

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Burroughs, Tony, 1948- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, |
| Dates: | August 11, 2005, July 19, 2005 and October 12, 2005 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2005 |
| Physical Description: | 18 Betacame SP videocassettes (8:33:32). |
| Abstract: | Genealogist Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs (1948 -) specialized in the tracing of African American family histories. He taught at Chicago State University. Burroughs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 11, 2005, July 19, 2005 and October 12, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2005_166 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

African American genealogist Anthony Preston “Tony” Burroughs was born on November 23, 1948 in Chicago, Illinois. Burroughs can trace his ancestors seven generations on his mother’s (Mary E. G. Burroughs) side of the family. His father, Elmer Burroughs, is the son of Asa Morris Burroughs, who was president of the Cook County Bar Association in 1928. Burroughs attended A.O. Sexton and Ambrose E. Burnside Elementary Schools; Frank L. Gillespie Upper Grade Center and graduated from Harlan High School in 1966. At Southern Illinois University, Burroughs, an African American Studies major, joined the Black Student Union. He met Alex Haley in 1969 and was influenced by *Roots*. During the early 1970s, Burroughs studied at the Center for Black Education in Washington, D.C. and Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina. Burroughs served as a staff member of Our House Community School in Milwaukee.

On Thanksgiving Day of 1975, Burroughs started tracing his own family tree and joined the Chicago Genealogical Society. In 1977, Burroughs attended a three-week genealogy institute sponsored by the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where he was mentored by pioneer black archivist, James Dent Walker (1928-1993). Meanwhile, Burroughs worked as both a physical education teacher at Francis W. Parker School and a commodities trader. Genealogy became Burroughs’ full-time occupation in 1990 when he started teaching it at Chicago State University. Burroughs, a graduate of the National Institute of Genealogical Research in Washington, D.C. and the Institute of Genealogy and History at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, was elected president of the Afro-American Genealogical and Historical Society of Chicago in 1991.

Burroughs has been quoted and featured in periodicals like *Time*; *People*; the *New York Times*; the *Wall Street Journal*; the *Chicago Defender*; and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In 1996, he received the Distinguished Service Award from the National Genealogical Society and co-authored the *African-American Genealogical Sourcebook* in 1995 and *Black Roots* in 2001. Lecturing widely in the United States and Canada, Burroughs made his television debut

in the PBS series *Ancestors* in 1997, and six episodes of the sequel in 2000. In 2005, Burroughs assumed the role of lead investigator for the BBC production of *The Real Family of Jesus* for the Discovery Channel, which took him to three continents.

Serving on the boards of the Association of Professional Genealogists, the New England Historic Genealogical Society and the Federation of Genealogical Societies, among others, Burroughs makes Chicago his home.

Burroughs was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 19, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 11, 2005, July 19, 2005 and October 12, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 18 Betacame SP videocassettes. Genealogist Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs (1948 -) specialized in the tracing of African American family histories. He taught at Chicago State University.

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:

Burroughs, Tony, 1948-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Burroughs, Tony, 1948---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Genealogist

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, August 11, 2005, July 19, 2005 and October 12, 2005. 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 Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs was born on November 23, 1948 in Chicago, Illinois to Mary Ellen Brooks Burroughs and Elmer Burroughs. Burroughs’ maternal ancestors were brought as slaves from Prince George’s County, Maryland to Fayette County, Pennsylvania in 1773, and later settled along the Monongahela River. His seventh generation ancestor, David Truman, was freed in 1806 at the age of twenty-five years old. Around the turn of the 20th century, Truman’s descendants lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they worked in the steel mills and coal mines. Burroughs’ maternal great-grandfather, William Terrell, was incarcerated in the late 1890s, leaving Burroughs’ great-grandmother to raise their children alone. Due to these circumstances, Burroughs’ maternal grandmother, Lydia Terrell Brooks, was raised in foster care. She gave birth to Burroughs’ mother in Pittsburgh in 1926. Burroughs also talks about the history of slavery and the sources of his family history, including his maternal aunt, Doris Brooks.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_001_002, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs’ maternal grandmother’s father, William Terrell, was imprisoned in the early 20th century for shooting two men in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His great-grandmother, Mary Terrell, then placed her daughters in the care of relatives, and found work in domestic service. Burroughs’ maternal grandfather, Preston Clyde Brooks, was the son of Buffalo Soldier Preston S. Brooks, and worked as a custodian in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. He talks about his grandfather’s relation to Preston Brooks, the white U.S. Representative from South Carolina who caned U.S. Senator Charles Sumner in 1856. Burroughs’ mother graduated from Pittsburgh’s Schenley High School, and moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she became a crossing guard and teacher’s aide in the Chicago Public Schools. Burroughs recalls his experiences of segregation in Chicago, where he attended a school located seventeen blocks from his home, and was denied medical attention at white hospitals after nearly severing four fingers.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs’ ancestors served under Commander Oliver Hazard Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie during the Civil War. Burroughs’ paternal great-grandfather, Morris Burroughs, moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1887, and helped organize the Pullman porters’ union in 1901. His son, attorney Asa Morris Burroughs, married Alma Rice Burroughs, who was born in Chicago in 1895 to William Rice and Minnie Barker, migrants from Missouri and Tennessee; and raised Burroughs’ father, Elmer Burroughs, who was born in Chicago in 1919. Years later, Burroughs was a student at Chicago’s overcrowded Burnside Academy. The school board refused to integrate the nearby Oliver H. Perry Elementary School, which was named for Burroughs’ ancestors’ commander; and, in 1962, he and his black peers were forced to transfer to Gillespie Elementary School, located seventeen blocks from their homes. With Alma Coggs, Burroughs’ mother, Mary Brooks Burroughs, organized sit-in protest against the transfer, but it was unsuccessful.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs' paternal great-grandmother, Mary Williams Burroughs, attended Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. His paternal grandfather, Asa Morris Burroughs, was a respected attorney in Illinois, whose only brother was incarcerated for robbing the Illinois Tool Works, Inc. Burroughs' father, Elmer Burroughs, attended law school at Roosevelt College in Chicago, Illinois, and left to work as a law clerk and later an insurance claims agent. Burroughs' parents were introduced by their sisters, Margaret Brooks and Irene Burroughs, who became friends at Wilberforce University. Burroughs grew up on 60th Street in Chicago, and attended Austin O. Sexton Elementary School and St. Edmund's Episcopal Church. Later, his family moved to a home with a large yard on Burnside Avenue. Burroughs recalls visiting the Lincoln Park Zoo with his father and brother, and the local library with his mother. He also describes his difficulty obtaining early records of the student body at Spelman College.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_001_005, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs grew up in Chicago, Illinois. He attended St. Edmund's Episcopal Church with his family until their relocation to Burnside Avenue, where he became an altar boy at St. George's Episcopal Church. With his brother, Asa Burroughs, Burroughs attended dance and singing lessons at the Parkway Community House on 51st Street and South Parkway, and watched Westerns at the Amo Theatre on 61st Street. Burroughs was an avid baseball player throughout his childhood. He attended Austin O. Sexton Elementary School, Burnside Elementary School, Gillespie Elementary School and John Marshall Harlan High School, which did not offer a baseball program. Instead, Burroughs joined Coach Gerald Richard's track team, where he competed in the one hundred yard dash. He also joined the football team and drama club, and played roles in 'Three's a Crowd' and 'Death Takes a Holiday.' During this time, Burroughs developed his aspiration to attend college.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_001_006, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs was raised in Chicago, Illinois, where he joined the school band and the track team at Gillespie Elementary School. He went on to attend John Marshall Harlan High School, and worked after class as an attendant at the Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital. Burroughs aspired to study at Tennessee State University or San Jose State College, but decided to matriculate at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, where he received in-state tuition and a guaranteed loan. At SIU, Burroughs initially struggled with his coursework, but eventually adopted a study schedule and secured passing grades. He pledged to the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, where he served in a leadership role and helped raise over \$10,000 for the chapter. He was also involved in the student government at SIU. Influenced by his involvement with the Black Student Union and his mother's civil rights activism, Burroughs eventually switched his major from physical education to African American studies.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_002_007, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs joined the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, Illinois. In 1968, he traveled with his fraternity brothers to Washington, D.C., where they met the leaders of the Poor People's Campaign, including Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. That summer, Burroughs worked for the Johnson

Products Company in Chicago, Illinois, and witnessed the events of the Democratic National Convention. He also toured Chicago's Black Peoples Topographical Research Center, where he learned about the history of the Interstate Highway System. Upon returning to SIU in the fall, Burroughs and his fellow members of the Black Student Union, including Sinclair Brown and Eric Frazier, successfully petitioned for the creation of the Black American Studies Program. Burroughs describes the development of his political consciousness, and remembers his first pair of blue jeans. He also recalls his Boy Scout troop's dress inspections.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_002_008, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs was instrumental in the establishment of the Black American Studies Program at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, Illinois in 1968. As a member of SIU's Black Student Union, he helped recruit guest speakers like activist Stokely Carmichael and writer Amiri Baraka. In 1969, Alex Haley visited the campus to speak about his African American family history. Around this time, Burroughs changed his major from physical education to African American studies. Then, SIU temporarily closed in response to student demonstrations, and Burroughs decided to leave the school. He moved to Washington, D.C., where he and his friend, Sinclair Brown, joined the Center for Black Education. Dissatisfied with the center's disorganization, they both left to find employment in the Midwest. Burroughs lived for a summer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he worked at a progressive community school. He talks about misleading family histories, and his friend's practice of polygamy.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_002_009, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs worked for a summer at a community school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He then moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he found employment with the U.S. Post Office Department. With the help of a brother from the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Burroughs was hired at the Illinois Department of Personnel in Springfield, Illinois, where he monitored the state's minority employment program. After a supervisor requested that he falsify a report in 1971, Burroughs left the agency to study at Howard Fuller's Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina. There, he took courses in electrical engineering, and worked at the radio station. He grew dissatisfied with the school's inability to enact social change, and moved to Lansing, Michigan, where he was hired to the Oldsmobile division of the General Motors Corporation. He joined the company's management training program, where he gained experience in purchasing, sales, shipping and marketing.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_002_010, TRT: 0:27:30 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs worked for the General Motors Corporation's Oldsmobile division in the early 1970s. When he was denied a promotion, he decided to leave the company in search of more fulfilling employment. He moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he became a sales representative for Hunt-Wesson Foods. In this role, he worked to expand the availability of Hunt's ketchup and Wesson oil at wholesalers and grocery stores. After leaving the company in 1974, he joined a childhood friend on a road trip to Southern California. Following an argument in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they parted ways, and Burroughs continued to the West Coast by himself. He stayed briefly with students at the University of California, Los Angeles, and then

obtained a position with a garden catalog manufacturer in the area. He ultimately returned to Chicago to help care for his ailing father, Elmer Burroughs. Burroughs describes Napoleon Hill's book, 'Think and Grow Rich,' and recalls visiting Los Angeles' Griffith Observatory.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_002_011, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs worked as a physical education instructor at the Hyde Park Jewish Community Center in Chicago, Illinois in 1974. He went on to teach for three years in Lillian Lowry's physical education department at the Francis W. Parker School, a progressive private school on Chicago's North Side. During this period, he became interested in genealogy after reading a Chicago Sun-Times article by Chicago Genealogical Society President Virginia M. Meyer. Following her recommendation, he purchased the genealogy merit badge book from the Boy Scouts of America, Inc., and began to interview his parents and grandparents. Burroughs traced his mother's family to the rural areas near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and located a maternal ancestor who was a Buffalo Soldier, and a paternal ancestor who served on the USS Niagara during the Battle of Lake Erie. Burroughs also talks about the claims to Native American ancestry in the black community, including among his family members.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_002_012, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs became interested in genealogy in the 1970s, and began interviewing his relatives about their family histories in 1975. During this period, he joined the Chicago Genealogical Society, and conducted genealogical research at Chicago's Newberry Library, the Chicago branch of the National Archives and Records Administration and the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. At this point in the interview, Burroughs talks about the Works Progress Administration's collection of slave narratives, as well as Marion Wilson Starling's dissertation, 'The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History.' He describes the griot tradition that originated in West Africa, and considers the reliability of oral histories for understanding genealogy. Burroughs talks about the social utility of claims to Native American ancestry in the African American community, and a black client whose lineage traced to the Pequot tribe in New England.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section
A2005_166_003_013, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs developed his interest in genealogy in 1975, while living in Chicago, Illinois. After reading the Boy Scouts merit badge book on genealogy, he began his research at local repositories like the National Archives at Chicago and the Newberry Library. He also joined the Chicago Genealogical Society, and participated in the National Archives and Records Administration's three-week National Institute on Genealogical Research. There, he met African American genealogist James Dent Walker, who went on to found the Afro American Historical and Genealogical Society in Washington, D.C. Under Dent Walker's mentorship, Burroughs learned about the relationship between history and genealogy, and how to use finding aids to access archival collections. Burroughs began writing a manuscript in 1989, and received advice from Delores "Dee" Parmer Woodtor, the author of a self-published book on black genealogy. Burroughs also talks about Alex Haley's 'Roots: The Saga of an American Family.'

