

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lillian Dickerson

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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>	Dickerson, Lillian, 1902-2010
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lillian Dickerson,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 7, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:55:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civic activist Lillian Dickerson (1902 - 2010 ) was a life-long resident on Fitzwater Street in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An active member in her community, Dickerson was honored in 2006, at the age of 104, for being the oldest gardener participating in the award-winning 2120-2124 Fitzwater Street Garden Project. Dickerson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 7, 2005, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_040
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lillie Benning Dickerson was born in the 1100 block of Fitzwater Street in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on June 12, 1902. Dickerson's grandmother was a slave from Sierra Leone who was raised by the family of Philadelphia financier Nicholas Biddle; her grandfather, an escaped slave, worked for the Thayer family in Mainline, a prosperous area on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Dickerson's mother, Julia Capps Benning, and father, George Edward Benning, travelled to Philadelphia by stagecoach from Charleston, South Carolina, and bought the house on Fitzwater Street in 1910. Dickerson attended Pollack Elementary School and graduated from South Philadelphia High School in 1920.

As a teenager, Dickerson was a piano accompanist for her friend and neighbor, Marian Anderson. Dickerson was also friends with Paul Robeson's sister, Marion, and songwriter Oscar Hammerstein II. Dickerson supported NAACP Attorney Raymond Pace Alexander's successful campaign and lawsuit to integrate restaurants and shops on Philadelphia's Chestnut Street between 1933 and 1935. During World War II, Dickerson and other black women were hired by the United States Post Office but, because of unequal pay and unfair treatment, she wrote an appeal to Eleanor Roosevelt on behalf of her colleagues.

Dickerson's husband, Earl, the chauffeur of baseball's Connie Mack, lived with her until his death in the 1960s. In 2006, at the age of 104, Dickerson honored by her community for being the oldest gardener participating in the award-winning 2120-2124 Fitzwater Street Garden Project.

Dickerson passed away on August 12, 2010 at the age of 108.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lillian Dickerson was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 7, 2005, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civic activist Lillian Dickerson (1902 - 2010 ) was a life-long resident on Fitzwater Street in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An active member in her community, Dickerson was honored in 2006, at the age of 104, for being the oldest gardener participating in the award-winning 2120-2124 Fitzwater Street Garden Project.

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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:

Dickerson, Lillian, 1902-2010

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Dickerson, Lillian, 1902-2010--Interviews

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African American women civic leaders--Interviews

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Neighborhood leaders--Interviews

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## Organizations:

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## HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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### Occupations:

Civic Leader

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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 Lillian Dickerson, February 7, 2005. 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 Lillian Dickerson, Section A2005\_040\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Lillie Dickerson was born on June 12, 1902 in Philadelphia Pennsylvania. Her mother Julia Capps Venning was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Augustus Capps. Her maternal grandmother was sent to Philadelphia from Sierra

Leone as a ward of the Biddle family. Dickerson's mother did not have a job, but kept house. Augustus Capps was a runaway slave who worked in the main line of Philadelphia. Dickerson's grandmother was a dressmaker. Her father George Venning, was born in Philadelphia. Dickerson's great-great-grandfather was South Carolina slave-owner Richard Walpole Cogdell who brought his children by an enslaved woman, Sarah Sanders, to Philadelphia. Dickerson's paternal grandmother fought a legal battle to allow her children to attend a white school when her father was in first grade. He later worked for the Philadelphia Postal Service, raising his family on \$2 a day. Dickerson remembers growing up in a strict household, and taking summer trips to her maternal grandmother's property in Atlantic City.

African American women civic leaders--Interviews.

Neighborhood leaders--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Lillian Dickerson, Section A2005\_040\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:35  
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Lillie Dickerson's family owned the townhouse in which she now lives since 1910. Dickerson visited Atlantic City with her grandmother, parents, and two sisters as a child. She often attended activities at The Church of the Crucifixion in Philadelphia. She attended Robert B. Pollock Elementary School, grammar school, and South Philadelphia High School. Dickerson was a good student, but did not want to be a teacher. As a child, she took dance and piano lessons. She grew up with singer Marian Anderson, and accompanied her on the piano for a concert performance when they were in grammar school. After graduating high school around 1920, Dickerson worked as a secretary for a real estate broker and ward committeeman. She also helped him with government work and was able to meet Jessie Owens. After his health began to fail, Dickerson began working for the Philadelphia Postal Service. She was also friends with Paul Robeson and his sister, Marian. She remembers him returning home quiet after a tour abroad.

Video Oral History Interview with Lillian Dickerson, Section A2005\_040\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:17  
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Lillian Dickerson worked for the Philadelphia Postal Service until around 1967. While there, she and the other women were treated poorly by a postmaster who did not want them to work, though most of the men had been sent to the war. The women organized and sent a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt. This let them receive help from Esther Peterson, and they were allowed to receive appointments for full-time jobs. Dickerson met her husband Earl Dickerson, in her 30s. He had fled from Virginia to family in Philadelphia after hitting his white employer. They lived with Dickerson's father. Dickerson's parents stopped going to a theater after experiencing the effects of segregation. They were friends with Raymond Pace Alexander, and after an incident at a theater, Dickerson's sisters spoke to him, and was told that he was working on a case to end segregation in Philadelphia. Alexander won the case, probably in the 1940s. Dickerson remembers reading about the Civil Rights Movement and Father Divine's movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Lillian Dickerson, Section A2005\_040\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:31  
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Lillie Dickerson describes her life and habits at 102 years old. She walks everywhere, and makes sure to eat balanced meals. The neighborhood where she lives has experienced a lot of change, especially with housing prices rising and, though it has been mixed since she moved there in 1910, it is becoming whiter. Dickerson's neighbor built a community garden, but despite their fighting, it was destroyed by the owner. Her heart specialist threw her a surprise 100th birthday

party. Dickerson reflects upon her life, and wishes she had done more public service. She hopes to be remembered for seeing the good in everyone. Dickerson ends the tape by narrating her photographs.