

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rowena Stewart

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Stewart, Rowena, 1932-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart,
Dates:	October 19, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:34:46).
Abstract:	Museum chief executive Rowena Stewart (1932 - 2015) was the director of four major African American museums and historical societies between 1975 and 2002: the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Motown Historical Museum and the American Jazz Museum. Stewart was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 19, 2006, in Jacksonville, Florida. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_126
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Culturalist Rowena Stewart was nationally known as one of the foremost African American museum directors having led four major African American historical museum societies between 1975 and 2002 (The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Motown Historical Museum and the American Jazz Museum). She became one of the most sought after African American museum directors in the country.

Stewart was born on March 6, 1932 in Jacksonville, Florida, as the only child of Essie (Brozle) Rhodes and Oliver Rhodes. She grew up in New Berlin, Florida, and graduated in 1955 from Edward Waters College in Jacksonville. She began her career doing social work in settlement houses and reformist-minded community centers in Jacksonville and then in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1975, Stewart became the first director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in Providence. And then, from 1985 to 1992, Stewart served as the Director and Curator of Philadelphia's Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. She transformed what was a rather static museum into one that was interactive. In 1992, Stewart moved to Detroit to head the Motown Historical Museum and three years later, she was recruited to Kansas City, Missouri where she oversaw the development of the American Jazz Museum and became its executive director upon completion in 1997.

In 2002, Stewart retired and moved back home to Jacksonville where she served for a time as President of the A.L. Lewis Historical Society Board and Coordinator of the American Beach Community Center and Museum on Amelia Island north of Jacksonville. She worked as a consultant to museums utilizing historical preservation, presentations and educational programs.

Stewart was the mother of four - Gwendolyn, Clarence, Alvie and Wannetta Johnson.

Stewart was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 19, 2006.

Stewart passed away on September 19, 2015.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rowena Stewart was conducted by Robert Hayden on October 19, 2006, in Jacksonville, Florida, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Museum chief executive Rowena Stewart (1932 - 2015) was the director of four major African American museums and historical societies between 1975 and 2002: the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Motown Historical Museum and the American Jazz Museum.

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:

Stewart, Rowena, 1932-

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stewart, Rowena, 1932- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Museum Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Rowena Stewart, October 19, 2006. 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 Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_001, TRT: 0:27:30 ?
Rowena Stewart was born on March 6, 1932 in Jacksonville, Florida to Essie Brozle Gilmore and Oliver Rhodes. Her mother's ancestors included Spicer Christopher, a white slave owner in Jacksonville. Her maternal grandfather,

Albert Brozle, was a Native American from North Carolina, and worked felling trees in Florida's turpentine industry. He lived with her grandmother, Katie Christopher Brozle, in New Berlin, Florida, where Stewart's mother grew up fishing and shrimping. At one point, her mother left New Berlin to attend beauty school in Jacksonville. When Stewart's father was young, her paternal grandfather was killed in a storm. Her grandmother, Irene Brill, then became a public school teacher in New Berlin. Her mother rowed from East Jacksonville across the St. John's River to reach the school, where Stewart's parents met as children. Stewart's parents eventually divorced, and her mother married Alvin Gilmore, a Pullman porter and talented cook. Stewart also describes her family's homes in New Berlin.

Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Rowena Stewart attended the elementary school at Jacksonville's Edward Waters College, where she was influenced by Mary McLeod Bethune. She was also taught after school by her paternal grandmother, who taught her African American history and culture. At her grandmother's insistence, Stewart attended Boylan-Haven School for one year. Disliking the preparatory school environment, she was transferred to Stanton Senior High School. Stewart attended Mount Olive A.M.E. Church, where she was an usher and member of the choir. She moved with her mother to Durkeeville, a middle class, African American neighborhood in Jacksonville, where her mother had a beautician shop attached to their home. Upon graduating from Stanton Senior High School in 1949, Stewart enrolled at Claflin College in South Carolina, where she was harassed by the Ku Klux Klan. In 1952, she married the school's football team captain, Clarence Johnson, and left school without completing her degree.

Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Rowena Stewart did not complete her degree at Claflin College, despite her mother's objections. Her first child, Gwendolyn Johnson, was born in 1953, and was followed by Clarence Johnson, Alvie Johnson and Wannetta Johnson. Stewart then separated from her husband, and married a U.S. Navy sailor. After completing her degree at Edward Waters College, she moved with her family to Boston, Massachusetts to work at Boston's American Red Cross. However, they rejected her upon learning she was black. Instead, Stewart's friend, Melvin King, helped her obtain a position at United South End Settlements. She began her museum career at Boston's Harriet Tubman House, before moving to Connecticut, and then to Charleston, South Carolina. Upon relocating to Rhode Island, Stewart became active with the local NAACP, and volunteered to conduct research on the all-black 1st Rhode Island Regiment. This experience led her to form the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, which she directed until 1985.

Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_004, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Rowena Stewart directed the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia from 1985, after the retirement of its founding director, historian Charles H. Wesley. To promote the museum, she attended community events each weekend with local photographer Jack T. Franklin, who was featured in exhibits. The museum was often threatened with budget cuts, but was defended by Philadelphia's citizens at city hall meetings. During this time, Stewart also studied museums in Nigeria and Niger. Then, she moved to Detroit to work with Motown Records Company founder Berry Gordy. She was initially hired to develop a Motown exhibit for The Henry Ford museum, and later worked with Gordy and Esther Gordy Edwards to create the Motown Museum. Stewart also recorded the oral histories of former Motown Records Company employees.

Then, Mayor Emanuel Cleaver invited Stewart to Kansas City, Missouri, to help the 18th and Vine Authority establish the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and the American Jazz Museum.

Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_005, TRT: 0:28:09 ?

Rowena Stewart worked with the 18th and Vine Authority commission in Kansas City, Missouri to restore its traditionally African American neighborhood. There, she established the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and the American Jazz Museum, and designed exhibits about Kansas City's music scene, and the legacy of Count Basie. She also created the Blue Room, a nightclub for local musicians within the jazz museum. In 2002, Stewart retired to her hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, although she continued to work with Jacksonville's Ritz Theatre and Museum and the American Beach Museum. Stewart talks about African American museum professionals Byron Rushing, Edmund B. Gaither and Harry Robinson, Jr., and the positive impact of tourism on African American museums at the time of the interview. Stewart also reflects upon her life and legacy; her advice for aspiring museum professionals; and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Rowena Stewart, Section A2006_126_001_006, TRT: 0:10:40 ?

Rowena Stewart narrates her photographs.