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section

A2005_166_003_014, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs began his genealogical research in 1975 in Chicago, Illinois, but was eventually forced to redirect his attention to compensated work. Around 1979, Burroughs joined the audit department of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He took classes on commodities trading, and developed his computer skills. He remained at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange until 1987, when he began trading commodities independently until the stock market crash in the fall of that year. In the late 1980s, Burroughs attended meetings of the Afro American Genealogical and Historical Society of Chicago, Inc. at the DuSable Museum of African American History. He became the society’s vice president in 1989, during the presidency of Roma Jones Stewart. The organization hosted notable speakers like Ira Berlin, David Streets and Dorothy Spruill Redford, who traced her ancestry to the Somerset Place plantation in North Carolina. In 1990, Burroughs began teaching a genealogy course at Chicago State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section

A2005_166_003_015, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs served as vice president and later as president of the Afro American Genealogical and Historical Society of Chicago, Inc. The organization hosted annual lectures by scholars like historian Christopher R. Reed, librarian Sylvia Cooke Martin and African American genealogist James Dent Walker. As his expertise increased, Burroughs gave lectures at both African American and predominantly white genealogical society meetings, in the United States and abroad. In 1994, he wrote a chapter on the Freedmen’s Bureau records for Paula Byers’ ‘African American Genealogical Sourcebook.’ Three years later, he was featured on the BYU Broadcasting series, ‘Ancestors.’ Then, in 2004, the British Broadcasting Corporation invited Burroughs to appear on ‘The Real Life of Jesus,’ a Discovery Channel program in which he interviewed theology scholars about the genealogy of Jesus Christ. At this point in the interview, Burroughs also talks about the work of professional genealogists.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section

A2005_166_003_016, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs began to research his family history in 1975, at institutions like the Newberry Library and the National Archives at Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. He traced his paternal lineage to his great-grandfather, Morris Burroughs, who was a porter with the Pullman Palace Car Company in 1887. Burroughs also found that, due to the circumstances of slavery, African American surnames were more challenging to trace than white surnames. He describes the resources he used to identify surnames, including U.S. military pension applications, the Works Progress Administration’s slave narrative collection and the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau. He also explains the Nettie Rule, which he developed to account for families whose surnames changed in the late 19th century. Burroughs published his book on African American genealogy, ‘Black Roots: A Beginners Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree,’ in 2001. He then began researching the contraband camps of the Civil War.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section

A2005_166_003_017, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs traced his maternal lineage to David Truman, his seventh generation ancestor, whom he identified in the census of 1810. Through his research, Burroughs discovered a will written in 1795 by

Truman's slaveholder, Margaret Goe Hutton, which provided for Truman's freedom after her death. Burroughs also describes his research into the transactions that resulted in Truman's enslavement by the Goe family. At this point in the interview, Burroughs describes Soundex, a phonetic coding system; and his search for the original Soundex instructions, which were misplaced by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). He located the original index, which was developed Robert C. Russell for use in court records; and advised NARA to republish Russell's codes, which were also circulated in 2001 by the National Genealogical Society Quarterly. Burroughs concludes this part of the interview by describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs, Section A2005_166_003_018, TRT: 0:19:39 ?

Anthony "Tony" Preston Burroughs reflects upon his life and legacy. He also talks about advancements in the field of DNA technology, and the limitations of DNA for genealogical research. At the time of the interview, Burroughs lived in Chicago, Illinois, where a number of his siblings and his maternal cousins also resided. He concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.