

HistoryMaker: Henry Louis Gates Jr.



On Thursday, February 18, 2010, The HistoryMakers project interviewed Henry Louis Gate Jr. and three other West Virginia honorees: Dr. Hazo W. Carter Jr., Lou Myers and Andrea L. Taylor. The event was sponsored by Verizon, West Virginia, and held at the West Virginia Culture Center, Charleston.

By Kim Harbour – February, 2010

CHARLESTON, WV – Celebrated as a favorite son of West Virginia – and the nation – Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., walked onstage at the West Virginia Culture Center in mid-February, as *“Take me home country roads...”* played and scenes of his life flashed on the large video screen.

Gates joined Suzanne Malveaux center stage, after CNN’s White House Correspondent introduced him as “an authority of history, a professor of history and English literature, an author, a TV producer, a father and a mentor to so many people. His *‘African American Lives’* series has put the focus, front and center, on the African American experience...”

Then, photos of Gate’s infamous “Beer Summit” with President Barack Obama and Sgt. James Crowley cycled through the video montage. Gates did a double-take and laughed, “Oh, so this is how it’s going to be.”

“We can’t be all serious,” said Malveaux. “That’s OK. This is home.” Gates said. Then they settled into an hour-long interview, filled with thoughtful insights and quite a bit of humor.



With this interview, Gates became the latest subject of The HistoryMakers project. The Chicago-based organization is the nation's largest African American video oral history archive with 7,000 hours of history on tape. In its 10 years, the project staff has gone to more than 80 U.S. cities and towns in its mission to preserve the memories of individuals who witnessed history or created history in their own right.

Gates' interview marked the project's first trip to the Mountain State. Yet, The HistoryMakers' Founder and Executive Director Julieanne Richardson said West Virginia is referenced often throughout the collection.

"West Virginia State University is very important to African American history in this country."

Richardson expressed her thanks to Verizon West Virginia for underwriting the interview of Gates and three other West Virginia honorees: Dr. Hazo W. Carter Jr., Lou Myers, and Andrea L. Taylor. "It's marvelous to sit down with someone and recount their life over a three-hour period," she said. "It all starts with an idea, and this project started when B. Keith Fulton, president of Verizon West Virginia, offered to sponsor this event."

Piedmont, WV – "The Center of the World"

Born in 1950 in Piedmont, WV, Gates joked that in a town with 2,000 people where, "386 people were black and 385 were related to me -- it made it rough at dating time!"

"Piedmont was the center of the world for me. It was fantastic. I loved growing up in West Virginia. Piedmont is about three hours from Washington, DC. It's right on the Potomac. And my family on both sides has lived in this area – Mineral, Hardy and Grant counties – for over 200 years."

Malveaux probed, saying she heard Gates often talk about his West Virginia roots.

“We all have multiple identities. In our society, you’re labeled as one, primarily,” Gates said. “But I tell my students that being West Virginian is just as important to who I am as being black.

“I’m a Mountaineer... and Mountaineers are always free. Being quirky or being a rugged individual all comes from growing up in these hills. I grew up hunting and fishing. I liked the camaraderie of being with my uncle and cousins. I love to fish.”

Gates said he didn’t know much about his older ancestors until he produced *African American Lives* for PBS. The genealogist of the show wanted to see what they could learn about him.

“They were able to restore my family tree back all the way to 1753. I learned about my ancestor John Redman, a Free Negro who fought in the Revolutionary War. He mustered into the Continental Army on Christmas Day in 1778 and mustered out in 1784.” (Due to this family link, Gates was inducted into the Sons of the American Revolution in 2006.)

Gates said Redman married another Free Negro, and the couple settled in Moorefield, W.Va., where they owned property.

“If you’re African American, we’re all descended from slaves. The only question is when your grandparents became free. I came from seven sets of ancestors who were all free by 1823 in West Virginia.”

Gates went on to explain that the economy of the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia did not need slaves. There were no big plantations like in the Carolinas or Virginia. Meanwhile, freed slaves in Virginia received property and money. So, Gates’ ancestors had property of their own – some of which the Gates family still owns today.

His childhood in the Mountain State also offered a different perspective on U.S. segregation in the 1950s. As a child Gates said his school was desegregated early, without protests, “because it just made sense.” There were not enough black kids in Piedmont to justify a separate school – so the schools were one.



Gates' Legacy: Being a drum major for African American intellectual life

When he was nine years old, Gates recalled going with his father to sort through his grandfather's things after his death. Gates' father gave him an old newspaper article about Jane Gates "an estimable colored woman" who owned property, even though she started her life as a slave.

"I knew that she had to be special. She was the oldest Gates that I knew of at the time. And the next day, I got a notebook and interviewed my family members," he said. So began his life-long passion for genealogy – which continues with Gates' PBS shows that combine the latest genetics research with tracing genealogy.

Professor Gates described receiving his bachelor's at Yale University, and earning his master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Cambridge. He remembered his father telling him, "Now, don't you Jim Crow yourself." By that, he meant he wanted Gates to have friends of all races, and to interact with them as intellectual equals.



"Many people think that black people are intellectually inferior," Gates said toward the end of the evening's interview. Gates feels this is the last front of racism that we need to confront as a country.

"I want to be remembered as a person who celebrated the diversity of America," Gates said at the closing of the event. "I want to be remembered as someone who fought for and restored the contributions of people of African descent to the culture and the intellectual contributions of this country.

"I want our people to have a place at the grand table of culture and civilization. I want to be remembered as the drum major for African American intellectual life."

