

The HistoryMakers Digital Archive

<http://www.thehistorymakers.org/digital-archive>

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The HistoryMakers Digital Archive is an online oral history portal dedicated to making accessible interviews and preserving histories of African Americans. Headquartered in Chicago, *The HistoryMakers* is a national nonprofit institution for education that creates curricula, produces oral histories, and hosts public programs.¹ Organizations including the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and several others that value educational opportunities for underrepresented groups, fund *The HistoryMakers*' educational programs.² *The HistoryMakers* also receives funding through its partnership with PBS, and has a broadcast called *An Evening With Celebrity... Interview and Fundraiser*.³

The HistoryMakers Digital Archive documents more than 2,000 African Americans who have played transformative leadership roles.⁴ The portal includes interviews with recognizable names, including Whoopi Goldberg, Barack Obama, and Sonia Sanchez. The site also includes interviews with many individuals who may not have the same degree of acclaimed fame but have undertaken initiatives deserving attention. The interviews cover such topics as childhood, family, legacy, and how interviewees want people to remember them.⁵ The recordings are separated into small segments, lasting between one and five minutes. When a segment ends, users can click "next story" to continue the interview. In their entirety, the interviews each last about two hours.

The digital archive has a "Topic Search" tab that allows users to narrow search results.⁶ Users can click on multiple topics at a time. If users are looking for a specific interview, they can click on the "Maker Directory" tab and query the name of a person.⁷ Users can also save interviews by clicking the "Add to Playlist" tab. The

¹ "Background," *The HistoryMakers*, accessed July 28, 2018, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/background>.

² "Education," *The HistoryMakers*, accessed July 28, 2018, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/education>.

³ <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/faqs>.

⁴ "FAQ" *The HistoryMakers*, accessed August 19, 2018, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/faqs#What%20is%20the%20Digital%20Video%20Library>.

⁵ "What we do" *The HistoryMakers*, accessed July 29, 2018, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/what-we-do>.

⁶ "Topic Search" *The HistoryMakers*, accessed July 28 2018, <https://demo.thehistorymakers.org/tag>.

⁷ "Maker Directory" *The HistoryMakers*, accessed August 9, 2018 <https://demo.thehistorymakers.org/all>.

video interviews display with synchronized transcripts, which highlight the text while the interviewee is speaking.

The interviews provide a breadth of information. I listened to two interviews: Frederick Ford (a Chicago real estate executive and accountant) and Barack Obama. Frederick Ford's interview was especially interesting to me because Mr. Ford is an alumnus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (the institution where I am currently employed). I have also done research related to his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, and the period during which he attended the university. His interview provides some context for African American students' experiences during the 1940s when they were not permitted to live on campus. It was also interesting to learn about the sit-ins in which Mr. Ford and members of his fraternity partook.⁸

Barack Obama's interview took place in 2001, several years before he became the first African American president. The interview thoroughly covers his family life, childhood, and career in politics. Near the end, the interviewer asks Obama what he would like his legacy to be. He responds: "I think that my career is still largely ahead of me as opposed to behind me, so it's hard to start writing my epitaph... what I'd like to be able to say is that at the end of my career my involvement in public service advanced opportunity for the African American community in a significant way, and that I was able to help shape the political dialogue in this country in a more constructive way not just for African Americans, but for all people."⁹ The interview captures his growing career in politics when the desire to run for the first African American president of the United States was not yet known.

Both interviews represent the variety of people interviewed, including famous and unsung leaders. Clearly, this is a site where most individuals can find a connection. The BasicMaker (a free membership) allows interested users an opportunity to read biographies and preview a limited number of interviews. To access the full interviews, one must have a DigitalMaker subscription, which costs \$30.00 per month. Users who are not familiar with the digital archive might be perturbed to pay the monthly fee if they are unsure if the content will be helpful to them. Possible suggestions include providing more accessibility to users with the BasicMaker membership, such as increasing the number of interview previews. This may help better capture researchers' interests in order to justify paying the monthly fee.¹⁰ If universities and other institutions do not have memberships, purchasing an institutional membership is another option. Students and staff can easily find accessible and valuable information from the *The HistoryMakers* Digital Archive. I had the opportunity to access the interviews through a thirty-day demo, which I was

⁸ "Frederick C. Ford," interview by Larry Crowe, January 31, 2003, 132:46
<https://demo.thehistorymakers.org/story/81221?type=7;pgS=30;pg=1;spec=--->

⁹ "The Honorable Barack Obama" interview by Julieanna Richardson, 96:30
<https://demo.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio:ID=A2001.082>

¹⁰ "Get Involved" *The HistoryMakers*, accessed August 15, 2018,
<http://www.thehistorymakers.org/become-member>.

granted as a reviewer of the site. The demo was an effective introduction to the site and could help interest potential users in acquiring a membership.

The depth of interviews and variety of prolific individuals highlighted illustrates *The HistoryMakers'* adherence to tell stories of significant individuals in American history. *The HistoryMakers* founder, Julieanna L. Richardson, describes this site as a means of telling America's missing stories.¹¹ Richardson's diligence in founding this resource provides access to stories about people whom mainstream society does not know. By bridging these gaps in the historical record, researchers of all different subjects and disciplines can find oral histories. Like myself, many archivists and researchers at academic institutions will benefit immensely from using this digital archive.

¹¹ "About Us," short film with Julieanna L. Richardson, <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/founder>.