

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas

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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>	Thomas, Latta R.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 3, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:38:49).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Philosophy and religion professor and chaplain Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas (1927 - 2021) taught at Benedict College for thirty years. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 3, 2002, in Columbia, South Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_219
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The Reverend Dr. Latta Roosevelt Thomas, liberation theologian, was born on October 12, 1927, in Union, South Carolina. Thomas graduated from Union's Sims High School in 1947. His desire for education and his work ethic helped him to earn an A.A. from Friendship College in Rock Hill, South Carolina in 1949. Thomas was salutatorian of his class at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1951, where he received his B.A. Because of his high grades, the Pepsi-Cola Company awarded him a graduate scholarship. Moving to Rochester, New York, Thomas earned a B.D. from Colgate Rochester Seminary in 1955. Meanwhile, Thomas became a full-time minister at Monumental Baptist Church in Elmira, New York, where he met his wife, Bessie "Bea" Lowery.

In 1966, Thomas earned a master's of sacred theology degree from Andover Newton Theological Seminary. At the request of a former mentor and friend, he returned to his alma mater, Benedict College. During his thirty-year tenure at Benedict, Thomas served as school chaplain and head of the Religion and Philosophy Department. He also served as pastor of Second Calvary Baptist Church in Columbia for more than twenty years. Thomas earned a doctor of ministry degree from Andover Newton in 1973. As a progressive theologian, Thomas has published numerous articles and two books, *Biblical Faith and the Black American* and *The Biblical God and Human Suffering*.

Three important factors influenced Thomas' philosophy of life: the Judeo-Christian tradition, the black American experience, and the people who took an interest in his academic and professional development. Thomas retired in 2000. He and his wife lived in Columbia, South Carolina, where Thomas spent his time perfecting his Greek and reading for pleasure. He was a member of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the NAACP, and was past chairman of the South Carolina Academy of Religion.

The Reverend Dr. Latta Roosevelt Thomas passed away on December 10, 2021 at age 94.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 3, 2002, in Columbia, South Carolina, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Philosophy and religion professor and chaplain Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas (1927 - 2021) taught at Benedict College for thirty years.

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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:

Thomas, Latta R.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Thomas, Latta R.--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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Benedict College

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## Occupations:

Chaplain

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

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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 Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, December 3, 2002. 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).

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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 Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_001, TRT: 31:17:00 ?

Latta Thomas talks about his family background. Thomas was born to Alsie Crenshaw Thomas and Pickett Roosevelt Thomas in Buffalo, South Carolina. His mother's great-grandfather Allen "Al" David Duncan was born into slavery in Union County, South Carolina in 1848. Al entertained with music while the slave-owners were out of town, and one time was caught and whipped. Al

married Dolly Anne who was half-African and half-Native American. Thomas's father's side of the family had Native American, Scotch-Irish, and African heritage. His paternal grandparents were Clorena Johnson and Arthur Thomas. Thomas tells stories about his paternal uncles. Uncle George was an alcoholic who gave up drinking after his religious conversion at a revival. Thomas's Uncle Jack "Pet" Jones was an intimidating man who went bird-hunting and said inappropriate things at church. Aunt Anna Rae attempted to make Uncle Pet change his behavior through voodoo. Uncle Pet sabotaged her efforts and stuck her with a safety pin at church.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Latta Thomas talks about his family. His Uncle Jack "Pet" Jones was shot by a relative after a drunken altercation over a woman. His father, Pickett Roosevelt Thomas, was born on February 21, 1905, and his mother, Alsie Crenshaw Thomas, was born on April 7, 1905. His parents met at church and eloped at age seventeen because his paternal grandmother Clorena disapproved of the marriage. Thomas's father had a fifth grade education, but he could read and was good at mathematics. His father worked as a sharecropper, blacksmith, and carpenter in South Carolina. His father often traveled north to Coatesville, Pennsylvania and Baltimore, Maryland to look for work, but he was not hired due to his lack of education. His mother had a ninth grade education and taught WWI G.I.s and she envied Northern visitors who had new cars. Thomas's father saw education as the key to employment but was thankful for the self-sufficiency of farming.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:55 ?

Latta Thomas describes his childhood and school experiences. Thomas remembers stealing fruit from plantation orchards with his friends. One group was chased by the landowner while the second group would take the fruit. Thomas recalls that his father and his friends also raided parties. His father told him of the time he raided Aunt Essie's party with Peg Leg Jackson and some other men who blew out the lamp while the others absconded with food items. As Thomas grew older, his friends pressured each other to steal their own watermelons rather than sharing. Thomas enjoyed school and learned to read at an early age. Thomas recalls his favorite elementary teachers, and Pastor M. A. Zimmerman, Pastor L. C. Sanders, and his principal A.A. Sims, who mentored him during high school. Thomas took to heart Sims' messages about the importance of the Classics and was disappointed that his high school did not offer Latin. Thomas graduated from Sims High School in 1947 at the age of twenty.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Latta Thomas talks about his education. Through the help of Reverend M. A. Zimmerman, Thomas received a work scholarship to attend Friendship Junior College, in Rock Hill, South Carolina where he graduated with an associate's degree in 1947. Friendship's President, Dr. Goudlock helped Thomas to obtain a scholarship to Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1951. Thomas then attended Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York where a white barber would not cut his hair anymore out of fear that he would drive customers away. Known for the social gospel tradition of Walter Rauschenbusch, tough academics, and notable alumni, the teachings of the Crozer Seminary influenced

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Thomas talks about Crozer alum, J.H. Jackson, leader of the National Baptist Convention, whose opposition to the Civil Rights Movement led to a contentious splinter and the formation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:09 ?

Latta Thomas talks about influential black theological and political leaders. Dr. James Rodney Branton, a protégé of E.J. Godspeed, Sr., was Thomas' mentor at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. Branton encouraged Thomas to learn Greek and to pursue his Ph.D in the New Testament. Thomas' dissertation interpreted Biblical passages related to slavery and led to his book "Biblical Faith and the Black American." Thomas talks about his teacher Gayraud Wilmore's involvement with the National Black Churchmen, a group of clergy who aligned with the Black Power movement. Cain Hope Felder, a black theologian at Howard University, personally invited Thomas to the Stony The Road We Trod Conference in 1991 and cited his work as foundational to black scholarship on the New Testament. Thomas talks about contemporary issues in theological scholarship, such as efforts to uncover the timeline of Jesus Christ's life and travels, as well as how the Cain Doctrine and the Ham Doctrine have been handled in Biblical scholarship on slavery.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Latta Thomas describes his theological philosophy. Trained at the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Thomas embraced liberation theology and contends that churches should actively be involved in social and political issues. Thomas recalls a poem from his childhood called "Abou Ben Adhem" which encourages people to love their fellow humans. Thomas talks about how Gurney Nelson, Dean of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, argued that Jesus was a humanist due to his emphasis on serving the needs of others. Thomas hopes that the black community will reject idolatry and injustice. Thomas also believes that humans have a fundamental dependency yet are often unaware of it until automatic functions, like moving one's arm, are impaired. Thomas values Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological liberalism which states that everybody is theological even if they deny it. Thomas believes in God even when his faith is tested like the time during seminary when three children were killed in a gas explosion.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Latta Thomas talks about his book "Biblical God of Human Suffering" in which he argues that God did not make human beings to suffer and suffering is a result of human's actions. Thomas describes black theology which is the idea that God is black because the Biblical God identifies with the person who suffers the most. Thomas recalls being accused of disloyalty for critiquing black scholar Reverend Albert Cleage's book on the New Testament. As a Baptist minister, Thomas met two famous football stars, Jim Brown and Ernie Davis. Ernie Davis, the first African American to win the Heisman trophy, died of leukemia at age twenty-three. Thomas then describes the major principles of African religion. Thomas pastored at Monumental Baptist Church in Elmira, New York for eleven years before moving to Benedict College where he taught for thirty years until retiring in 1995. In 1996, he began working at Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina to develop a religious studies curriculum. Thomas reflects upon his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Latta Thomas, Section A2002\_219\_001\_008,  
TRT: 0:27:35 ?

Latta Thomas would like to be remembered as a fair teacher and a caring pastor. Thomas talks about the important role that black churches have in promoting the education of young people and the influence of W.E.B. DuBois, Benjamin Mays, Joseph Nicholson, and Gayraud Wilmore on developing an educational curriculum around the black church. Thomas cites Reverend Yvonne Delk, Reverend Bill Jones, and Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood as progressive religious leaders who set up schools at their churches. Thomas concludes by narrating his photographs.