

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**MARGARET E. M. TOLBERT**

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Jeannette E. Brown

at

National Science Foundation  
Arlington, Virginia

on

13 August 2009

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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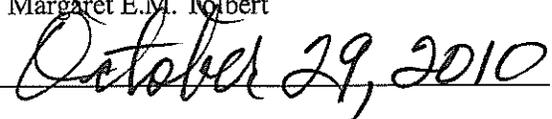
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## MARGARET E. M. TOLBERT

1943 Born in Suffolk, Virginia on 24 November

### Education

1967 B.S., Tuskegee Institute, Chemistry  
1968 M.S., Wayne State University, Analytical Chemistry  
1974 Ph.D., Brown University, Biochemistry  
1988 Completed Accounting Principles Course, Dyke College

### Professional Experience

Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama  
1969 Biomedical Research Technician  
1969-1970 Instructor of Mathematics  
1973-1976 Assistant Professor of Chemistry; Associate Professor of  
Chemistry; Professor of Chemistry  
1980-1988 Professor of Chemistry

Opportunities Industrialization Center, Providence, Rhode Island  
1971-1972 Instructor (Night Classes) of Mathematics and Science

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island  
1973 Instructor of Chemistry for Transitional Program  
1978-1979 Associate Professor of Medical Science & MARC Faculty Fellow  
in Research

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, California  
1974 Research Associate in the Biomedical Institute

Southern Vocational College, Tuskegee, Alabama  
1974 Instructor of Biology and Mathematics

University of Texas Medical School at Houston, Houston, Texas  
1977 Visiting Scientist

Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida  
1977 Researcher  
1977-1979 Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences  
1977-1979 Associate Dean of the School of Pharmacy

1977-1978	International Institute of Cellular & Molecular Pathology, Brussels, Belgium Guest Research Scientist & MARC Faculty Fellow
1979-1988	Carver Research Foundation of Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama Director and Associate Provost for Research and Outreach, later named Associate Provost for Research and Development
1982-1983	University of Alabama System, Tuscaloosa/Huntsville/Birmingham, Alabama Member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama System
1985-1987	Birmingham Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Birmingham, Alabama Director of the Birmingham Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta; Chair of the Birmingham Branch
1988-1990	BP America, Inc, Research Center at Warrensville Heights, Ohio
1988-1990	Senior Budgets and Control Analyst
1988-1990	Senior Planner
1990-1993	National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C. Program Director; Special Assistant to the Vice Chair of the Committee on Education and Training of the Federal Coordinating Council for Science, Engineering, and Technology
1994	Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland Program Officer for International Programs
1994-1996	Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois Director of the Division of Educational Programs
1996-2002	The New Brunswick Laboratory/U.S. Department of Energy, Argonne, Illinois Director
2001	Office of Laboratory Operations and Environment, Safety and Health (SC-80) in the Office of Science/U.S. Department of Energy. Acting Associate Director
2002-present	National Science Foundation, Arlington, Virginia
2002-present	Senior Advisor (Senior Executive Service)
2002-present	Director, Science and Technology Centers Integrative

2002-present Partnerships Program, FY 2005/FY 2006 Cohort  
Executive Liaison, Committee on equal Opportunities in  
Science and Engineering

Honors

1970-1971 Brown University Fellowship  
1971-1973 Southern Fund Fellowship for Graduate Study at Brown University  
1975 Outstanding Teacher, College of Arts and Sciences, Tuskegee Institute  
1975 Plaque awarded by MBS Trainees for outstanding service to student  
trainees at Tuskegee Institute  
1976 Personalities of the South Award in recognition of achievements and  
outstanding service to the community and state  
1978 Plaque awarded by undergraduate and graduate students in the Career  
Outreach Awareness Program in appreciation of the outstanding work  
in student preparation  
1978-1979 NIH/NIGMS-MARC Faculty Research Fellowship Award—Served as  
Guest Scientist, International Institute for Cellular and Molecular  
Pathology in Brussels, Belgium and Brown University in Providence,  
Rhode Island  
1981 Alabama Democratic Conference Award in Science and Medicine  
1981-present Presidential Associate, