

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sheila Gregory Thomas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Thomas, Sheila
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas,
Dates:	October 25, 2013 and October 26, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:14:30).
Abstract:	Television producer and writer Sheila Gregory Thomas (1938 -) created, produced and hosted the television program <i>The Magic Door</i> . She also wrote about her family history for the African American National Biography project. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 25, 2013 and October 26, 2013, in Silver Springs, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_270
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Writer, producer and consultant Sheila Gregory Thomas was born on November 11, 1938 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Her mother was Hugh Ella Hancock-Gregory, and her father was Thomas Montgomery Gregory, a well-known educator and dramatist. Thomas graduated from Howard University with her B.A. degree in Spanish in 1961.

Upon graduation, Thomas was hired as a Spanish teacher in the Washington D.C. public school system, where she taught until 1969. Thomas then created, produced and began hosting the educational children's television program *The Magic Door* on WMAL-TV in Washington D.C. The show aired from 1969 until 1973. In 1974, while working as an independent writer and consultant, she was engaged as media coordinator for the vice chairman of the D.C. city council. In 1976, Thomas was hired as a public affairs specialist for the National Park Service. She then accepted the position of cultural education specialist in 1977, remaining in that position until 1979, when she worked as an independent writer and consultant. In 1988, Thomas was appointed director of public relations for Diversified Engineering and Architecture. Then, in 1996, she was featured on PBS's *Frontline*, in her interview of producer and writer, June Cross. That same year, Thomas began serving as vice president of Diversified Environmental, Inc.

Thomas has published a number of articles relating to her family's history. In 1984, she wrote an article about her great-grandmother entitled "Margaret Mahamitt of Maryland," which was published by the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. Thomas also authored an article in 2002 about her father, Thomas Montgomery Gregory. In 2008, three family biographies she wrote for the *African American National Biography* project were published by Oxford University Press. Thomas has received the MAMM Award from the American Association of University Women, the Action for Children's Television Award, the Capital Press Club Award, and the Ohio State Award.

Sheila Gregory Thomas was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 25, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 25, 2013 and October 26, 2013, in Silver Springs, Maryland and Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Television producer and writer Sheila Gregory Thomas (1938 -) created, produced and hosted the television program *The Magic Door*. She also wrote about her family history for the African American National Biography project.

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:

Thomas, Sheila

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Thomas, Sheila--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Writer

Television Producer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Sheila Gregory Thomas, October 25, 2013 and October 26, 2013. 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 Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_001, TRT: 1:29:50 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas was born on November 11, 1938 in Atlantic City, New Jersey to Hugh Hancock Gregory and Thomas Gregory, Sr. Her paternal great-great-grandfather, Jeremiah Mahammitt, was born to a prominent family in Madagascar. He immigrated to Frederick, Maryland, where he fell in love with an African American woman and bought her freedom. Their daughter, Thomas' paternal great-grandmother Margaret Mahammitt Hagan, was born in Frederick in 1826. She moved to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where she opened a laundry business and married her first husband. Together, they had two children, including Thomas' paternal grandmother, Fannie Hagan Gregory. Thomas' maternal great-grandfather, John Hancock, was a rancher and attorney in Austin, Texas, and also served in the U.S. Congress. His son, Thomas' maternal grandfather Hugh Berry Hancock, left Texas during the Civil War. He met his wife, Susie James Hancock, in Oberlin, Ohio. They later returned to Austin, where Thomas' mother was born.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_002, TRT: 2:27:54 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas' paternal grandfather, James Monroe Gregory, was the valedictorian of the first graduating class at Howard University. He later became a professor there, and served as the founding president of the American Association of Educators of Colored Youth. In 1893, he published a biography of his mentor, Frederick Douglass. He met Thomas' paternal grandmother, Fannie Hagan Gregory, while she was his student at Howard University. After they married, she gave birth to Thomas' father, Thomas Gregory, Sr. They later moved from Washington, D.C. to Bordentown, New Jersey, where Thomas' father was raised. Her father graduated from the Williston Seminary boarding school in Easthampton, Massachusetts, and then attended Harvard University. He went on to study at Columbia University in New York City, and became a professor of English and drama at Howard University. There, he founded the Howard Players and the debate team, and developed The Stylus literary magazine with his colleague, Alain Locke.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_003, TRT: 3:29:06 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas' parents, Hugh Hancock Gregory and Thomas Gregory, Sr., met on the campus of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. They married in 1918, and Thomas' older sister, Yvonne Gregory, was born one year later. Thomas' older sister earned degrees from the University of Michigan and New York University. She then settled in New York City, where she wrote for Paul Robeson's Freedom newspaper. She also helped raise Thomas, who lived with their parents in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Thomas' oldest brother, Thomas Gregory, Jr., graduated from Harvard University, and worked for the National Institutes of Health in Washington, D.C. Her middle brother, Hugh Gregory, attended the University of Chicago, and worked in the advertising industry. Her youngest brother, Eugene Gregory, was a graduate of Howard University and became a computer programmer. Thomas' youngest sister, Mignon Gregory Wilson, lived on the campus of Howard University, where her husband was a professor.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_004, TRT: 4:29:11 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas' parents, Hugh Hancock Gregory and Thomas Gregory, Sr., moved to Atlantic City, New Jersey when her father was appointed principal of the all-black New Jersey Avenue School. Thomas was born in Atlantic City, and grew up in the city's predominantly African American Northside

community. The city was a popular entertainment destination, and featured a number of black nightclubs like the Club Harlem and Timbuktu on Kentucky Avenue. Thomas attended Atlantic City High School, where she took foreign language classes, joined the National Speakers Bureau and participated in the Spanish dance troupe. Her favorite teacher was Carmen Prezioso, who taught Latin dances and how to play the castanets. Upon graduating from high school, Thomas considered attending Sarah Lawrence College or Bennington College, but eventually decided to enroll at Howard University. She based her choice on the advice of her older brothers, who recommended that she study at a historically black institution.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_005, TRT: 5:29:52 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she studied under Sterling A. Brown and E. Franklin Frazier. She also joined the Howard Players theatre troupe, which was founded by her father, Thomas Gregory, Sr. Thomas studied Spanish language and education, and was a member of the Spanish club. Her favorite teacher was José Ferrer Canales, who regarded her as the top student in his Spanish conversation class and coached her winning performances in Spanish poetry declamation contests. Thomas was also active in the Civil Rights Movement in Washington, D.C., where she became acquainted with activist Diane Nash. While at Howard University, Thomas met her husband, Marion Curtis Thomas. Shortly after graduating, they married and went on a honeymoon tour of Europe. Thomas then began teaching Spanish in the District of Columbia Public Schools through the Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools (FLES) program. She taught for six years before retiring in 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_001_006, TRT: 6:29:03 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas retired from the District of Columbia Public Schools in 1968, when her second child was born. She then sought a program directorship at the local WMAL-TV station in Washington, D.C. Thomas was offered the position, and the network invited her to create her own children's television program. With the help of her mother, Hugh Hancock Gregory, Thomas developed the idea for a show called 'The Magic Door,' which was designed to expose children to new cultures and languages. Thomas focused on Spanish, and traveled to Puerto Rico to film an episode about African diasporic traditions in the village of Loiza Aldea. She also filmed 'The Magic Door' in Washington, D.C., and worked with the District of Columbia Public Schools to share the program with students. Eventually, tensions developed between Thomas and her supervisors, who refused to credit her as a producer. They canceled 'The Magic Door' after four years of production.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_002_007, TRT: 7:30:31 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas produced and hosted the children's television program 'The Magic Door' on WMAL-TV in Washington, D.C. from 1969 to 1973. During that time, she exposed her viewers to the Spanish language and Latino cultures. She developed a strong reputation in the Latino community of Washington, D.C., and was recruited to create the English subtitles and voice overs for the documentary film 'Spanish Spoken Here.' After the cancellation of 'The Magic Door,' Thomas worked as the media coordinator and community relations advisor to Washington, D.C. Councilman Sterling Tucker, and continued to advocate for the city's Latino community. In 1976, she was hired as

a public information specialist for the National Parks Service, and was later promoted to cultural education specialist. In this role, she developed the Heritage Days program at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Thomas also appeared as an extra in 'Jaws: The Revenge,' and taught Spanish at the Nathan Mayhew Seminars on Martha's Vineyard.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_002_008, TRT: 8:23:03 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas interviewed June Cross in 1996 for the PBS documentary 'Secret Daughter: A Mixed Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away.' Thomas was recruited for the role because of her childhood friendship with Cross, who was raised by an adoptive mother in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The film won a Primetime Emmy Award and The Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Award in 1997. Around this time, Thomas helped her son, Marion Curtis Thomas, Jr., establish an environmental contracting firm called Diversified Environmental, Inc. Thomas also began studying her family history, and wrote three biographies for the African American National Biography Project. Thomas talks about children's television programming, and her experiences working with the District of Columbia Public Schools. She reflects upon her life and legacy, as well as her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Thomas concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Sheila Gregory Thomas, Section A2013_270_002_009, TRT: 9:26:00 ?

Sheila Gregory Thomas narrates her photographs.