

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Foster

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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>	Foster, Robert, 1950-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 8, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:07:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Federal government employee Robert Foster (1950 - ) has been a professional staffer for the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee for over thirty-five years. Foster was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 8, 2006, in Falls Church, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_133
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Robert Lee Foster has been a fixture on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. for thirty-seven years as a professional staffer to the United States Senate Commerce Committee. Starting in government service in 1969, he has been on “The Hill” through the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Jimmie Carter, Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

Foster was born on March 27, 1950 in Cashville, South Carolina. Both parents, Rusher Allen Foster and Bernice (Greene) Foster were sharecroppers as were his maternal and paternal grandparents. As a youngster, Foster worked in the fields helping his family, including nine siblings. Before leaving Cashville at age twenty, Foster completed Woodruff High School and attended Greenville Business College. In September of 1969, he left Cashville and headed to Washington, D.C. with a cousin, Willie James Greene, who was driving back after a visit with family.

Within a week of being in Washington, D.C., Foster obtained a position as a file clerk and messenger boy in the office of the Senate Commerce Committee. He held this position for approximately twelve years before being promoted to the position of Public Information Officer for the Commerce Committee. From this position, he moved on to become the lead professional staffer, a position he has held for over twenty years. In 1980, he earned a certificate from the United States Department of Agriculture which gave him background and skills in landscaping, one of his major avocations.

Foster’s work has brought him in close contact with Nelson Mandela, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the late and former Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown and hundreds of U.S. Senators including Senators Warren Magnuson and Ted Kennedy. From 1976 to 1996, Foster served as the Commissioner of the U.S. Senate Softball League; from 1980 to 1988, as Sergeant-at-Arms, Vice-President, and President of the U.S. Senate Staff Club. Between 2005 and 2006, he served as Chairman of the Black Representatives Golf Association.

Foster is married to Nancy (Carter) Foster, Senior Adviser for Health Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. They

reside in Falls Church, Virginia.

Foster was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 8, 2006.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Foster was conducted by Robert Hayden on November 8, 2006, in Falls Church, Virginia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal government employee Robert Foster (1950 - ) has been a professional staffer for the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee for over thirty-five 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:

Foster, Robert, 1950-

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Foster, Robert, 1950- --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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United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

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## Occupations:

Federal Government Administrator

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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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 Robert Foster, November 8, 2006. 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 Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?  
Robert Foster was born on March 27, 1950 in Cashville, South Carolina to

Bernice Greene Foster and Rusher Foster. His maternal grandparents, Rachel Greene and Richard Greene, were sharecroppers, and raised fourteen children. Foster's grandfather was a deacon at his church and a talented singer, and his grandmother was a gardener. His parents raised ten children in Cashville. Foster recalls his mother's cooking and her love for Mahalia Jackson's music, and his father's habit of dressing formally. His parents sharecropped for Guy Phillips, a landowner who kept them perpetually in debt to prevent them from leaving the farm. Foster and his siblings picked cotton during the summers to help support the family. They lived together in a three-room house with a tin roof and no running water, where Foster shared a room with three of his brothers. His father attended Lower Shady Grove Baptist Church, while his mother belonged to New Bethel Baptist Church, so their children alternated between the two.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:26 ?

Robert Foster was raised in Cashville, South Carolina, where his parents and maternal grandparents were sharecroppers. Foster recalls playing marbles and sports; scrapping with his siblings; and picking cotton from a young age on his family's farm. He grew up in a community with many other African American sharecropping families; and, while his family owned a Pontiac car, he never traveled as a child due to the necessity of farm work. Foster began school at the all-black New Bethel High School in Woodruff, South Carolina, where he was a quiet student, and most of his teachers lived far from the Woodruff community. In 1964, he and five of his classmates volunteered to integrate the previously all-white Woodruff High School. Foster recalls his shock at how well funded Woodruff High School was, and how they had new books and could afford to buy frogs and dissect them. He was provoked into a fight by a white student, after which he was disciplined by the principal while his white classmate was not.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Robert Foster attended Woodruff High School in Woodruff, South Carolina, where he was originally one of very few black students. In his sophomore year, the public school system integrated after a fire destroyed the all-black New Bethel High School. Foster joined Coach W.L. "Willie" Varner and running back Larry Fryer on the Woodruff High School football team, and won a state championship. In the summers, he continued picking cotton on his family's farm. Foster graduated in 1969, and briefly attended Greenville Business College, while working as a forklift driver, and making plans to move to San Francisco, California. In 1970, Foster's cousin Willie James Greene convinced him to move to Washington, D.C., where he initially lived with his half-brother, Wilbur Greene, Jr. Foster applied to work for Senator Warren G. Magnuson, chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation; and, after winning the approval of staffer Isabel Peterson, was hired as a clerical assistant and runner.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Robert Foster moved from South Carolina to Washington, D.C. in 1970, and became a clerical assistant for the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation under Chairman Warren G. Magnuson. Foster was promoted to staff assistant during the early 1980s by Senator Bob Packwood. His responsibilities at the committee included heading its public information office; supervising mail delivery; preparing rooms for hearings and meetings; and supplying office equipment. Foster was influenced by other African American Senate staffers during the 1970s and 1980s, like Bertie Bowman and staff director Ron Brown, and describes his relationships with U.S. Senators like

James B. Pearson; Edward M. Kennedy; John E. Sununu; Strom Thurmond; and Ernest “Fritz” Hollings. Foster served under numerous committee chairs, including Howard W. Cannon, John Danforth, John McCain and Ted Stevens. He describes Stevens’ efforts to pass the Advanced Telecommunications and Opportunities Reform Act in 2006.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Robert Foster was a staffer for the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation for several decades. He worked with many prominent officials, like Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., Michael Powell, Ralph Albrecht and William T. Coleman, Jr. Foster befriended Clarence Thomas while Thomas was an aide to Senator John Danforth, and encouraged Thomas during his 1991 confirmation hearing for the U.S. Supreme Court. He was also a friend of Ron Brown, and recalls Brown’s influence as a Senate aide and his easy confirmation as secretary of commerce in 1993. Foster attended several Congressional Gold Medal ceremonies, including those for Jackie Robinson and Dorothy Height. He met his wife, Nancy Carter-Foster, in the early 1990s while she was working for the U.S. Department of State, and they married in 1992. Foster also recalls how Strom Thurmond and Ernest “Fritz” Hollings, senators from his home state of South Carolina, arranged for his family’s gospel choir to perform in the U.S. Capitol rotunda.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_006, TRT: 0:26:20 ?

Robert Foster organized the Black Republican Golf Association, as well as a similar group for Democrats, in order to introduce young African Americans to the political networks of Washington, D.C. He also was the commissioner of the U.S. Senate Softball League, which included over a hundred teams from various branches of government, for twenty-five years. Foster helped to organize a reception honoring Nelson Mandela in the Kennedy Caucus Room for Mandela’s visit to Washington, D.C. in 1990. During the late 1990s, Senator John McCain introduced a bill to provide financial support for retired boxers, and Foster was assigned to guide Muhammad Ali around Washington, D.C. while Ali was present to testify in the bill’s favor. He befriended Ali, and they often saw each other on Ali’s later visits to Washington. Foster recalls his cousin, Willie James Greene, who originally him drove to Washington, D.C. in 1970, and passed away in the 2000s. He reflects upon his life and his hopes for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Foster, Section A2006\_133\_001\_007, TRT: 0:10:30 ?

Robert Foster narrates his photographs.