7, 2011. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 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 John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:43 ?

John Watson slates his interview and shares his favorites. He talks about the family background of his mother, Catherine Pauline Berkley, and traces her ancestry back to James Cornelius. Cornelius was a subject of the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives in 1936. He served in the Civil War as a servant to his master, and was hugged by his master's wife when he returned to the plantation in Magnolia, Mississippi. Watson describes the secrecy in his family and talks about his mother's life growing up around the "sundown towns" of southern Illinois.

Slavery--United States.

United State--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.

Slavery--Mississippi.

Fatherless families--Washington (D.C.).

Pike County (Miss.)

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

John Watson shares the family history of his father, Hosea Watson. He can trace his lineage back to his great, great-grandfather, Harrison Watson I, who was born around 1820. His son, Harrison Watson II, became a blacksmith and an entrepreneur, and Watson's grandfather, Rev. John Watson, was a Baptist minister. Watson's father was born in 1917 and moved with his family to Chicago, Illinois, at an early age. He later served in World War II and worked in the United States Postal Service. Watson's parents met prior to the War and they had eight children. Watson describes the de-facto segregation in Chicago as well as some of his experiences of growing up in the Ida B. Wells Housing Project. He recalls a sense of community within his neighborhood, and he would visit the Abraham Lincoln Centre and listen to the blues music in the clubs on Chicago's South Side.

Chicago (Ill.).

African American families--Illinois--Chicago.

Segregation--Illinois--Chicago.

Abraham Lincoln Centre (Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:24 ?

John Watson recalls his elementary school experiences at Oakland Elementary School and he describes his life growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. From an early age, Watson enjoyed exploring the city and would visit the Museum of Science and Industry, but he learned to avoid certain neighborhoods due to de-facto segregation within the city. To earn some money, Watson sold copies of the "Chicago Defender." He describes a couple of incidents when he was mugged. Watson attended Parker High School, and he describes the school's increasingly African American presence within the student body. He graduated from high school in 1954. Watson explains that he enjoyed science as a youth and remembers experimenting with his Gilbert chemistry set and watching DuPont commercials on TV.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Illinois--Chicago.

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs.

Chicago defender.

Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_004, TRT: 0:26:36 ?

John Watson describes his growing interest in science, but notes that he did not have any mentors. Talking about his high school years at Parker High School, Watson describes some of his teachers and the success of his classmates. Watson pursued college studies at the University of Illinois, Navy Pier, but due to low grades, was urged to leave school. While at Navy Pier, Watson met and married Valerie [Modia Landry]. He was soon hired at the American Institute of Baking to assist in physiological studies, but in 1960, Watson resumed his college education at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He describes how he was awarded the Commonwealth Edison Academic Scholarship for Colored Students. Watson earned his B.A. degree in biology in 1964 and continued his studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago Medical Center.

American Institute of Baking.

African Americans--Education (Higher).

University of Illinois at Navy Pier.

Illinois Institute of Technology.

African American educators.

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:19 ?

John Watson describes his graduate research in glyceraldehyde metabolism at the University of Illinois Medical Center with his adviser, James Hiyashi. Watson isolated an enzyme that could digest glyceraldehyde, a byproduct in petroleum production. Prior to receiving his Ph.D. degree in biochemistry in 1968, Watson began working at Brandeis University with James Lowenstein studying long chain fatty-acid synthesis. In 1969, Watson was hired by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), with hopes of earning tenure within seven years. Watson describes two of his mentors, John Wellington, assistant dean for student affairs in the UCSF School of Medicine; and William Rutter, chair of the UCSF Department of Biochemistry and Biophysics.

Biochemistry--History.

Brandeis University.

Biophysics.

University of California.

San Francisco (Calif.).

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_006, TRT: 0:32:34 ?

John Watson discusses the research he conducted at the University of California, San Francisco. Watson touches upon his research of the enzyme, NADPH-dependent reductase, which he identified in *Rhodotoria glutinis*. He then describes his finding that liver cancer cells are able to regulate cholesterol metabolism. Watson also conducted studies on isopentenoids in insect cells and regulation mechanisms in halobacterium. He closes this section of the interview by sharing the history of the Coalition for the Advancement of Blacks in the Biochemical Sciences (CABBS).

University of California--San Francisco.

National Organization for Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers.

*Rhodotorula gracilis*.

Biomedical science.

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_007, TRT: 0:30:24 ?

John Watson discusses the importance of developing scientific models and their usefulness in understanding patterns in nature. He then explains his decision to retire from the University of California, San Francisco, and the rigorous process of applying for funding in scientific research. Watson then reflects on the students he has mentored and notes that many of them have found success in academia, including Michael Drake, chancellor of University of California, Irvine. After sharing his strategies for conducting research in his laboratory and for mentoring students, Watson closes this tape by discussing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, namely that the number of African Americans entering higher education has not grown as he and his colleagues had hoped.

African American educators--California--San Francisco.

Scientific research.

African Americans--Education.

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_008, TRT: 0:26:38 ?

John Watson reflects on his decisions and the life experiences that have shaped him into the person he has become, although he wishes he would have had the same opportunities as the youth of today. In addition to his scientific accomplishments, Watson hopes that his legacy will be as a successful African American in science. Watson enjoys spending time with his family and doing work around his home, particularly after retiring from the University of California, San Francisco. In retirement, Watson has reconnected with his African roots and has made several trips to Nigeria and Kenya, where he and his wife introduced their hosts to the festivities of Kwanzaa.

African American scientists.

Festivals--Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with John Watson, Section A2011\_004\_001\_009, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

John Watson discusses how he wants to be remembered, and he closes the interview by sharing his advice for students interested in science.

Science--Vocational guidance.