

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Wilhelmina Rolark

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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>	Rolark, Wilhelmina, 1916-2006
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Rolark,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 19, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:22:38).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Foundation chief executive Wilhelmina Rolark (1916 - 2006 ) founded the United Black Fund, and the National Association of Black Women Attorneys. In 1976, she was elected to the Washington, D.C. City Council, where she went on to serve four consecutive terms, and was later unanimously elected as the President /CEO of the United Black Fund. Rolark was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 19, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_053
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lifelong civil rights and community activist, attorney and politician Wilhelmina Rolark was born on September 27, 1916 in Portsmouth, Virginia. She attended Truxton elementary school in the Truxton area of Portsmouth until seventh grade. In 1933, Rolark graduated from I.C. Norcum High School in Portsmouth .

Following her high school graduation, Rolark attended Howard University from 1933-1937 where she earned bachelor's and master's of arts degrees in political science. While at Howard, she studied under Ralph Bunche. In 1944, while working at the Treasury Department and going to law school at night, she earned her bachelor's of law degree from the Robert H. Terrell Law School in Washington, D.C.

As a young attorney practicing law in the 1940s, she worked on many civil rights cases. In 1970, she founded the National Association of Black Women Attorneys. Following on the footsteps of a successful law career, she set her sights on politics.

In 1969, Rolark and her husband, the late Dr. Calvin Rolark, founded the United Black Fund, a non-profit organization that provides funding to community-based organizations. Rolark served as the group's General Counsel, where she won major legal battles against United Givers Fund and the Civil Service Commission discriminating against black and other minorities. In 1976, Rolark was elected to represent residents of Ward 8 on the Washington, D.C. city council, where she went on to serve four consecutive terms. While on the council, she chaired several committees including the committee on Employment and Economic Development, Public Service and Consumer Affairs and Judiciary. Rolark also served on the Sentencing Guidelines Commission of the D.C. Superior court.

As a legislator, Rolark was responsible for a number of laws including the legislation that created the D.C. Energy

Office, the Bank Depository Act, the law that triples the penalties for PCP distribution and the law that brought cable television to D.C.

Upon the untimely death of her husband in 1994, she was unanimously elected as the President /CEO of the United Black Fund, a position she held for twelve years. Rolark also served on the National Board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Rolark passed away on February 14, 2006.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Wilhelmina Rolark was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on May 19, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Foundation chief executive Wilhelmina Rolark (1916 - 2006 ) founded the United Black Fund, and the National Association of Black Women Attorneys. In 1976, she was elected to the Washington, D.C. City Council, where she went on to serve four consecutive terms, and was later unanimously elected as the President /CEO of the United Black Fund.

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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:

Rolark, Wilhelmina, 1916-2006

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Rolark, Wilhelmina, 1916-2006--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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United Black Fund of Greater Washington, D.C.

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**Occupations:**

Foundation 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 Wilhelmina Rolark, May 19, 2004. 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 Wilhelmina Rolark, Section A2004\_053\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Wilhelmina Rolark was born on September 27, 1916 in Portsmouth, Virginia. Her mother, Margaret Boykins Jackson, was from a wealthy family in Portsmouth and was a teacher. Rolark's maternal grandfather owed a successful cafeteria-style restaurant. Rolark's father, John W. Jackson, was from Washington, D.C. and was one of the first two black clerks in the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth. His father worked as a valet for a Bishop in Washington, D.C. Both of Rolark's great-grandmothers were Native Americans of the Creek Nation Tribe. Rolark was raised a Portsmouth neighborhood around other families affiliated with the naval base. Her maternal grandmother periodically lived with her family. Growing up, Rolark's family stressed the importance of education. She remembers her mother punishing her and her brother by burying them in leaves in a forest near their home, the smell of the nearby hide-tanning factory and the sounds of the ships in the naval yard. Rolark has an older sister and a younger brother.

Video Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Rolark, Section A2004\_053\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:19 ?

Wilhelmina Rolark was a great student at Truxton Elementary School in Portsmouth, Virginia. After visiting the plant of The Norfolk Journal and Guide, Rolark aspired to be a writer. Rolark attended Zion Baptist Church in Portsmouth with her family, but attended Sunday school at a smaller church. She remembers her birthday parties and her sister coming back home from school in Washington, D.C. for the summer. Rolark attended I. C. Norcom High School in Portsmouth where she had great teachers. She declined a scholarship to Virginia State University, and following in her father's footsteps, she matriculated at Howard University in D.C. in 1933. Rolark enjoyed Howard and stayed to get her M.A. degree in political science, studying under Dr. Ralph Bunche. Upon graduation in 1937, Rolark worked for the U.S. Department of Treasury and attended Robert H. Terrell Law School D.C. at night. She earned her law degree in 1944 and learned to run a practice by working for her law professor, Maurice Weeks.

Video Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Rolark, Section A2004\_053\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Wilhelmina Rolark met her husband, journalist Calvin Rolark, in the 1940s at a meeting of the U Street Business and Professional Association in Washington, D.C. She reflects on integration's effect on African American businesses and her interest in politics leading up to her election to the Council of the District of Columbia in 1976. Having already been a strong community leader, as a city council person Rolark chaired the Employment and Economic Development committee, Judiciary committee, and Public Service and Consumer Affairs committee, through which she shaped an energy bill that created the D.C. Energy Office. Rolark is concerned about the incarceration of African Americans and its negative effect on their families and community; how segregated communities affect the education system; and the lack of young people voting. Rolark's husband was very active in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Rolark often accompanied him to meetings. After his death in 1994, Rolark joined the SCLC board.

Video Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Rolark, Section A2004\_053\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Wilhelmina Rolark talks about the impact of the 1939 Alexandria, Virginia Library Sit-In and the 1962 Howard Johnson Restaurant Sit-In, in Durham, North Carolina. After learning that the United Givers Fund had denied funding to an African American senior home in Washington, D.C., Rolark and her husband founded the United Black Fund, Inc., which raises money to support African American non-profits in D.C. Rolark founded the National Association of Black Women Attorneys in 1970, which was met with resistance from male members of the National Bar Association. While serving on the Council of the District of Columbia from 1976 to 1993, she fought to keep the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law open; and interacted with many D.C. mayors, including HistoryMaker Marion Barry. Rolark expresses her concerns for the D.C. community, including the rising cost of living, home rule, young people voting and young African Americans staying in school.

Video Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Rolark, Section A2004\_053\_001\_005, TRT: 0:23:22 ?

Wilhelmina Rolark wrote a column called Checks and Balances in her husband's newspaper, The Washington Observer, where she covered political issues, such as rent control. She talks about the importance of affirmative action and history. Rolark feels fortunate to come from a strong family. She describes how she would like to be remembered, reflects upon her legacy and narrates her photographs. HistoryMaker Denise Rolark-Barnes is her stepdaughter.