

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mary Harris

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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>	Harris, Mary Styles, 1949-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 11, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:12:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Health researcher Mary Harris (1949 - ) received her Ph.D. degree from Cornell University and is the founder of BioTechnical Communications, Inc. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 11, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_208
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Health researcher Mary Styles Harris was born on June 26, 1949 in Nashville, Tennessee. She later moved to Miami. Her father, George Styles, was finishing his studies at Meharry Medical College, and her mother, Margaret, had completed her degree in business administration at Tennessee State University. In 1963 Harris was one of the first African Americans to enter Miami Jackson High School. Four years later, she graduated 12th out a class of 350. Harris graduated from Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) in 1971, and then enrolled at Cornell University where she Ford Foundation Doctoral Fellowship to study molecular genetics. She graduated with her Ph.D. degree in 1975.

In 1977, Harris became the executive director of the Sickle Cell Foundation of Georgia, where she raised money to fight sickle-cell anemia and was in a position to inform the public about this very serious condition. Harris was awarded a Science Residency Award by the National Science Foundation. After a period spent in Washington, D.C. completing her Science Residency, Harris became the state director of Genetic Services for the Georgia Department of Human Resources. From this position, she could also influence health policies nationwide, and her advice was sought by health officials in other states. In addition to work in Genetic Services, Harris was a part-time assistant professor at Morehouse College in Atlanta and at Atlanta University. To make life even busier, the couple's daughter was born during this period. Then, Harris became founder and president of BioTechnical Communications, which actively focuses on health issues by producing audiovisual materials on such health topics as breast cancer, an issue of major concern among minority women.

Harris' interest in preventive health care has led her to get involved in new born screening of Sickle-cell disease and sitting on the Atlanta board of the March of Dimes. Also, she has produced television and radio shows, and she hosts a radio show, "Journey To Wellness," and has developed a documentary, "To My Sisters... A Gift For Life." Harris has received several awards for her research and advocacy, including the National Cancer Research postdoctoral fellowship, the Ford Foundation Doctoral Fellowship, and the Outstanding Working Woman from *Glamour magazine*.

Mary Styles Harris was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 11, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mary Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 11, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Health researcher Mary Harris (1949 - ) received her Ph.D. degree from Cornell University and is the founder of BioTechnical Communications, Inc.

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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:**

Harris, Mary Styles, 1949-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, Mary Styles, 1949---Interviews

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African American health administrators--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:**

Health Researcher

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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 Mary Harris, December 11, 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).

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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 Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:08 2012/12/11

Mary Harris describes her family background. Harris was born in 1949 in Nashville, Tennessee. Her mother, Margaret Sharpe was born in Nashville in 1918. Harris' maternal grandmother was the first African American to work in a printing house in Nashville. Margaret Sharpe attended Pearl High School and Tennessee State University, where she majored in music. She spent her career working in hospital systems. Harris' father, George Styles, was born in Miami, Florida, to parents who had immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s from the Bahamas. He attended Booker Washington High School in Miami and Meharry Medical College in Nashville. After getting married, Harris' parents moved to St. Louis for Styles' residency at Homer G. Phillips Hospital, and then to Miami, to set up his medical practice. Harris is the oldest of three children; her sister is a math educator and her brother is a minister.

African American families--Tennessee--Nashville.

African American mothers--Tennessee.

African American fathers--Florida.

Hospitals--Tennessee.

African American physicians.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:03 2012/12/11

Mary Harris describes her childhood and schooling in Miami, Florida. Harris grew up in the African American

neighborhoods of Overtown and Brownsville in the 1950s. Although the neighborhood of Brownsville was neglected by the city in the allocation of amenities and rights, the African American community there was self-contained, thriving, and close-knit. Harris attended Holy Redeemer and Bethune Elementary schools, but felt that they lacked in the quality of instruction. Her childhood interest in science was strengthened by her experience at Brownsville Junior High School, where she had inspiring science teachers. Harris was among the first group of African American students to attend Jackson High School after it was integrated in the 1960s. Her family stayed abreast on the civil rights activism of the 1960s.

Childhood--Florida--Miami.

African Americans--Florida--Miami--Social conditions.

Education--Florida--Miami.

Segregation in education--Florida.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:56 2012/12/11

Mary Harris describes her teenage years in Miami, Florida. After Harris' father's death in 1958, her mother remarried, and the family ran a service station in Liberty City, Miami. As a teenager, Harris was exposed to the diverse races and communities that had become established in Miami during the 1960s. Through her experiences with her father's family of Bahamian descent, and at the newly-integrated Jackson High School, Harris became particularly familiar with the Bahamian community, and the newly-emerging Cuban-American community in Miami. Harris' interest in science was further strengthened at Jackson High School, where she honed her critical thinking and analytical skills.

Childhood--Florida--Miami.

Death.

Race awareness.

Education, Secondary--Florida--Miami.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_004, TRT: 4:32:00 2012/12/11

Mary Harris received a well-rounded science education in

Jackson High School in Miami, Florida, which prepared her for college. After graduating from high school in 1968, Harris began her undergraduate studies at Lincoln University in Chester County, Pennsylvania. While at Lincoln University, Harris decided to pursue a Ph.D. degree after college, instead of a medical degree. She spent two summers in a summer research program at Atlanta University, where she was mentored by Luther Williams and Roy Hunter, Jr. After receiving her bachelor's degree in 1971, Harris received a coveted Ford Foundation fellowship to pursue her Ph.D. degree in molecular genetics at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she worked with Gerald Fink. Harris completed her dissertation research in four years, and earned her doctorate in 1975.

Education, Secondary--Florida--Miami.

Lincoln University (Pa.).

Atlanta University.

Ford Foundation--Education (Higher)--United States--Endowments.

Genetics.

Cornell University.

Fink, Gerald R.

Burdon, R. H. (Roy Hunter)

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_005, TRT: 5:31:04 2012/12/11

Mary Harris performed her dissertation research on characterizing the molecular mechanism of the function of killer factor in yeast, and received her Ph.D. degree in 1975 from Cornell University. Influenced by her experiences as a post-doctoral researcher at Rutgers Medical College, Harris decided to depart from laboratory research. At the age of twenty-eight, she became the executive director of the Sickle Cell Foundation of Georgia, where she pushed for a program to screen newborns for sickle cell trait and sickle cell disease. In 1979, Harris receives a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant for science programming for television. In 1984, she was appointed as Director of Genetic Services

for the Georgia Department of Human Services, where she worked to make genetic screening an integral part of public health delivery system. Harris founded Biotechnical Communications, Incorporated, in 1992, and produced the first documentary on African American women and breast cancer.

Cornell University.

Genetics.

Rutgers University.

Sickle cell anemia--Research.

National Science Foundation (U.S.)--Awards.

Georgia Department of Human Services

Documentary films.

Breast--Cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:47 2012/12/11

Mary Harris and her family moved back from California to Atlanta in 1998. Through her efforts at communicating science, Harris has made a significant impact on public health, particularly in the African American community. Her programming is aimed towards raising awareness in the African American community about major health concerns. Harris' most recent television production, 'Keeping Up with the Walkers' is an animated soap-opera that was funded by the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities.

Public health.

Television in education.

Public service television programs.

Minorities--Medical care--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Harris, Section  
A2012\_208\_001\_007, TRT: 7:11:13 2012/12/11

Mary Harris reflects upon her legacy and her hopes for the African American community. Harris believes that her legacy lies in having thrived and succeeded in a non-traditional career path. She and her husband, Sidney Harris, have been married since 1971, and have one daughter.



Reminiscing.

Marriage.

African American families.