

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mercer Cook

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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>	Cook, Mercer, 1930-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mercer Cook,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 16, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:44:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	State deputy attorney Mercer Cook (1930 - 2018) has served as Assistant State's Attorney and Deputy State's Attorney for Cook County, after which he went into private practice. Cook was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 16, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_300
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Mercer Cook, born May 31, 1930 in Washington, D.C., is an accomplished attorney in public and private practice with an interesting family story. His great grandfather John Hartwell Cook graduated from Oberlin College during the Civil War and was reportedly the first Dean of Howard University Law School. His grandfather, classically trained composer Will Marion (Mercer) Cook (1869-1945) collaborated on Broadway musicals with Paul Laurence Dunbar and Bert Williams. His father, (Will) Mercer Cook (1903-1987) was a noted scholar and translator from Howard University who served as United States Ambassador to Senegal and Nigeria.

Cook grew up in Atlanta, attending Oglethorpe Elementary School. He graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. in 1947. Cook earned a B.A. from Amherst College in 1951. He spent some time in Europe before returning to finish his J.D. from the University of Chicago in 1956. Cook's brother, Jacques is also an attorney. From 1957, he was in private practice. In 1967, he was hired by the Cook (Illinois) County Legal Assistance Foundation. In 1970, Cook switched to the Cook County State's Attorney's Office. He was Assistant State's Attorney from 1970 to 1989 and Deputy State's Attorney from 1989-1993. From 1993 to 1996 Cook worked for the legal firm Gordon and Pikarski. He has remained in private practice since 1996.

Cook has three children: Antoinette, a lawyer, Mercer, a managing director of Citigroup, and Janice, senior vice president of New York City Investment Fund. Cook and his wife, Edwina, live in Chicago.

Cook passed away on January 4, 2018.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mercer Cook was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 16, 2003, in

Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. State deputy attorney Mercer Cook (1930 - 2018) has served as Assistant State's Attorney and Deputy State's Attorney for Cook County, after which he went into private practice.

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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:

Cook, Mercer, 1930-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cook, Mercer, 1930- --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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Cook County (Ill.). State's Attorney's Office

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## Occupations:

State Deputy Attorney

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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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 Mercer Cook, December 16, 2003. 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 Mercer Cook, Section A2003\_300\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Mercer Cook was born on May 31, 1930 in Washington, D.C. His mother, Vashti Maria Smith Cook, was born in 1910 in Baltimore, Maryland. After her father died in the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, her mother, Margaret Hubbard, married Negro League baseball player, Jess Hubbard, whom she later divorced. Cook's father, Will Mercer Cook, was born on in 1903 in D.C.; he was educated at Amherst College and Brown University. Cook's paternal grandfather, Will Marion Cook, was a classically trained composer and violinist, famous for his songs and Broadway musicals. Cook's paternal grandmother, Abbie Mitchell, was a singer and actress, who married Cook's grandfather at fourteen years old

after she was cast in one of his musicals. Cook's grandparents enjoyed successful careers in the U.S. and Europe, touring in the musical 'In Dahomey.' Cook spent his childhood, living in the United States, France, Cuba and Haiti where his father taught and, later, served as a diplomat. Cook remembers his father's friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercer Cook, Section A2003\_300\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Cook's parents met at Howard University in Washington, D.C. where his mother was a student and his father was teaching. Cook has one brother, Jacques Cook. Though he enjoyed living in Atlanta, Georgia, Haiti and Washington, D.C., Cook's nomadic childhood was hard on him. Cook's father had many friends who were prominent African American figures in academics, art and politics. Cook attended Oglethorpe Elementary School in Atlanta and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C, where his teachers helped him with English upon his return from Haiti. In 1947, Cook went to Amherst College and studied French. After graduation, he sought a career with the U.S. State Department, but was denied because of his race. Cook then spent two years with his father in Paris, France where he met novelist Richard Wright. Many years later, while he was working for World Peace Through Law, Cook visited his parents in Niger, where his father was a diplomat. Cook recalls a story about his grandfather and Josephine Baker.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercer Cook, Section A2003\_300\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Mercer Cook met Richard Wright in Paris, France and met many Négritude writers, who were friends of his father's. Cook graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in Illinois in 1956 where he was close to HistoryMaker Truman K. Gibson, who later let him work out of his office. Cook married his first wife in 1956; the couple had four children during their ten year marriage. Upon graduation, Cook accepted a job with the City of Chicago in the Corporation Counsel's Office. He later worked for the Cook County Legal Defense Foundation and worked in the Cook County State's Attorney's Office for twenty-three years; he eventually became deputy state's attorney and retired from the State's Attorney's Office in 1993. During his career, Cook litigated a tax exemption case involving the Elks National Memorial. Cook participated in the March on Washington in 1963, and married his second wife in 1967. Cook describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and reflects upon his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercer Cook, Section A2003\_300\_001\_004, TRT: 0:13:15 ?

Mercer Cook narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercer Cook, Section A2003\_300\_06\_MED\_001, TRT: 0:05:55 ?