

# Making History of History Itself

[www.TheHistoryMakers.org](http://www.TheHistoryMakers.org) - A Review

By TiMOTHY ERIC

The thought that I distinctly remember as I first browsed the site was, "how is it that I have never heard of this?" That assuredly isn't a knock on The HistoryMakers, because clearly, they have been quite busy building this gem. Still, when one starts to browse the pages there, two things become very clear: this is a wonderful effort and it will be an incredible resource for a long time to come.

Founded in 1999, HistoryMakers began recording the oral stories of "both well-known and unsung African Americans." The non-profit is impressively gaining ground toward building the largest oral record of African Americans in the country. After seventeen years of work, they now house 9000 hours of recorded testimonies that are available by appointment in the Library of Congress; recording stories in over 180 cities in U.S. and even those in the Caribbean, Mexico and Norway. They do not only seek to record the individual stories and achievements of African Americans, but those of organizations, political movements, and other significant social benchmarks in the African American Community. This enormous amount of content is available only by appointment now in the Library of Congress, but a significant portion is already available in the *HistoryMakers Digital Archive*. HistoryMakers promises that by April of 2018, the entire collection will be replicated in the online archive, which is the epicenter of the monumental website.

## The Homepage

Navigating through the site is very fluid and the site is very responsive. Without much fumbling, the user is quickly presented with the deftly placed top-left button of the '*Makers*' menu which contains fifteen categories, such as MusicMakers, PoliticalMakers, LawMakers, and ArtMakers. Any user can freely browse through these and find a Maker in an area of interest. Upon choosing one, a finely written biography is presented on the Maker's page along with a hi-res picture. Still, one cannot pass on the digital content which has its link placed just below the picture of the Maker. The Digital Archive is the heart of the site and, to be sure, it doesn't disappoint in the least.

The Digital Archive is elegant and efficient. On the home page, one can keyword search the entire archive and extract scores of interview clips which can then be further drilled into by a second layer keyword query. Or, if one wants to browse by context, they can call up the Table of Contents conveniently placed just below the search bar. There in the TOC, I had access to 211 interviewees and the page presented a very slick interactive filter-engine to the troves of interviews. For those spreadsheet-natured types, the listing can be ordered/grouped by name, Gender, Job Type, Year (of birth), or Maker Group. Alternatively, for the object-oriented types, one can use a very interesting set of three pie-chart styled metrics that similarly drill into the database of interviews using the same aforementioned attributes - and I will add that these searches are instant!

Whichever route one chooses, they can swiftly arrive at a well-styled array of search results, or "stories", which are the smaller meta-tagged clips of full interviews. The segments of clips are edited according the topic areas of the full interview; some general, such as 'family background' and others very specific to the interviewee's accomplishments. Each Story bears a thumbnail, a short description about the clip, its date, and time length. There is also a smartly placed [+] button for creating a playlist of stories that is always present in the left pane, which is a feature that an instructor will love when compiling segments for a lecture. The engine is quite elastic, as it conforms to the style of the researcher very intuitively. If you enjoy using a scalpel when researching, this site can quickly carve out the content you need. Conversely, those who peruse the aisles certainly have their place here too.

When one clicks on a clip it begins to play immediately and the transcript of the interview is on screen below the video. The transcript is highlighted as the video plays out in real time so that one can follow along and be clear on what is being said. Each individual clip page includes a left pane that includes full Citation that one can copy/paste into their reference list with ease. The added bonus of these transcriptions is that they are in effect the heart of the search engine and enable one to find only the content that is needed. So, if one is researching commonalities in the childhood experiences among black mathematicians born in the 1970s, which I stabbed at for this review, they can collect a relevant playlist of segments and clip the text they want in less than five minutes using this phenomenal engine.

## Added Content

The site shines just as bright in its Special Collections area. This section boasts curated collages of related content under exciting subject headings such as the Negro Baseball League, the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority or The Links, Incorporated, to name a few. These master pages offer full biographical data on the subject along with all of the individual interviews that make up the collection. There are also extensive pages under the headings *Events & Programs* and Education. The former is comprised of an illustrious video series of interviews of luminaries such as Eric Holder, Quincy Jones, and Valerie Jarrett which were taped live in front of audiences all over the nation. The latter informs the user of major resources in the field of education, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities' Summer Institute where leading African American Scholars train Middle/High School teachers on African American history as well as using the HistoryMakers Digital Archive in the classroom. The Education page also highlights available fellowships, mentoring programs, and interactive video content for those in education.

## Membership

Access to the Biographies and Archive is for members only, of course, but HistoryMakers offers three very amenable tiers of membership: BasicMaker (free), DigitalMaker (\$30/mo), and InstitutionalMaker (starting at \$10k). Most will undoubtedly jump on the middle tier, as it affords one access to the entire archive, leaving the first tier to limited access. Nevertheless, the top-tier is a formidable and foreseeable peer to institutions of education, as it enables, say, a college to issue credentials to 1000 users. At present, 26 universities possess top-tier membership which means that access to the archive can be granted to their faculty and students. The list of these institutions will surely grow, as Howard University, Harvard University, and Stanford University are already taking advantage of this historic effort.

## Final Thoughts

The HistoryMakers.org website is a triumph. Surely it is one of the most significant uses of the technology of our time. The themes of hard work and achievement are ever-present and inspiring. The star power is certainly scintillating, without question. The archive already includes the stardust of comets such as General Colin Powell, Harry Belafonte, and even former President Barack Obama before he became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Still, the real power of the site will be in its ability to illuminate the achievements of those in the sciences and other less-celebrated halls of power in our culture. My time with the site left me with the impression that very few Makers will be missed, as it even offers an area for one to 'Nominate' a Maker. There is also ample resonance in the site with regard to raising awareness of ways to support it.

Ultimately, the site makes quick work of redefining the archetype of a HistoryMaker. So often when we think those who make history, we ardently go to the time-honored luminaries – and the usual icons are emblazoned on the header of the main page. Still we largely fail to recognize that history is being made in each walk of life by African Americans from then unto this; in the lives of mathematicians, engineers, artists, educators, biologists, and columns of others. HistoryMakers will, in my humble opinion, bend this trajectory toward something much more

inclusive, available and even material. For one dollar a day, don't miss out on this invigorating slice of history – for history's sake.

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