

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Earl Lewis

---

## 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>	Lewis, Earl
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 18, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:31:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	History professor, academic administrator, and foundation chief executive Earl Lewis (1955 - ) , author of <i>In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk</i> , was Emory University's first African American provost and the highest-ranking African American administrator in the university's history. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 18, 2013, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_255
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Foundation president, historian and academic administrator Earl Lewis was born in 1955 in Norfolk, Virginia. Lewis attended Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, where he graduated in 1978 with his B.A. degree in history and psychology. After graduating from Concordia College, Lewis enrolled in the University of Minnesota and received his M.A. degree in history in 1981. He then went on to earn his Ph.D. in 1984 from the University of Minnesota.

In 1984, Lewis was hired as an assistant professor in the department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Then, in 1989, he joined the faculty at the University of Michigan as an associate professor of history and African American and African Studies. One year after his arrival at the University of Michigan, Lewis was appointed as the director of the university's Center for African American and African Studies. He became a full professor of history and African American and African Studies in 1995, and a faculty associate in the Program in American Culture. In 1997, Lewis was promoted to interim dean of the University of Michigan's Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies. Shortly thereafter, in 1998, Lewis became the vice provost for academic affairs for graduate studies and dean; and, in 2003, he was appointed the Elsa Barkley Brown and Robin D.G. Kelley Collegiate Professor of History and African American and African Studies. Then, in 2004, he was hired as both provost and executive vice president for academic affairs and as the Asa Griggs Candler professor of history and African American studies at Emory University. Lewis was Emory University's first African American provost and the highest-ranking African American administrator in the university's history. In 2013, he left Emory University and assumed a new role as president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Lewis has edited, authored or co-authored seven books. They include the 1991 monograph *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk*, 2000's *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, 2001's *Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White*, and 2004's *The African American Urban Experience: From the Colonial Era to the Present*. Lewis is also the author of more than two dozen scholarly articles and has served on several academic and community boards, including the American Historical Review, Council of Graduate Schools, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Academy of Science's Board on Higher Education and the Workforce, and the Center for Research Libraries. He became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2008.

Earl Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 18, 2013.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Earl Lewis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on October 18, 2013, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. History professor, academic administrator, and foundation chief executive Earl Lewis (1955 - ) , author of *In Their Own*

Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, was Emory University's first African American provost and the highest-ranking African American administrator in the university's history.

---

## **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:**

Lewis, Earl

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Lewis, Earl--Interviews

---

**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Emory University University of Michigan

---

Emory University University of Michigan

---

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

---

**Occupations:**

History Professor

---

Academic Administrator

---

Foundation Chief Executive

---

**HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers

---

**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 Earl Lewis, October 18, 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 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 Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:43 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis was born on November 15, 1955 in Norfolk, Virginia. His father, Earl Lewis, Sr., was born in Tidewater, Virginia in August 1923 and worked as a custodian in the federal building. Lewis's father died of kidney failure on November 11, 1961 in Norfolk General Hospital, just shy of Lewis' sixth birthday. Lewis' mother, Virginia Carr, was born in Norfolk, Virginia to Susan Jordan James and Clifton James and was a teacher and

counselor. Susan James was born on June 12, 1903 in Norfolk and worked as a housekeeper, while Clifton James was a painter. Susan James' parents were born slaves in South Carolina, but moved to Virginia after the Civil War and her father became a justice of the peace. Because Susan James was unable to pay for college during the Depression, she ensured that her children would attend college, and Virginia Carr attended Virginia State University in Norfolk. Lewis attended Messiah Presbyterian Church. He also remembers going to City Beach, the black beach outside of Norfolk, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:49 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis recalls going to City Beach outside of Norfolk, Virginia with his younger brother, Rudolph Lewis and catching crabs to eat. He grew up in a neighborhood that was a mixture of working class and middle class in Norfolk, Virginia. After his father's death, Lewis grew close to his maternal grandparents and his brother, and recalls traveling with his mother and grandmother to the New York World's Fair in 1965 and the 1967 International and Universal Exposition in Montreal, Canada. He also recalls his mother's devotion to both him and his brother, and her willingness to provide them with new opportunities. Lewis attended Crestwood High School in Chesapeake, Virginia, where his mother worked, from kindergarten through tenth grade. He recalls being a troublemaker in elementary school and being ostracized for not living in the same community.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:29 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis started to attend Indian River High School in Chesapeake, Virginia during his sophomore year in 1971. He recalls the tense racism at the school from both teachers and students, his experience integrating the school's Key Club with his brother, and his mother's experience as a black teacher teaching at an integrated elementary school for the first time. In 1974, Lewis graduated from high school and enrolled at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota where their marketing efforts to African American students resulted in one of the

