

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Michael Thurmond

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Thurmond, Michael L.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Michael Thurmond,
Dates:	October 12, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:44:12).
Abstract:	State labor commissioner The Honorable Michael Thurmond (1953 -) was the first African American to be elected to the Georgia General Assembly from Clarke County since Reconstruction. Later, Thurmond became the first African American elected Georgia State Labor Commissioner, an office he held for over ten years. Thurmond was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 12, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_199
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Georgia Labor Commissioner and noted historian Michael L. Thurmond was born in Athens, Georgia, on January 5, 1953, the youngest of the nine children of Sidney and Vanilla Thurmond. For eleven years Thurmond attended all-black schools, graduating from consolidated Clarke Senior High School in 1971 as co-president of the student council and holder of the 100-yard dash record. At Paine College Thurmond started a student paper, was class president, and graduated cum laude with his B.A. degree in philosophy and religion in 1975; he later graduated from the University of South Carolina Law School.

In the summer of 1975, Thurmond helped start the black *Athens Voice* newspaper and upon graduation from law school in 1978, published *A Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History*. Thurmond returned to Athens to practice law and took an active role in civic affairs; in 1986, he became the first African American to be elected to the Georgia General Assembly from Clarke County since the time of Reconstruction. In 1994, Governor Zell Miller selected Thurmond to head Georgia's transition from welfare to work. Thurmond became a distinguished practitioner and lecturer at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Thurmond became the first African American elected Georgia State Labor Commissioner in 1998; in this role he oversaw some four thousand employees while serving 90,000 families.

Thurmond chaired the Martin Luther King, Jr., Georgia State Holiday Commission, and served on the board of curators of the Georgia Historical Society. Thurmond published a second book entitled, *Freedom: An African American History of Georgia*. Thurmond and his wife Zola raised a daughter, Mikaya.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Michael Thurmond was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 12, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. State labor commissioner The Honorable Michael Thurmond (1953 -) was the first African American to be elected to the Georgia General Assembly from Clarke County since Reconstruction. Later, Thurmond became the first African American elected Georgia State Labor Commissioner, an office he held for over ten years.

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:

- Thurmond, Michael L.
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Melnick, Coy (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Thurmond, Michael L.--Interviews
 - African American authors--Interviews
 - African American historians--Interviews
 - African American civic leaders--Interviews
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African American labor leaders--Interviews

African American legislators--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Georgia

Occupations:

State Labor Commissioner

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 The Honorable Michael Thurmond, October 12, 2004. 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).

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 The Honorable Michael Thurmond, Section
A2004_199_001_001, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

The Honorable Michael Thurmond was born on January 5, 1953 in Athens, Georgia. His mother, Vanilla Burton Thurmond, was born in 1921 in Elbert County, Georgia. She traced her ancestry back to a relative enslaved on a plantation in nearby Oconee County. She attended Athens High and Industrial School, took classes at Fort Valley State University, and briefly worked as a schoolteacher before marrying. Thurmond's father, Sidney Thurmond, was born in 1903 in Oconee County, Georgia. He grew up working for a white family to pay off a family debt and never learned to read or write. He worked mainly as a sharecropper, and also sold vegetables, wood, and coal. After the Moore's Ford Bridge Lynching near Oconee County in 1946, his family moved to rural Clarke County, near Athens. Growing up, Thurmond used the newly integrated library of the University of Georgia in Athens to educate himself about black literature and history. Thurmond attended the segregated Lyons Elementary School and Lyons Junior High.

African American authors--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

African American labor leaders--Interviews.

African American legislators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Michael Thurmond, Section
A2004_199_001_002, TRT: 0:28:06 ?

Michael Thurmond aspired to a political career early in life after seeing prominent civil rights leaders in the Atlanta Constitution. Thurmond heard the sound of bombs and sirens following HistoryMaker Charlayne Hunter-Gault's attempted integration of the University of Georgia in 1961. He attended the all-black Burney Harris High School until 1970 when it closed due to desegregation. After fighting to preserve the legacy of, and retain faculty from his former school, Thurmond attended the newly integrated Clarke Central High School in his senior year. Thurmond served as student co-president with a white student and gave a speech that was well-received by both black and white students. His parents' emphasis on education made college a priority for him, and Thurmond attended Methodist Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. Thurmond reflects on the losses incurred by school integration and the historic achievement of sitting in Georgia's first integrated classes. He also remembers influential teachers.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Michael Thurmond, Section
A2004_199_001_003, TRT: 0:28:21 ?

The Honorable Michael Thurmond graduated from Paine College in 1975 then began the Athens Voice, the first local black newspaper since the 19th century. Thurmond graduated from the University of South Carolina School of Law and published his first book, 'A Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History,' in 1978. Thurmond returned to Athens to work in the city attorney's office, then started his own law firm. In 1986 Thurmond became the first African American elected to the Georgia General Assembly since Reconstruction and the only one representing a majority-white district (Clarke

County) in the Southeast. After losing a 1992 run for the U.S. House, Thurmond began his second book, 'Freedom: An African-American History of Georgia, 1733-1865.' In 1994, he was appointed Director of Human Services, Division of Family and Children's Services and tasked with implementing federal welfare reform. Thurmond's 1997 election as Georgia's Labor Commissioner led to modernizing the state's unemployment system.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Michael Thurmond, Section
A2004_199_001_004, TRT: 0:18:16 ?

The Honorable Michael Thurmond met his second wife, Zola Thurmond, while she was working in the office of Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris. They have one daughter, Mikaya Thurmond. Thurmond wrote his 2003 book, 'Freedom: An African-American History of Georgia, 1733-1865,' to raise awareness of the unknown multitude of enslaved African Americans who resisted slavery and fought for freedom. Thurmond reflects his legacy, and his life. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered.