

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harrison B. Wilson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilson, Harrison B., 1925-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson,
Dates:	May 11, 2010 and May 13, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:34:21).
Abstract:	University president and college basketball coach Harrison B. Wilson (1925 - 2019) was president of Norfolk State University in Virginia. He was also on the board of directors of Virginia National Bank. Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 11, 2010 and May 13, 2010, in Chesapeake, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_012
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

University President and College Basketball Coach Harrison B. Wilson was born on April 21, 1925 and was a native of Amsterdam, New York. Wilson as the fifth of seven siblings. His mother was a school teacher and his father worked in construction. Wilson served in the United States Navy from 1945 until 1947, when he enrolled at Kentucky State University at the age of nineteen. There he received his B.S. degree, was an honor student and a star athlete in basketball, football, baseball and track.

In the early 1950s Wilson received his M.A. degree and his D.H.S. in health science and administration from Indiana University. Between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-nine, Wilson worked as a professor, administrator and coach at Jackson State College (now Jackson State University). Wilson was the head basketball coach from 1951 to 1960. He then became chairman of the Department of Health and Physical Education from 1960 until 1967. Additionally, he became chairman and professor of health and physical education at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee that same year as well. Wilson then briefly worked at Fisk University as the assistant to the President of Fisk before being named President of Norfolk State University in 1975. During Wilson's term at Norfolk, which spanned over three decades from 1975 until 1997, Norfolk State University's annual budget increased from \$14 million to \$86 million, enrollment increased from 6,700 students to 8,100 students, and the number of faculty and staff grew from 377 to 412, with a student-faculty ratio of twenty-two-one. The University also added fourteen new buildings and acquired fifty-one acres of land during Wilson's tenure.

Upon his retirement in 1997, Wilson was honored by Old Dominion University as one of their Strong Men and Women Excellence in Leadership series. Wilson was active in a number of boards and organizations, including the board of directors of Virginia National Bank, the lay advisory board of DePaul Hospital, the Virginia State Advanced Council on Vocational Education, and the board of directors of the Virginia Health, Welfare, and Recreation Planning Council. Wilson was also a member of the Alpha Kappa Mu fraternity.

Wilson was married to Dr. Lucy Wilson, and he was the father of six children.

Harrison B. Wilson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 11, 2010.

Wilson passed away on July 28, 2019, at the age of 94.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Harrison B. Wilson was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 11, 2010 and May 13, 2010, in Chesapeake, Virginia, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. University president and college basketball coach Harrison B. Wilson (1925 - 2019) was president of Norfolk State University in Virginia. He was also on the board of directors of Virginia National Bank.

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:

Wilson, Harrison B., 1925-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wilson, Harrison B., 1925- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

College Basketball Coach

University President

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|SportsMakers

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 Harrison B. Wilson, May 11, 2010 and May 13, 2010. 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 Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_001, TRT: 0:30:54 ?

Harrison B. Wilson was born on April 21, 1925 in Amsterdam, New York to Marguerite Ayers Wilson and Harrison Wilson, Sr. His maternal family was originally from Falmouth, Kentucky. His maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Price Ayres, attended Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio and taught until she married. Wilson's maternal uncle, Willis Ayres, received a medical degree from Meharry Medical Department of Central Tennessee College in Nashville, Tennessee. He was unable to find a position practicing medicine, so he preached instead. Wilson's paternal grandfather was the son of a slave owner named Lyles near Falmouth. He was close to his father and fought alongside him in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. After the Battle of Gettysburg, Wilson's grandfather was given money to travel to Boston, Massachusetts where he joined the Union Army and changed his name to John L. Wilson. After the war ended, he purchased a farm in Virginia before returning to Kentucky, where Wilson's father was born.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_002, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Harrison B. Wilson's paternal grandfather, John L. Wilson, fought in the Civil War; and afterward, reconnected with his wife, Martha Wilson. They returned to Big Island, Virginia briefly, before moving to Falmouth, Kentucky, where he owned a farm and had several sons, including Wilson's father, Harrison B. Wilson, Sr. who was the youngest. Wilson's father was spoiled by his mother who later helped him to start a laundry business. He often struggled with the business, but became more serious when he met Wilson's mother, Marguerite Ayers Wilson. After marrying, Wilson's parents then moved to Amsterdam, New York, where Wilson had numerous altercations as child in the mostly Italian community. His mother managed their household while his father worked several jobs. Wilson later met one of his paternal uncles in Detroit, Michigan who told him much of his family history. At this point in the interview, he talks about building the president's house during his tenure at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_003, TRT: 0:31:34 ?

Harrison B. Wilson's and his siblings were raised in Amsterdam, New York where he often saw the 20th Century Limited train. The family lived in a predominately Italian American neighborhood before buying a house in an African American neighborhood. Although Wilson saw older black men disrespected by white citizens, his father, Harrison Wilson, Sr., was respected in the community. Wilson began his education at West Spring Street Elementary School and went on to attend Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School, where he was the only African American student in his class. Wilson was a good student, but was usually bested by his friend, Rocco Petrone. Wilson admired boxer Joe Louis and began to box for money at twelve years old. Although his parents forbid it, Wilson continued fighting until his high school graduation, even after he was punished by his father. Wilson's mother, Marguerite Ayers Wilson, often worried about his other reckless behavior as a teenager, which she heard about through their neighbors.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_004, TRT: 0:30:19 ?

Harrison B. Wilson attended Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School in Amsterdam, New York, and hoped to enroll at the United States Military

Academy in West Point, New York. However, they only accepted his classmate, Rocco Petrone, who later became a general in the U.S. Army. Wilson's mother insisted that he graduate before entering World War II, so he remained in school until he was given a false diploma to expedite his induction. He then joined the U.S. Navy at sixteen years old, and was stationed at Naval Station Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in 1943. Wilson was trained as a corpsman and served in the Pacific Theater, providing first aid to wounded U.S. Marines. Wilson assumed a different racial identity in order to serve in his preferred position. At this point in the interview, Wilson talks about the actions of U.S. soldiers in the heat of battle and how the media portrayed the war. After his discharge, he worked as a surgical assistant at Naval Station Pearl Harbor, and planned to attend medical school.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_005, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

Harrison B. Wilson visited the South for the first time as a young adult with his mother, Marguerite Ayers Wilson, and was impressed by the African American in professional positions. He then matriculated at Kentucky State College for Negroes in Frankfort, Kentucky where his cousin, John Merritt, was attending. There, he planned to major in pre-med, but was told by a counselor that he could not also be an athlete. Instead, Wilson studied physical education, psychology and sociology, while playing basketball and football. Upon graduating in 1950, he was recruited to Indiana University in Bloomington by basketball coach Branch McCracken. Wilson completed his master's degree in 1951, and was then hired as a basketball coach at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi. Despite the racial tensions there, Wilson befriended the white police chief, and invited him to games. Wilson's team competed in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) against other black colleges.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_001_006, TRT: 0:15:26 ?

Harrison B. Wilson coached the basketball team at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi, where he often travelled around the state to recruit athletes. He provided athletes' families with washing machines, clothes and other amenities. In Mississippi, Wilson was once arrested for pulling around a stopped school bus, but used his connection to the Jackson police chief to be released. He recalls meeting civil rights activist Medgar Evers, who was instrumental in registering African American voters in Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_007, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Harrison B. Wilson married Anna Wilson while attending Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana; and together, they had four sons. She passed away when he was a coach at Jackson State College, and Wilson began raising his sons alone. Later, he dated his former classmate, academic administrator Lucy R. Wilson, with whom he became reacquainted at a party. Wilson introduced her to his sons carefully, and also met her daughter. At the end of the summer, he proposed, and she accepted after first talking to her mother, Christine O'Neal Nicholson. Soon after, Wilson was hired at the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University as the assistant to university president, Walter S. Davis, who had previously coached at the school. Wilson secured a position at the university for his fiancé without informing the school of their relationship, so that she received a fair salary. The couple married at the county courthouse in route to Tennessee.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_008, TRT:

0:30:57 ?

Harrison B. Wilson worked as the assistant to President Walter S. Davis at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University in Nashville, Tennessee. His wife, Lucy R. Wilson, was also hired as director of testing and the counseling center. Initially, they kept their relationship a secret, fearing she would receive a reduced salary. Wilson collaborated with former coach and businessman Jerome H. Holland to create an industry program at the university, which connected engineering students to employers. Wilson met and befriended country music singer Johnny Cash, and hosted fundraisers, which were attended by executives from General Motors Corporation and Ford Motor Company. In 1969, Wilson purchased a house in Nashville, and he and his wife had a daughter, April Wilson Woodard. Soon after, Wilson joined the staff at Fisk University in Nashville to serve under President James Lawson. There, Wilson worked with boxer Muhammad Ali and the Fisk Jubilee singers to raise money for the school.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_009, TRT: 0:28:36 ?

Harrison B. Wilson became the assistant to James Lawson, the president of Fisk University, in 1970. In this role, he travelled to Chicago, Illinois and Cleveland, Ohio to raise money for the university. He also created a cluster program where industry leaders came to the campus to recruit business students for employment. Wilson was supported in his work by his wife, Lucy R. Wilson, who wrote speeches for him, in addition to her work at local universities. After conflicting with fellow faculty members, Wilson considered presidency positions at his alma mater, Kentucky State University in Frankfort, Kentucky and Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia. In Norfolk, Wilson competed against a candidate who favored by the resigning president, Lyman Beecher Brooks, but gained the support of an influential board member. With this endorsement, Wilson received the presidential nomination at Norfolk State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_010, TRT: 0:28:36 ?

Harrison B. Wilson was named president of Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia in 1975. Soon after, he requested Virginia Governor Mills Godwin's assistance in selecting board members that supported him. They became friends at his inauguration ceremony, and Wilson was impressed by Godwin's interest in meeting his father, Harrison Wilson, Sr. Wilson later used this relationship to acquire funds to build a president's home on campus. Wilson employed students studying brick masonry to complete some of the construction, and hired outside contractors for the remaining tasks. Wilson befriended several university presidents in Virginia, and was adept at working with governors like Gerald Baliles to obtain funds for the school. He also worked with Governor L. Douglas Wilder who granted him money to build the L. Douglas Wilder Performing Arts Center at Norfolk State University. During his tenure, Wilson increased both student enrollment and the school's annual budget.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_011, TRT: 0:25:01 ?

Harrison B. Wilson increased enrollment from 4,000 to 8,000 students during his presidency at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia. He also oversaw the construction of several new facilities, including the William "Dick" Price Stadium. To accommodate the overflow of Reserve Officer Training Corps students and equipment, Wilson employed the help of Virginia Governor George

Baliles to build an athletics gymnasium. He also created the first doctoral social work program, expanded various bachelor's programs and established the Dozoretz National Institute for Minorities and Applied Sciences at the university. Wilson concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy, and describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_012, TRT: 0:12:55 ?

Harrison B. Wilson used his background in boxing throughout his life, including when he was challenged by his coach at Kentucky State College for Negroes in Frankfort, Kentucky. Wilson went on to overcome many challenges as president of Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia. He concludes this part of the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Harrison B. Wilson, Section A2010_012_002_013, TRT: 0:11:12 ?

Harrison B. Wilson narrates his photographs.