

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter Cooper

PERSON

Cooper, Walter, 1928-

**Alternative Names:** Walter Cooper;

**Life Dates:** July 18, 1928-

**Place of Birth:** Clairton, Pennsylvania, USA

**Residence:** Rochester, New York

**Occupations:** Nonprofit Executive

## Biographical Note

Nonprofit executive Walter Cooper was born on July 18, 1928 in Clairton, Pennsylvania to Alonzo and Luda Cooper. After graduating as salutatorian from Clairton High School in 1946, Cooper received his B.S. degree in chemistry from Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania in 1950.

Hired as a research scientist at Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, New York in 1956, Cooper became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. degree in physical chemistry from the University of Rochester in 1957. At Kodak, he was promoted successively to senior research chemist, research associate and technical associate. During his career at Kodak, Cooper published a wide array of scholarly papers in the fields of chemistry and physical chemistry and became the holder of three patents.

Cooper served as chairman of the education committee of the NAACP from 1959 to 1965. In Rochester, he was heavily involved in community development and civil rights issues. Cooper took a leave of absence in 1964 from Eastman Kodak to help form an anti-poverty agency in Rochester called Action for a Better Community, Incorporated. He co-founded the Rochester branch of the Urban League in 1965, continuing to serve on the Board of Directors into the 1970s. He established Rochester's Sister City program with Bamako, Mali in 1975.

Returning to Eastman-Kodak, Cooper was named manager of the office of technical communications, overseeing the publications and technical reports by 2,300 scientific and research personnel in 1985. Cooper retired from Eastman Kodak Company in 1986.

Cooper was elected to the Board of Trustees of Washington and Jefferson College in 1975, and named a Knight of the National Order of Mali in 1981. Cooper was named to

the New York State Board of Regents in 1988, and he became Regent Emeritus in 2003. State University of New York at Geneseo awarded Cooper an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, and he also received the Rotary Award, the oldest civic honor in Rochester, New York in 2005. He received the Frederick Douglass Medal from the University of Rochester in recognition of his lifetime involvement in civil rights in 2008. Rochester City School No. 10 was named the Dr. Walter Cooper Academy School #10 in his honor in 2010. The Rochester Area Community Foundation presented Walter Cooper with the Joe U. Posner Founders Award, its highest honor, in recognition of his many charitable contributions in 2013. Dr. Walter Cooper Papers are archived and housed at the River Campus Libraries, at the University of Rochester, in Rochester, New York in 2018.

His wife, Helen, who was also a scientist and worked for Kodak prior to Cooper joining, passed away in January, 2005. They have two adult sons.

Walter Cooper was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on April 19, 2018.

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