

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Kenneth Olden

---

## 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>	Olden, Kenneth
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 21, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:28:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Cell biologist and academic administrator Kenneth Olden (1938 - ) became the founding Dean of the School of Public Health at the City University of New York in 2008. He is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. Olden was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 21, 2013, in Arlington, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_123
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cell biologist and biochemist Kenneth Olden was born in Parrottsville, Tennessee. He graduated from Knoxville College in 1960 with his B.S. degree in biology. In 1962, Olden enrolled at the University of Michigan and graduated from there in 1964 with his M.S. degree in genetics. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in cell biology and biochemistry from Temple University in 1978. Upon graduation, Olden served as a postdoctoral fellow and instructor in the physiology department at Harvard University Medical School where he worked from 1970 to 1974.

From 1974 to 1979, he was employed as a researcher in the laboratory of molecular biology at the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In 1977, he became the first African American to be awarded tenure and promoted to the rank of independent investigator at the NIH. From 1979-1991, he held several positions at the Howard University Cancer Center, including Director, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Oncology. Olden served in several positions at Howard University between 1979 and 1991, including associate professor of oncology in the Medical School as well as professor and chairman of the Department of Oncology.

In 1991, Olden was named Director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the Nation Toxicology Program (NTP) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service. He was the first African American to become director of one of the NIH Institutes. Olden then served as Chief of the Metastasis Group in the Laboratory of Molecular Carcinogenesis at the NIEHS. He was appointed as the Yerby Visiting Professor in the Harvard School of Public Health from 2006 to 2007. In 2008, Olden became founding Dean of the School of Public Health at the City University of New York.

Olden has received four of the most prestigious awards in public health: the American Public Health Association Calver Award in 2002, the Sedgwick Memorial Medal and the Laurenberg Award in 2004, and the Julius B. Richmond Award in 2005. He also received three of the highest awards for a public servant in the executive branch

of the U.S. Government: the DHHS Secretary's Distinguished Service Award in 1995, the President's Meritorious Executive Rank Award in 1997, and the President's Distinguished Executive Rank Award in 1998. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Science from the University of Rochester and an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the College of Charleston. Olden was elected to membership in the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences in 1994.

Ken Olden was interviewed by *TheHistoryMakers* on May 21, 2013.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Kenneth Olden was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 21, 2013, in Arlington, Virginia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Cell biologist and academic administrator Kenneth Olden (1938 - ) became the founding Dean of the School of Public Health at the City University of New York in 2008. He is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences.

---

## 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:

Olden, Kenneth

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Olden, Kenneth--Interviews

---

African American biologists--Interviews.

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

National Institutes of Health.

---

## Occupations:

Cell Biologist

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

---

## 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 Kenneth Olden, May 21, 2013. 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).

---

## 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 Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:26 ?

Kenneth Olden describes his family background. Olden's parents, Mary Augusta Christmas and Mack Leonard Olden were born in Newport, Tennessee in 1910 and around 1906, respectively. Olden's maternal great-grandmother was born into slavery in the mid-1800s. Slavery was abolished when she was about seven years old. Olden describes his memories of her. His paternal grandfather, James Olden, owned his own farm in Newport, and was a well-known member of his community. Olden talks about the early death of his grandfather, which led his father to drop out of school in the eighth grade in order to help support his family. Olden's parents attended Allen Chapel near Newport, which played a central role in the African American community there. In this section of the interview, Olden also reflects upon life in Newport, one of the poorest regions in the state of Tennessee. He also describes his visits home.

African American families.

African American fathers--Tennessee.

African American mothers--Tennessee.

African American grandparents--Tennessee.

Slavery.

Farming--Tennessee.

Childhood--Tennessee.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:18 ?

Kenneth Olden was born and raised near Newport, Tennessee. Olden attended Allen Chapel School until the eighth grade, before going to Tanner High School. He describes his experience in grade school, and the lack of teachers who motivated the students to aim for higher education. Olden discusses his early interest in reading. His mother had a small collection of books, and his parents' subscribed to the Pittsburgh Courier and a local newspaper. Olden describes his parents as his role models, and talks about growing up with four siblings. As a young boy, he observed the difference in the quality of life led by his own community and the educated section of the community, including the African American doctor in his neighborhood. This observation influenced his goal to pursue higher education. Olden also describes his memories of walking seven miles to school as well as other parts of his childhood in Newport.

Childhood--Tennessee.

Education--Tennessee.

Reading and books.

African American parents.

Class consciousness.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:39 ?

Kenneth Olden attended Tanner High School in Newport, Tennessee. While in high school, Olden was influenced by his principal, Mr. Rakestraw, who emphasized education, and helped Olden apply to college and for scholarships as well as to get a summer job to save money for college. Olden attended Knoxville College where he was mentored by his chemistry teacher, Dr. Mertin. Through him, Olden was also able to participate in an undergraduate research program at the University of Tennessee, even before it had integrated. Olden describes his

studies and his social development at Knoxville College. He also talks about his involvement with his church, his interest in becoming a scientist, and the difference between teaching and research laboratories and institutions.

Education--Tennessee.

Mentoring in education.

Knoxville College.

University of Tennessee.

Segregation in education--Tennessee.

Science--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:06 ?

In 1964, Kenneth Olden received his M.S. degree in biology/genetics from the University of Michigan, where he studied chromosomal relocation in *Drosophila melanogaster*, or the fruit fly. After spending a year as a researcher in biochemistry at Columbia University, Olden began to pursue his Ph.D. degree at Temple University. He began his training in *Drosophila* genetics with Ralph Hillman, but switched into cell and molecular biology, and studied the mechanism of ATP synthesis with Walter Hempfling. In 1970, Olden received an NIH Fellowship to pursue his postdoctoral training with Alfred Goldberg at Harvard University. He describes his characterization of an *E.coli* cell-wall mutant. He also demonstrated that ATP is the energy source in protein degradation, which led to a citation in the 1972 Nobel Prize lecture. Olden also talks about his family's reaction to his career as a scientist, and his experience at Knoxville College during the Civil Rights Movement.

University of Michigan.

Biology.

Genetics and Molecular Biology.

Temple University.

Columbia University.

Harvard University.

*Escherichia coli* O157:H7.

Hempfling, Walter P.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:08 ?

In 1974, Kenneth Olden was appointed as a researcher in the laboratory of molecular biology in the National Cancer Institute (NCI) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He was awarded tenure in 1977, becoming the first African American to receive tenure and the rank of independent investigator at the NIH. Olden describes his research in the field of protein secretion, and his seminal discovery that cellular protein secretion does not require a carbohydrate tag. He also talks about Nobel Prize winning discoveries in the field of protein secretion. Olden and his collaborators spent several years studying the role of the glycoprotein, fibronectin, in cancer metastasis. Although they found a way to suppress the metastasis of melanoma in mouse models, they were unable to develop an effective drug for human use because of technical and cost-related challenges. In 1979, Olden became the scientific director of the Howard University Cancer Center.

National Cancer Institute (U.S.).

National Institutes of Health (U.S.).

Proteins--Secretion.

Metastasis.

Cancer cells.

Howard University.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:14 ?

In 1979, Kenneth Olden became the scientific director of the Howard University Cancer Center. He describes his role in restructuring the center. In 1991, he became the first non-Caucasian director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS). He was also appointed as the director of the National Toxicology Program, and as chief of the Metastasis Section of the NIEHS Environmental Carcinogenesis Program. Olden describes his fourteen years of service at the NIEHS, and the importance of transitioning out of positions of leadership within an appropriate timeframe. Since 2005, he has served as the Yerby Visiting Professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, and as the founding dean of the School of Public Health at the City University of New York (CUNY). Olden currently serves as the director of the National Center for Environmental Assessment at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Howard University.

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

National Toxicology Program (U.S.).

Harvard University.

City University of New York.

National Center for Environmental Assessment (Washington, D.C.).

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:53 ?

Kenneth Olden currently serves as the director of the National Center for Environmental Assessment at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). He describes the role of this center in providing scientific justification for environmental safety standards. Olden also discusses the history and the role of the EPA, his service there, environmental justice, and the dual role of genetic predisposition and environmental triggers in the manifestation of chronic diseases. In this section of the interview, Olden expresses his concerns for the African American community, and reflects upon his career and legacy.

National Center for Environmental Assessment (Washington, D.C.).

United States. Environmental Protection Agency.

Disease susceptibility--Genetic aspects.

Reminiscing.

Video Oral History Interview with Kenneth Olden, Section A2013\_123\_001\_008, TRT: 8:07:11 ?

Kenneth Olden talks about his wife and his four children. He closes the interview by sharing how he would like to be remembered.

African American families.

Reminiscing.