highest percentages of black students in the country. Lewis studied psychology and history with a minor in political science. During his senior year, Lewis and others boycotted classes for ten days with AIM leader Russell Means to protest the University's treatment of its black students. After receiving his B.A. in 1978, Lewis enrolled at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he studied under Russell Menard and with historian Joe William Trotter, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:06 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis enrolled at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1978 to pursue a master's in history. He recalls his trepidation over becoming a teacher like his mother. His mentors included Lansine Kaba, Russell Menard, Clarke Chambers, John Modell, and Marlys McPherson. He received his M.A. degree in 1981 and his Ph. D. in history from the University of Minnesota in December of 1984. Lewis dissertation was on black working life in Norfolk, Virginia and later became his first book, "In Their Own Interests." Lewis recalls the quantitative research methods he used while writing his dissertation, as well what his research taught him about Norfolk that he did not know even though he grew up there. While writing his dissertation, Lewis taught five classes after a tenured black professor stopped teaching his courses. After graduating, Lewis was hired as an assistant professor at the University of California in Berkeley, California.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_005, TRT: 5:31:02 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis became an assistant professor at the University of California in Berkeley, California in January of 1985 after a practice interview that he arranged at the University of Minnesota with Russell Menard. At Berkeley, Charles Henry and Reginald Jones were heading the African American Studies department. Lewis' mentors included Leon Litwack, Lawrence Levine, and Ron Takaki, who gave Lewis an important suggestion about how to work with publishers. By 1988, Lewis had a contract for his first book, "In Their Own Interests," which was published in

1991 to mostly positive reviews, though one reviewer, Henry Lewis Suggs, accused Lewis of appropriating others' ideas. Lewis recalls marrying his first wife, Jayne London, in 1984 and the birth of their daughter in 1986. In 1989, after receiving tenure, Lewis and his family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he became an associate professor in the history department and Director of the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_006, TRT: 6:34:39 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis published his first book in 1991. His other publications include a volume on African Americans in the Industrial Age with Joe Trotter and an eleven-volume series titled "The Young Oxford History of African Americans" with Robin Kelley. He reflects on the ways the study of African American history and identity are changing given the work his students produce and the interdisciplinary approach of African American Studies programs and departments. His students include Merida Rua, Tom Guglielmo, and Heidi Ardizzone, with whom he wrote "Love on Trial." Lewis recalls the process of researching, writing, and publishing the book with Ardizzone and W.W. Norton editor Amy Cherry and the praise it received. In 1997, Lewis became interim dean of the University of Michigan's Rackham Graduate School. He reflects on his work with organizations like the Social Science History Association, NSF, AHA, and OAH, as well as on his family, his divorce from Jayne London in 1999, and his marriage to Susan Whitlock in 2002.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_007, TRT: 7:35:14 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis became dean of the Rackham Graduate School of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan under university president Lee Bollinger around 1997. While in this position, two cases, Grutter v. Bollinger and Gratz v. Bollinger, challenged the affirmative action policies of the University of Michigan. Lewis was asked by Bollinger and provost Nancy Cantor to put together a team to study diversity on campus, which led to the development of the University of Michigan Depression



Center and the book “Defending Diversity.” Lewis shares the history of presidents of the University of Michigan and talks about his role as chair of the search committee that chose President Mary Sue Coleman. In 2004, Lewis made history as the first black provost at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia and talks about studying diversity among university staff and faculty. In 2010, he joined the board of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation alongside HistoryMaker Walter E. Massey, and, in 2013, he became president of the foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_008, TRT: 8:32:02 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis became President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2013 after choosing it over being a university president, and he reflects on the funding differences between universities and foundations. He describes his goals for promoting diversity and performing arts through the Mellon Foundation and reevaluating the legacy commitments that the foundation has made. Lewis reflects on the future of African American Studies departments and how they can establish the foundation for future disciplinary and interdisciplinary work and department leadership. He describes starting the American Crossroads book series and how it has provided a continuing platform to promote historical scholarship and scholars. He reflects on how being a black man from Norfolk, Virginia affected the writing of his first book on Norfolk. He also reflects upon the problems facing African American historians in the academy.

Video Oral History Interview with Earl Lewis, Section  
A2013\_255\_001\_009, TRT: 9:17:26 2013/10/18

Earl Lewis talks about other organizations that sponsor the sciences, arts, and the humanities including the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, and Art Commission of the City of New York and how those organizations can work together to promote the arts and humanities in the future. He reflects on his own life’s journey from troublemaker to President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and how he has motivated himself to advance his career. He ends

the interview by reflecting on how he would like to be remembered as well as on his legacy.