

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gwen Ifill

---

## 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>	Ifill, Gwen
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 22, 2014 and March 8, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012 and 2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:53:51).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Newspaper reporter and television news reporter Gwen Ifill (1955 - 2016 ) was the first African American woman in history to host a prominent political talk show on national television when she became moderator and managing editor of 'Washington Week' and senior correspondent for 'The PBS NewsHour'. Ifill was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 22, 2014 and March 8, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_058
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

PBS-TV journalist Gwen Ifill was born on September 29, 1955 in New York City to her parents, O. Urcille Ifill, Sr., an African Methodist Episcopal minister who hailed from Panama, and her mother, Eleanor Husbands from Barbados. Her father's ministry required the family to live in several cities in different church parsonages throughout New England including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York, where the family resided in federally subsidized housing. Ifill's interest

in journalism was rooted in her parents' insistence that their children gather nightly in front of the television to watch the national news. In 1973, Ifill graduated from Classical High School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Four years later, she received her B.A. degree in communications from Simmons College in Boston. During her senior year, she interned at the *Boston Herald American* newspaper.

Ifill worked at the *Boston Herald American* newspaper as a reporter in 1977. She left in 1980 to work as a writer for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* where she was able to work as a political reporter. In 1984, Ifill moved to Washington D.C. to work as a political reporter for the *Washington Post* where she covered the suburban Maryland beat until 1988, when she was promoted to the national news desk and sent to report on the Republican National Convention. Ifill then accepted a position as White House correspondent for the *New York Times* in 1991. She went on to NBC News in 1994 and worked in the Washington, D.C. bureau as chief Congressional and political correspondent. In 1999, Ifill became the first African American woman to host a prominent political talk show on national television when she became moderator and managing editor of PBS's *Washington Week* and senior political correspondent for *The PBS NewsHour*. In 2004, Ifill moderated the vice-presidential debate between Republican Vice President Dick Cheney and Democrat Senator John Edwards, and in 2008, she moderated the vice-presidential debate between Democratic Senator Joe Biden and Republican Governor Sarah Palin.

Ifill was the recipient of numerous awards including the George Foster Peabody Award and the Leonard Zeidenberg First Amendment Award. Her book *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*, was published in 2009.

Gwen Ifill was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 8, 2012.

Ifill passed away on November 14, 2016.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gwen Ifill was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 22, 2014 and March 8, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Newspaper reporter and television news reporter Gwen Ifill (1955 - 2016 ) was the first African American woman in history to host a prominent political talk show on national television when she became moderator and managing editor of 'Washington Week' and senior correspondent for 'The PBS NewsHour'.

---

## 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®.

---

## 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:

Ifill, Gwen

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Ifill, Gwen--Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

New York Times Company; Washington Post Company

---

## **Occupations:**

Newspaper Reporter

---

Television News Reporter

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

---

## **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 Gwen Ifill, March 22, 2014 and March 8, 2012. 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 Gwen Ifill, Section  
A2012\_058\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:13 2012/03/08

Gwen Ifill was born on September 29, 1955 in New York City. Her mother, Eleanor Husbands Ifill, was born in Barbados. Her father, O. Urcille Ifill, Sr., was raised in the Panama Canal Zone by a mother of Barbadian descent. Ifill's parents met in Barbados, and her father immigrated to the United States in the 1950s; her mother followed about eight years later. Ifill's father was an African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) minister, which meant the family moved frequently throughout the Northeast, as he was assigned to a new church every few years. He instilled in Ifill a strong sense of black pride. She remembers the high-church anthems sung in the A.M.E. church, growing up in poverty, the smells of Caribbean food and holiday gatherings with her cousins in New York City. She was a quiet, serious child, who was the second youngest of six siblings. The oldest three were born in Barbados and the youngest three were born in the U.S. Ifill strives to embody her father's boldness and her mother's gentleness.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section

A2012\_058\_001\_002, TRT: 2:32:37 2012/03/08

Gwen Ifill's father was strict, patriotic and a race man. As a child, she was close to her brother Roberto Ifill, enjoyed reading, and discussed the newspaper everyday with her family. She was in third grade when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and recalls that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s profile had waned by the time he was assassinated in 1968. Ifill attended junior high school in Steelton, Pennsylvania and graduated from Classical High School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Despite discouragement from a guidance counselor, Ifill attended Simmons College in Boston; there she was active in the black student organizations and interned at HistoryMaker Melvin Miller's Bay State Banner. She also interned at the Boston Herald American. After a racist note was left at her desk, she was promised a job there following graduation. Ifill graduated from college in 1977 and Shirley Chisholm spoke at her commencement. Ifill talks about her identity as an African American with Caribbean heritage.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section

