

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert A. 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, Robert Allen, 1938-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 25, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:54:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Conductor and music professor Robert A. Harris (1938 - ) , former Director of Choral Activities at Michigan State University, retired as professor emeritus of the Northwestern University Bienen School of Music in 2012. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 25, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_234
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Music professor and conductor Robert A. Harris was born on January 9, 1938 in Detroit, Michigan. His father, Major Harris, was a factory worker; his mother, Rusha Harris, a homemaker. Harris attended Sherrill Elementary and graduated from Charles Chadsey High School in 1956. He studied at Wayne State University where he earned his B.A. degree in music education in 1960 and his M.A. degree in music on 1962. Harris briefly attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York and then received his Ph.D. degree in composition and theory from Michigan State University in 1971. He also completed post-doctoral

work at Aspen Music School in 1973 and 1974.

In 1960, Harris was hired as a music teacher in the Detroit Public Schools. He was then appointed as an assistant professor of music at Wayne State University. Harris became Director of Choral Activities at Michigan State University in 1964, and then joined the faculty of Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music as professor of conducting and director of choral organizations in 1977. He has also served as a visiting professor at Wayne State University, the University of Texas, and the University of South Africa in Pretoria. In 2012, Harris retired as professor emeritus at Northwestern University. Harris has appeared as a conductor, choral clinician and adjudicator throughout the United States and in the Republic of China where he served as one of two guest conductors/clinicians for the Taipei Philharmonic Choral and Conducting Workshop. His international performances also include South Korea as the guest conductor for the Incheon City Chorale, and Hong Kong as a guest conductor of a Choral Festival Youth Chorale. As an international music instructor, Harris has presented master classes, workshops, and lectures on conducting in South Africa, as well as presenting lectures and master classes on African American spirituals in Argentina.

Harris served as a member and co-chair of the Choral Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. Harris is associated with a number of professional and honorary organizations, including the American Choral Directors Association, the American Society of Composers and Publishers (ASCAP), Chorus America, Pi Kappa Lambda National Honor Music Society and Phi Mu Alpha Professional Music Fraternity.

Harris has received several awards and honors, including the Wayne State University "Alumni Arts Achievement Award in Music," the Northwestern University School of Music "Faculty Exemplar Teaching Award," and the Northwestern University Alumni Association "Excellence in Teaching Award." As a composer, Harris has been the recipient of over forty commissions from various schools, churches and musical organizations. His compositions, especially those of the choral genre, have been performed throughout the United States, Europe and South Africa. A number of his compositions have been published.

Robert A. Harris was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 25, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert A. Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 25, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7

uncompressed MOV digital video files. Conductor and music professor Robert A. Harris (1938 - ) , former Director of Choral Activities at Michigan State University, retired as professor emeritus of the Northwestern University Bienen School of Music in 2012.

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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, Robert Allen, 1938-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, Robert Allen, 1938---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:**

Conductor

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Music Professor

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MusicMakers|EducationMakers

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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 Robert A. Harris, August 25, 2013. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral

## 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 Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_001, TRT: 1:36:54 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris was born on January 9, 1938 in Detroit, Michigan to Mary Lou Jenkins and William Jenkins. Harris' maternal great-grandparents had been enslaved in Georgia, where their descendants worked as sharecroppers before moving to Detroit in the 1920s. After his mother died in childbirth, Harris' maternal aunt and uncle, Rusha Harris and Major Lee Harris, adopted him. Harris' biological father, who lived in Detroit, cared for his two brothers and remained involved in his life throughout his childhood. Harris grew up on the West Side of Detroit near a black business district and attended Sherrill Elementary School, an interracial school. His adoptive father, Major Lee Harris, worked as a laborer for the Detroit Motor Company. He describes the sights, sounds and smells of his childhood, including listening to music at the Tabernacle Baptist Church and St. Stephen's A.M.E. Church. His adoptive parents and oldest brother, Maurice Jenkins, exposed him to jazz and bebop music from a

young age.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:06 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris remembers taking field trips to see the Detroit Symphony Orchestra while at Sherrill Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan, where his music instructors fostered his growing interest in classical music. Harris began collecting classical records as a child and received a conducting baton from the choir director of Detroit's Tabernacle Baptist Church when he was about ten years old. At Tabernacle, he was exposed to spirituals, sacred anthems and oratorios. In 1952, he entered Detroit's Chadsey High School, where he was mentored by the band and choral directors, played tennis and ran track. A maternal uncle also influenced Harris' educational aspirations. Harris originally intended to study jazz after graduating from high school, but Leonard Bernstein's television show, 'Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra,' and listening to Alice Coltrane on the piano convinced him to study classical music. Harris talks about Detroit's black history clubs and visiting the Paradise and World Stage Theaters.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_003, TRT: 3:27:29 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris attended Sherrill Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan. In eighth grade, a teacher attempted to dissuade him from enrolling in high school college preparatory courses. Despite this incident of racial stereotyping, Harris completed the college prep curriculum at Detroit's Chadsey High School. A guidance counselor helped him make the decision to study music in college. He conducted a band for the first time in 1956 at his high school graduation. Harris studied music education at Detroit's Wayne State University, where Malcolm Johns, Ruth Wylie, and James Gibb acted as his mentors. Harris describes integrating a restaurant in Detroit and a hotel swimming pool in Washington, D.C. Harris graduated in 1960 and began teaching for the Detroit Public Schools. In 1962, he obtained his M.A. degree in music from Wayne State University, for which he completed an oral-history based thesis, and joined the

faculty soon after. Harris remembers hearing Paul Robeson sing in Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:28 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris taught music theory and conducted a women's chorale ensemble at Detroit, Michigan's Wayne State University during the early 1960s. He also formed the black music ensemble, Robert Harris Singers. In 1970, he joined the music faculty at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. Racial discrimination by a professor at Eastman School of Music prompted him to end his doctoral studies. Harris earned his Ph.D. degree in composition and theory from Michigan State in 1971 and continued to teach there until 1977. During this time, he composed choral music and met Eva Jessye. While at a music conference, he was offered the director of choral music position at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. He joined the faculty in 1977 despite the difference in atmosphere from Michigan State. The caliber of Northwestern students and faculty impressed him. Harris taught conducting at Northwestern for thirty-five years. He was the second black faculty member in the music department.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:48 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris primarily composes church anthems and writes for choral ensembles. He has conducted internationally, including in Korea, Taiwan, and South Africa. In 2000, he conducted the New York City premier of David Fanshawe's 'African Sanctus,' and in 2012, he premiered Richard Blackford's 'Not In Our Time' at Northwestern University. Harris taught Broadway star Heather Headley and opera singer Daniel Washington. Harris describes Chicago, Illinois' classical and choral music scene and talks about composers and conductors, HistoryMakers T.J. Anderson, Olly Wilson, and Julius Williams. Harris describes the role of the conductor in a performance and his personal conducting philosophy. He also talks about composers Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven and explains how a musical composition translates in a performance.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_006, TRT: 6:11:25 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris retired from his position as director of choral music at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in 2012. After leaving Trinity United Methodist Church in Wilmette, Illinois, he joined the congregation at Winnetka Congregational Church in Winnetka, Illinois. He talks about musical collaborations between individual artists and describes his dream choral ensemble. Harris also talks about his plans for retirement. He reflects upon his personal legacy and what he would have done differently in his life. Harris describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and describes how he would like to be remembered. Harris has two daughters.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert A. Harris, Section  
A2013\_234\_001\_007, TRT: 7:09:45 2013/08/25

Robert A. Harris narrates his photographs.