

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Prudence Burrell

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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>	Burrell, Prudence Burns, 1916-2012
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Prudence Burrell,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 7, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:18:27).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Teacher and nurse Prudence Burrell (1916 - 2012 ) attained the rank of first lieutenant of the United States Army Nursing Corps and served during World War II. She also taught mathematics in Detroit Public Schools, and became a health care analyst for the State of Michigan. Burrell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 7, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_077
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Nurse Prudence Hathaway Burns Burrell was born on March 23, 1916, in Mounds, Illinois, to Al Wade and Mary Burns. Burrell was raised in Danville, Illinois by Gwendolyn Chambliss, her caretaker. Growing up in Southern Illinois, she attended Douglas Elementary School in Danville. An outstanding Latin student, Burrell graduated from Lovejoy High School in Mound City in 1934. She attended nursing school at Kansas City's segregated General Hospital No. 2. Burrell passed the state nursing board certification examination in 1939 as a registered nurse and soon enrolled in the University of Minnesota.

With the onset of World War II, Burrell decided to join the United States Army Nurse Corps at Fort Huachuca, Arizona in 1942. There, she tended to the famed Buffalo Soldiers and met dancer Fayard Nicholas. Although she attained the rank of first lieutenant of the United States Army Nursing Corps, she was not allowed to treat white troops because of her race. In 1943, Burrell was sent to Station Hospital 268 in Sydney, Australia, then to Brisbane, and eventually to Milne Bay, New Guinea in 1944. There, she taught first-aid techniques to other units, treated gun shot and other wounds, and specialized in the treatment of malaria. Transferred to the Philippine Islands in 1945, Burrell met and married Detroit native, Lieutenant Lowell Burrell. After a simple ceremony consisting of a wedding gown made from a parachute and a fifty-cent ring, she was transferred to Germany during the integration of the United States Armed Forces.

Returning to the United States, Burrell taught at Pacific Lutheran Hospital and earned her B.S. degree in public health from the University of Minnesota in 1951. Eventually, she and her husband moved back to Detroit where she taught mathematics in the Detroit Public Schools and became a health care analyst for the State of Michigan. An active volunteer in Detroit, Burrell delighted in sharing her past with school children. Burrell published her life story in a book called *Hathaway* in 1997.

Burrell passed away on February 29, 2012 at age 95.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Prudence Burrell was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 7, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Teacher and nurse Prudence Burrell (1916 - 2012 ) attained the rank of first lieutenant of the United States Army Nursing Corps and served during World War II. She also taught mathematics in Detroit Public Schools, and became a health care analyst for the State of Michigan.

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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:

Burrell, Prudence Burns, 1916-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burrell, Prudence Burns, 1916-2012 --Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Nurse

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MedicalMakers

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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 Prudence Burrell, March 7, 2007. 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 Prudence Burrell, Section A2007\_077\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Prudence Burrell was born on March 23, 1916 in Mounds, Illinois to Mary Nickles Burns and Allie Wade. She was raised primarily by her maternal grandmother, Maggie Stanfield Eskitte, who was the granddaughter of a slaveholder. They often read together, and Burrell accompanied her grandmother to the railroad station where she worked. Burrell attended the Douglas School in

Mounds until the age of ten years old, when her grandmother passed away. At that time, Burrell and her siblings moved to the home of their maternal great-grandmother, Mary Reynolds, in Danville, Illinois. Her great-grandmother was strict, and required Burrell to complete chores like harvesting greens each morning before school. Burrell met her father for the first time at thirteen years old, although he did not contact her again after returning to his home in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition, Burrell remembers winning a Charleston dance contest as a teenager.

African American families--Illinois--Mounds.

African American fathers.

Video Oral History Interview with Prudence Burrell, Section A2007\_077\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:12 ?

Prudence Burrell attended Lovejoy High School in Mound City, Illinois, where she was mentored by teacher Gwendolyn Chambliss. Throughout her childhood, Burrell did housework for the wealthy Chambliss family, who taught her to drive and allowed her to use their cars. Burrell excelled in high school, and graduated in 1934. Through her connections with the Chambliss family, she obtained a nursing position at the all-black General Hospital No. 2 in segregated Kansas City, Missouri. There, she was almost terminated after a conflict with a white dietician, but was allowed to stay after a leave of absence. Burrell also took summer classes at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, including a course taught by Sister Elizabeth Kenny, the nurse who pioneered the use of stretching exercises to treat polio. In 1939, Burrell passed the state board examination to become a registered nurse, and began work as a public health nurse. She joined the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in 1942.

African American students--Education (Elementary)--Illinois--Mounds City.

Segregation in education--Illinois--Mounds City.

Vocational guidance--United States--Personal Narratives.

African American nurses.

Video Oral History Interview with Prudence Burrell, Section A2007\_077\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:16 ?

Prudence Burrell joined the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in 1942, and was sent to Arizona for training at Fort Huachuca. There, she treated tap dancer Fayard Nicholas, and danced with him in the officers' club upon his recovery. She also treated the many soldiers who contracted venereal diseases from prostitutes, and rebuked her commanding officer after he said that the nurses were meant to do sex work as well. In 1943, Burrell was deployed to the South Pacific. In Australia, she faced discrimination from white Americans, who attempted to bar the black troops from the local restaurants. She also successfully advocated for the African American soldiers to be moved from their barracks in Sydney's red light district; and developed a strong reputation among the troops, many of whom shared their care packages with her. Eventually, Burrell was stationed at the 268th Station Hospital in Milne Bay, New Guinea. She remembers the culture of the indigenous coastal residents.

Military nursing--United States.

Sexual harassment in the military--United States.

United States. Army Nurse Corps.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

World War, 1939-1945--Medical care--United States.

Nicholas, Fayard.

Video Oral History Interview with Prudence Burrell, Section A2007\_077\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Prudence Burrell met administrator Lowell Burrell while stationed at the 268th

Station Hospital in Milne Bay, New Guinea. They married in the Philippines in 1945, and Burrell wore a dress sewn from a parachute to the ceremony. Burrell nearly became a captain; but her promotion was rescinded by President Harry S. Truman, along with those of several other nurses at the hospital. Burrell then returned to the United States, and moved to her husband's hometown of Detroit, Michigan. Her husband reenlisted in the U.S. Army, while Burrell joined the U.S. Army Reserve and found work as a healthcare analyst for the State of Michigan. She also taught in the Detroit Public Schools, as well as at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee. Burrell later integrated the faculty of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and lived for a time in Germany. She recalls a speech by Eleanor Roosevelt, and meeting Mary McLeod Bethune.

African Americans--Marriage.

Integration in higher education--California.

Detroit (Mich.)--Social life and customs.

Public health--Michigan--Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Prudence Burrell, Section A2007\_077\_001\_005, TRT: 0:21:08 ?

Prudence Burrell had a long career as a healthcare analyst for the State of Michigan. In this role, she evaluated the conditions of veterans' administration hospitals and nursing homes. During the 1980s, she began writing her autobiography, 'Hathaway,' which she published several years later. Burrell had no children; and, at the time of the interview, the only surviving members of her family were her brothers, Allie Burns and Lionel Burns, one of whom lived near her home in Detroit, Michigan. Burrell reflects upon her life and legacy, her hopes and concerns for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Public health--Michigan.

Autobiography--African American authors.

Burrell, Prudence Burns 1917-.

Public health nursing--United States.