A2012\_058\_001\_003, TRT: 3:32:41 2012/03/08

Gwen Ifill began working at the Boston Herald American in 1977. She covered the Boston public schools when they were being desegregated, and, as a novice reporter, almost missed capturing her eventual front-page story about the school superintendent being fired. While living in Boston, Ifill attended St. Paul AME Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1980, she took a job at the Baltimore Evening Sun covering city and state politics, which taught her how to write about eccentric politicians like Baltimore Mayor Don Schaefer. In 1984, she accepted a job at The Washington Post covering Prince George's County, Maryland. In 1987, she moved to The Post's national desk where she covered HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign. In 1991, she accepted a position as a congressional correspondent for The New York Times. Ifill describes learning about the impact of politics on everyday life and what it was like to be an African American female reporter at The Washington Post in the 1980s.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section

A2012\_058\_002\_004, TRT: 4:29:39 2014/03/22

Gwen Ifill began working at The Washington Post in 1984, shortly after Post reporter Janet Cooke was forced to give up her Pulitzer Prize because she fabricated the story. When Ifill arrived at The Post, Michel Martin and HistoryMakers Dorothy B. Gilliam and Milton Coleman were working there. At The Post, Ifill covered the Washington D.C. suburb of Prince George's County, Maryland when its racial demographics were changing. In 1987, she moved to The Post's national desk and covered the fringe candidates in the 1988 presidential campaign, including HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson who won thirteen primaries. Post reporter David Broder taught Ifill how to interview voters about political campaigns. In 1991, Ifill was hired as a congressional correspondent at The New York Times and covered President Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. Ifill describes what it is like to be a reporter on a political campaign trail and the dynamics between reporters and candidates' staff while on the trail.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section

A2012\_058\_002\_005, TRT: 5:33:04 2014/03/22

Gwen Ifill's father died in 1991 and her mother died in 1994. Her first TV appearance was on 'Maryland News Rap' when she was a reporter for the Baltimore Evening Sun. She began appearing on 'Meet the Press' while she was a congressional correspondent for The New York Times. Due to her appearances on the premier Sunday news show, Ifill began to receive offers from TV networks, but chose to go to NBC News in 1993 where she was the chief political correspondent and regular guest on 'Meet the Press,' due to her relationship with Tim Russert. Ifill's close friends Michel Martin and HistoryMaker Michele Norris were making the transition from print to TV journalism at the same time and served as a support network for her. In 1999, Ifill became moderator and managing editor of 'Washington Week' and senior political correspondent for 'PBS NewsHour' on PBS. Ifill talks about the differences between the two shows and between commercial and noncommercial television. She also describes her vision for 'Washington

Week.’

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section  
A2012\_058\_002\_006, TRT: 6:31:10 2014/03/22

Gwen Ifill moderated the 2004 and 2008 vice presidential debates. She recalls the unsatisfactory answers the candidates in 2004 gave to her question about HIV/AIDS in the African American community. At the time of the 2008 debate Ifill was working on her book ‘The Breakthrough: Race and Politics in the Age of Obama.’ The Republican candidates raised questions about whether Ifill was impartial since Obama’s name was in the title of the book. Only days before the debate Ifill broke her ankle. Ifill explains how she prepared for each debate and how nervous she was just before going on stage. In 2007, Ifill wrote an op-ed in The New York Times denouncing Dom Imus for his racist comments about Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey women’s basketball team. Imus had previously insulted Ifill behind her back, and she felt it was important to use her platform to defend African American women. She talks about the other ways she has mentored young African American women throughout her career.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section  
A2012\_058\_002\_007, TRT: 7:29:48 2014/03/22

Gwen Ifill’s book ‘The Breakthrough: Race and Politics in the Age of Obama’ was published in 2009. She was inspired to write the book by the generation of African American politicians she had covered throughout her career, from her days reporting on Baltimore and Prince George’s County, Maryland to her coverage of HistoryMaker The Honorable Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. In 2009, following the death of her mentor at NBC News, Tim Russert, Ifill was considered to succeed him on ‘Meet the Press,’ but ultimately did not get the job. She has been honored to interview several celebrities for The HistoryMakers’ ‘An Evening With’ series and recalls highlights of those interviews, such as interviewing fellow Panamanian American HistoryMaker Ursula Burns. Ifill shares some of her thoughts on the evolution of African American politicians since the Civil Rights Movement. She also reflects upon her career, her

positive African American identity and her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Gwen Ifill, Section  
A2012\_058\_002\_008, TRT: 8:13:39 2014/03/22

Gwen Ifill believes that being a child of immigrants instilled in her the importance of taking risks for success and taking advantage of opportunities. She reflects upon the legacy achieved by her generation of African Americans and reflects upon her racial identity. Ifill concludes by reflecting upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered.