

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thomas C. Holt

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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>	Holt, Thomas C. (Thomas Cleveland), 1942-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 1, 2018 and May 27, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010 and 2018
<b>Physical Description:</b>	12 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:57:18).
<b>Abstract:</b>	African american history professor Thomas C. Holt (1942 - ) was the James Westfall Thompson Professor of American and African American History at the University of Chicago. Holt was most known for his work on race, labor and politics in post-emancipation societies. Holt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 1, 2018 and May 27, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_027
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Historian and scholar Thomas C. Holt was born on November 30, 1942 in Danville, Virginia. Holt attended and graduated from segregated schools in southside Virginia. He went to work for the SNCC during the Civil Rights Movement in his hometown, Danville, and in Cambridge, Maryland in 1965. He graduated from Howard University with his B.A. degree in 1965 and his M.A. degree 1966. Following that, Holt worked for federal antipoverty programs trying to change the living and working conditions of migrant and seasonal farm workers until 1968. Holt began his teaching career at Howard University in 1972 and in 1973, he received his Ph.D. from Yale University.

Holt taught at Howard University, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the University of California, Berkley before becoming a professor at the University of Chicago in 1988. Holt is the University of Chicago's James Westfall Thompson Professor of American and African-American History. Over the course of his career, Holt has published the following books: *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (1979), *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (1992), and *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century* (2000). Holt also co-wrote *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Post-emancipation Societies* (2000) with Rebecca J. Scott and Frederick Cooper.

In 1978, the Southern Historical Association awarded Holt the Charles S. Sydnor Prize for his work on racial politics in the post- emancipation American South in *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction*. Holt also received the Elsa Goveia Prize from the Association of Caribbean Historians for the same book. In 1987, Holt received the Presidential Initiatives Award from the University of Michigan under President Harold Shapiro. In 1990, Holt received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur "Genius Grant." President Clinton appointed Holt to the Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1994

to 1997. Holt worked as a fellow in the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. In 2003, Holt was elected to be a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Holt sat on the editorial board of the Journal of Southern History from 1983 to 1986 as well as the editorial board for the American Historical Review from 1986 to 1993. In 1999, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the American Council of Learned Societies and served until 2002.

Thomas C. Holt was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 27, 2010 and May 1, 2018.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thomas C. Holt was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 1, 2018 and May 27, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 12 uncompressed MOV digital video files. African american history professor Thomas C. Holt (1942 - ) was the James Westfall Thompson Professor of American and African American History at the University of Chicago. Holt was most known for his work on race, labor and politics in post-emancipation societies.

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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:

Holt, Thomas C. (Thomas Cleveland), 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Holt, Thomas C. (Thomas Cleveland), 1942- --Interviews

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**Organizations:**

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
  - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
  - University of Chicago
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**Occupations:**

- African American History Professor
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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

- EducationMakers
- 

**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 Thomas C. Holt, May 1, 2018 and May 27, 2010.  
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 Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:03 ?

Thomas C. Holt was born on November 30, 1942 in Pittsylvania County, Virginia to Catherine Fitzgerald Holt and Grover Holt, both of whom were also born in Pittsylvania County. There, Holt's paternal grandmother, Lillian Walton Holt, was a descendent of the white Schultz family and their African American slaves. She inherited a small plot of land, where she farmed tobacco with her husband, Isaac Holt; and raised nine children, including Holt's father. Holt's mother was the youngest of six children born to farmers Carrie Price Fitzgerald and George Fitzgerald. Holt's parents were educated through the seventh grade at the Mount Freeman School in Danville, Virginia, near the cotton mills and tobacco factories where many of their relatives worked. Holt's father went on to serve in the U.S. military during World War II. Additionally, Holt talks about the differences between black landownership in Virginia and the Deep South, where cotton agriculture made small farms less profitable.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:13 ?

Thomas C. Holt was born in rural Pittsylvania County, Virginia during World War II. His father, Grover Holt, was serving abroad with U.S. Army at the time, and returned when Holt was three years old. Holt had no siblings, and few African American children lived nearby, so he spent most of his time playing alone. He enjoyed reading, and older relatives brought him books about philosophy from college. His maternal grandmother, Catherine Price Fitzgerald, lived with his family until he was eleven years old, and cared for him while his parents worked. Holt often accompanied his grandmother to New York City and Washington, D.C., where they visited his maternal aunts. He recalls his experiences of discrimination during these trips, including his grandmother's response when a group of white children accosted them with racial slurs. Holt went on to attend Southside High School in Blairs, Virginia, and spent the summers working in Brooklyn, New York, where his paternal grandmother's brothers settled after World War I.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Thomas C. Holt attended Southside High School, a small, all-black school in Blairs, Virginia. Although he had a shy personality during childhood, Holt became the captain of the football team and president of the student body, and was cast in the school's theater productions. He was influenced by his history and civics teacher, Mr. Hennessey, from whom he learned about African history for the first time. During a trip to Nigeria, Mr. Hennessey exchanged letters with Holt, which inspired Holt's interest in Africa. Mr. Hennessey also brought Holt and his peers to a courtroom to learn about the legal process. During this time, Holt was aware of civil rights activities like Barbara Johns' student demonstration in Farmville, Virginia, and the sit-in protests held by students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina. Holt graduated as the valedictorian of his class, and received a scholarship to study engineering at Howard University.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:18 ?

Thomas C. Holt matriculated as an engineering major at Howard University in 1960. He joined the university's debate team, where he was coached by John W. Blassingame, who later became his dissertation advisor. Holt also was a member of the college acting troupe, where he worked with future playwright Ted Shine. In 1963, Holt switched his major from engineering to English literature under

the influence of author Sterling A. Brown. Around that time, civil rights activists began organizing the community against segregation and job discrimination in Holt's hometown of Danville, Virginia. That summer, Holt planned to briefly visit Danville before continuing to his job in Brooklyn, New York; but, when protesters were beaten by the police in front of Danville's courthouse, he joined the demonstrations led by SNCC Field Secretary Avon Rollins. That summer, Holt became a member of SNCC, and was jailed twice for his civil rights activities.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Thomas C. Holt became active with SNCC during the summer of 1963, and witnessed the organization's debates about whether to attend the March on Washington that fall. The day before the march, Holt and a group of SNCC members from Danville, Virginia picketed the U.S. Department of Justice. The next day, Holt left the march early, as he considered the demonstration to be a spectacle led by the elites. During the summer of 1964, Holt worked to earn money for his education. He went on to complete a degree in English literature and mathematics at Howard University, where he joined the student protests against the administration. At his graduation in 1965, Holt protested against the commencement speech given by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. That summer, he joined the SNCC chapter in Cambridge, Maryland, where he demonstrated against a segregated swimming pool, and helped organize farm workers. He then returned to Howard University to pursue a master's degree in English literature.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Thomas C. Holt earned a master's degree in English literature from Howard University in 1967. He continued his work with SNCC, and served as advocate for migrant farm workers from 1966 to 1968. Around this time, Holt met and married his wife, who was also a SNCC activist. Then, Holt began a Ph.D. degree in American studies at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where he studied under historian John W. Blassingame. He completed a dissertation on South Carolina's black political leadership during Reconstruction, and earned his degree in 1972. He then joined the faculty of the history department at Howard University, where he remained until 1976. At that time, his dissertation was published, and he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to research the emancipation era in the British West Indies. Holt also remembers the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the divisions within the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_007, TRT: 7:32:26 ?

Thomas C. Holt traveled to Jamaica in 1975 to conduct research for his book 'The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938.' He focused on the social and political conditions in Jamaica after the abolition of slavery in 1838, highlighting key figures like George William Gordon and Paul Bogle. He also covered the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865, where hundreds of freed slaves revolted against the widespread poverty and injustice throughout Jamaica. In 1976, Holt was recruited to teach at Harvard University, where he worked with professors like Martin Kilson. With the rise of African American studies programs in universities across the United States, Holt held a joint appointment with the history and African American studies departments. In this tape, Holt recalls the debates regarding Affirmative Action at Harvard University. He also describes the mission of an African American studies program, as well as the challenges many departments faced with credibility and enrollment.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_008, TRT: 8:29:30 ?

Thomas C. Holt was a professor at Howard University from 1972 to 1976. There, he also conducted research on various topics, including African American politicians during the Reconstruction era. To celebrate the history of the Freedman's Hospital, Holt and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn produced a pamphlet that incorporated interviews of its prominent doctors like William Montague Cobb. In 1980, Holt was offered a tenured position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. While there, he taught courses on African American history, slavery and emancipation; and later, he became director of the African American studies department. He also advocated for the university's divestment from South Africa; and participated in the Postemancipation Societies Project. After leaving in 1988, he joined the faculty at the University of Chicago. In order to generate interest in African American studies amongst the students and faculty, Holt organized the Race and the Reproduction of Racial Ideologies Workshop.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_009, TRT: 9:29:29 ?

Thomas C. Holt served as a professor of African American history at the University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. He was also on the editorial boards of *The American Historical Review* and *The Journal of Southern History*. At the request of editors John Hope Franklin and August Meier, Holt contributed the article, 'The Lonely Warrior: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Struggle for Black Leadership' to their collection of essays entitled 'Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century.' Later, he wrote 'Children of Fire: A History of African Americans,' which explored major global events like Plessy v. Ferguson, colonization in Africa, the Spanish American War and the height of lynchings in the United States. The book also covered the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and the opposing views of Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass on the fair's Colored American Day. At this point in the interview, Holt talks about his writing process and his research assistants. He also describes his work on W.E.B. Du Bois.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_010, TRT: 10:30:17 ?

Thomas C. Holt received a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to finish the research for his book, 'The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938,' which was published in 1992. The book was well received by his contemporaries, especially among the younger generation of Caribbean historians. In 1994, Holt became the second African American president of the American Historical Association (AHA). That year, the annual AHA conference was scheduled to take place in Cincinnati, Ohio; however because of the anti-LGBT legislation passed by the city government and after much deliberation with the board, Holt decided to change the location of the conference to Chicago, Illinois. In 1995, Holt was awarded a yearlong fellowship with the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University in Stanford, California. Holt also lists some of his publications; and talks about William H. McNeill's approach to teaching world history.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_011, TRT: 11:30:04 ?

Thomas C. Holt published 'Children of Fire: A History of African Americans,' in 2010. The work was written to serve as a textbook, and organized through a series of narrative writings and themes to offer a comprehensive view to African American history. Holt's book was also viewed as supplementary text to John Hope Franklin's 'From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans.' At this point in the interview, Holt reflects upon the work of past historians such

as Franklin, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and W.E.B. Du Bois. He talks about their approaches to writing about history as well as the criticism against their work. Holt also describes his work as a historian, which includes teaching and publishing research; and reflects upon the images of African Americans in popular culture. He concludes this part of the interview by talking about the perception of race in a global context and in the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas C. Holt, Section A2010\_027\_002\_012, TRT: 12:28:42 ?

Thomas C. Holt reflects upon the administration of President Barack Obama, and considers how future historians will interpret the president's legacy and achievements while in office. Holt then talks about the process of writing history, and the impact of technological advancements on research processes as well as the ever changing interpretations of history over time. He also mentions his favorite historical works, and reflects upon the life and career of W.E.B Du Bois. At this point in the interview, Holt talks about his family and his favorite historical figures in African American history. He also describes his hopes for the African American community. Holt concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered.