

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Julia Purnell

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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>	Purnell, Julia Brogdon, 1916-2013
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 28, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:02:00).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Association chief executive Julia Purnell (1916 - 2013 ) was the sixteen president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Purnell was also the president of The Links, Inc., and served as a Southern University professor for two decades. Purnell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 28, 2008, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_066
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Association chief executive Julia Brogdon Purnell was born on March 19, 1916 in Belton, South Carolina. Purnell and her two sisters, Sadie Brogdon Blackwell and the late Christine Brogdon Gilchrist (both AKA Sorority members), were born to the Reverend and Mrs. Richard E. Brogdon Purnell. Under Purnell's leadership, the AKA Sorority, Inc. opened its first National Program Office in Washington, D.C. Purnell's administration also secured a \$4 million contract to operate the first federal Job Corps Center for women.

Purnell completed her B.A. degree with honors with a major in psychology and a minor in education at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina and went on to receive her M.A. degree in educational psychology from Atlanta University in 1942. Afterwards, she pursued advanced work at several other universities and earned her specialist teaching certificate in reading from Colorado State College of Education. Since then, Purnell has been the recipient of eight honorary degrees.

Purnell's lifelong service to the AKA Sorority began with her initiation into the Beta Zeta Omega Chapter in Orangeburg, South Carolina. She fulfilled many leadership roles in her home chapter, including Chapter President, Vice President, Parliamentarian, advisor to the Undergraduate chapter and Recording Secretary. She also served as the South Eastern Regional Director. Purnell was elected as the 16th International President of the Sorority in 1962 at the Sorority's national convention in Detroit, Michigan, succeeding Marjorie H. Parker in office. One of her first challenges as president was the implementation of the recommended changes outlined by the Sorority's Study Commission Report. The result was the creation of new manuals and handbooks that continue to influence the Sorority's structure and operation. Other highlights of Purnell's term included obtaining a multi-million dollar contract for the establishment of a Residential Job Corps Center for Women in Cleveland, Ohio. She played a significant role in the effort for civil rights as a participant at the invitation of President Kennedy in the "White House Conference of Three Hundred Women," and in 1964, she mustered national support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Under Purnell's leadership, a program office was set-up in Washington, D.C.; the second chapter

of the Sorority was established outside of the United States in Nassau, Bahamas, and in 1965, she convened the first Undergraduate Leadership School held in Zion, Illinois. Purnell is a well-respected professor, having spent more than two decades at Southern University in Baton Rouge before her retirement in 1986.

Purnell has long been dedicated to community service and launched, with her late sister Christine, a Service Center at Bethel A.M.E. Church. As a member of the AKA Sorority and the Links, Inc., she holds the distinction of being the only African American female to have been president of both organizations. She is also a life member of the National Council of Negro Women and the NAACP. She has further served her community through the Baton Rouge YWCA, Women in Politics, the League of Women Voters, The Blundon Home for Orphans, the local Girl Scouts' Executive Board and the Steering Committee of the Status of Women in Louisiana.

Purnell is the widow of Clifton A. Purnell, Sr., long-time athletic director at Capitol Senior High School in Baton Rouge, she has one son, Clifton, Jr. and two grandchildren. She continues to live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where she has been honored by several local and national organizations including the Women's Greater Council of Baton Rouge.

Purnell was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 28, 2008 as part of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's Centennial Boulé 2008 celebration. Segments of these interviews were used in a DVD entitled *A.K.A. Sorority: A Legacy of Supreme Service*.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Julia Purnell was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 28, 2008, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association chief executive Julia Purnell (1916 - 2013 ) was the sixteen president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Purnell was also the president of The Links, Inc., and served as a Southern University professor for two decades.

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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:**

Purnell, Julia Brogdon, 1916-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Purnell, Julia Brogdon, 1916-2013 --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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Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

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## **Occupations:**

Association Chief Executive

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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 Julia Purnell, March 28, 2008. 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell, Section A2008\_066\_001\_001, TRT: 0:25:50 ?

Julia Purnell was born on March 19, 1916 in Belton, South Carolina. She began her leadership of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (AKA) at the Gamma Eta Omega Chapter in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. From there, Purnell advanced to the regional directorship, and then succeeded Marjorie Parker as AKA's sixteenth supreme basileus in 1962. In this position, Purnell promoted personal communication between sorors by developing a monthly newsletter. During Purnell's tenure, AKA directed the Cleveland Job Corps program, which was established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. According to Purnell, the Job Corps was her biggest challenge as supreme basileus, as well as one of her greatest legacies. Purnell was supported by her personal spiritual practice, as well as her fellow sorors and her parents, Sarah Christie Brogdon and Richard E. Brogdon. Purnell also talks about the importance of heeding the AKA constitution and its bylaws in order to continue the organization's commitment to sisterhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell, Section A2008\_066\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Julia Purnell was born on March 19, 1916 in Belton, South Carolina to Sarah Christie Brogdon and Richard E. Brogdon. Her father was born in the 1870s in Sumter, South Carolina, where his family owned land. He studied English and theology at Allen University, an African Methodist Episcopal school in Columbia, South Carolina, as well as at Yale University, and earned a doctorate of divinity from Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. Purnell's mother was born in 1892 in Orangeburg, South Carolina to an African American father and a white mother. After her mother passed away, Purnell's mother was reared by her father's family on a plantation. She studied home economics at Allen University, where she met Purnell's father, who was her teacher. They had three daughters, including Purnell. During her childhood, Purnell's family moved frequently due to her father's work as a minister. She lived in several towns in South Carolina, including Belton, St. Matthews, Orangeburg, Georgetown and Charleston.

Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell, Section A2008\_066\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Julia Purnell began her primary school education at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. She went on to attend the segregated Waverly Elementary School in Columbia, South Carolina, and also received instruction from her father, Reverend Richard E. Brogdon, who emphasized the importance of education. At Howard High School in Georgetown, South Carolina, Purnell was one of three valedictorians, and argued that she and her two peers should all speak at graduation. Purnell studied psychology at Allen University in Columbia, and pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. She initially experienced skin color discrimination, but her superior academic record and leadership skills

gained her admission to the sorority. She also recalls instances of color discrimination within the black community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Upon graduating from Allen University, Purnell pursued a master's degree at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. She also remembers the musicians of her college years, like Jimmie Lunceford.

Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell, Section A2008\_066\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Julia Purnell received a full tuition scholarship to Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. There, Purnell interacted frequently with W.E.B. Du Bois, and attended lectures at the Atlanta University Center. She earned a master's degree in 1944, and then taught education courses at Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina and the Colored Normal Industrial Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina in Orangeburg. Purnell completed a Ph.D. degree in educational psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1946. For her dissertation, she studied the relationship between reading and language, particularly for South Carolina's Gullah population. Then, Purnell began her career at Southern University, where she taught until 1983. During her tenure there, she met her husband, Clifton Purnell, Sr. She was also elected the supreme basileus of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and president of The Links, Incorporated. Purnell describes her legacy, and her hopes and concerns for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Julia Purnell, Section A2008\_066\_001\_005, TRT: 0:06:50 ?

Julia Purnell narrates her photographs.