

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Blockson

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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>	Blockson, Charles L.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Blockson,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 5, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:23:09).
<b>Abstract:</b>	African diaspora historian and curator Charles Blockson (1933 - 2023) is an expert on African American genealogy and the Underground Railroad, and curates the Charles Blockson collection at Temple University. Blockson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 5, 2002, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_180
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Black studies scholar and author Charles L. Blockson was born on December 16, 1933 in Norristown, Pennsylvania. A book lover as a young boy, the son of Annie Parker and Charles E. Blockson, has amassed one of the world's largest private collections of African American history.

Blockson graduated from Penn State University in 1956, where he played fullback on a football team that included football greats Lenny Moore and Roosevelt Grier. He turned down an offer to play professional football for the New York Giants. Blockson was a member of the U. S. Army from 1957-1958. A natural historian, Blockson taught local and multicultural history while serving as a human relations advisor for the Norristown Area School District. He held seminars and workshops for teachers and other school district employees. Blockson traveled extensively around the world, acquiring rare African, African American and African Caribbean publications dating back to the sixteenth century in addition to other materials. In 1984, Blockson donated these amazing items to Temple University, where he serves as curator of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection. It includes prints, photographs, slave narratives, manuscripts, letters and sheet music as well as other objects. For example, within the Collection are first edition works by Phyllis Wheatley and W.E.B. DuBois; African Bibles; correspondence of Haitian Revolutionaries; Paul Robeson's sheet music; narratives by Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass; thousands of taped interviews and radio programs on African and African American history and culture; and over 500,000 photographs.

Blockson lectures internationally and organizes exhibitions and black studies programs throughout the country. He has served as director of the Pennsylvania Black History Committee, director of the Pennsylvania Afro-American History Board and governor's commissioner of the Governor's Heritage Program. Blockson has been a member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the NAACP, the Pennsylvania State University Alumni Council, the Urban League and the American Antiquarian Society. For his football exploits, the Pennsylvania State Quarterback Club honored him in 1984. Blockson is the

recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and multiple honorary doctorates. He is considered one of the country's leading experts on the Underground Railroad.

Charles Blockson passed away on June 14, 2023.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Blockson was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 5, 2002, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. African diaspora historian and curator Charles Blockson (1933 - 2023) is an expert on African American genealogy and the Underground Railroad, and curates the Charles Blockson collection at Temple University.

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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:

Blockson, Charles L.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Blockson, Charles L.--Interviews

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Museum curators--Interviews

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Genealogists--Interviews

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African American historians--Interviews

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Collectors and collecting--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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Temple University

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## **Occupations:**

Archivist

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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 Charles Blockson, September 5, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 7/20/2023 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 Charles Blockson, Section A2002\_180\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Charles Blockson describes his family history. Born on December 16, 1933 to Annie Parker Blockson and Charles E. Blockson in Norristown, Pennsylvania. His father was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania in 1915, and his mother was born in Asheville, North Carolina in 1914. When he could not trace his ancestors like his white classmates, Blockson became interested in tracing his genealogy. Over time, he collected information on his family's past. His mother had Native American ancestry. His father's side of the family was originally owned by a slave owner in Accomack County and then they moved to Seifert, Delaware. His great-grandfather escaped slavery using the Underground Railroad. Blockson recalls growing up in Norristown, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, where he lived in a diverse, but impoverished environment. Blockson attended Norristown High School, an integrated school, although he experienced de facto segregation. As a child, Blockson was athletic and played football, basketball, and track.

Museum curators--Interviews.

Genealogists--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

Collectors and collecting--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Blockson, Section A2002\_180\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:19 ?

Charles Blockson talks about playing college football, his early career, and starting his collection of African American literature. Blockson played football with legends like Roosevelt Grier and Lenny Moore at Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania. While in college, Blockson went to Lewis Michaux's National Memorial Bookstore in Harlem, New York. Michaux introduced him to Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, and Joel A. Rogers. Blockson was one of the early black bibliophiles, and he compares book auctions to slave auctions. After graduating from Penn State in 1956, Blockson turned down an offer to play professional football for the New York Giants. Instead, Blockson served in the U. S. Army from 1957 to 1958 and then opened a janitorial business in Norristown, Pennsylvania. He was then recruited by the Norristown school board to help with racial issues as a human relations and cultural affairs specialist. Blockson concludes by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Blockson, Section A2002\_180\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Charles Blockson narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Blockson, Section A2002\_180\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Blockson describes his work as a black studies scholar, collector, and author. Blockson taught local and multicultural history while serving as a human relations advisor for the Norristown Area School District in Norristown, Pennsylvania. He held seminars and workshops for teachers and other school district employees. Blockson published his book "Pennsylvania's Black History" in 1975. He also wrote several articles on black history for "National Geographic" magazine emphasized the importance of preserving books written by African Americans. His interest in the Underground Railroad originated when his grandfather sang about it, and he later found his family linked to Harriet Tubman in a book by William Steele. As one of the country's leading experts on the Underground Railroad, Blockson chaired the National Park Service Underground Railroad Advisory Committee. However, he also expressed concern about the increasing commercialization of the Underground Railroad and other African American historical sites.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Blockson, Section A2002\_180\_001\_005, TRT: 0:24:00 ?

Charles Blockson describes his collection of African American history that is housed at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Blockson traveled extensively around the world, acquiring rare African, African American and African Caribbean publications dating back to the sixteenth century in addition to other materials including a copy of "Lincoln the Unknown" by Dale Carnegie that is bound in the human skin of a black person. In 1984, Blockson donated his collection to Temple University, where he served as curator of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection. The collection contains prints, photographs, slave narratives, manuscripts, letters and sheet music as well as other objects. Highlights include the first edition works by Phyllis Wheatley and W.E.B. DuBois; thousands of taped interviews and radio programs on African American history and culture; and over 500,000 photographs. Blockson reflects upon his legacy and his choice to pursue collecting historical books over a sports career.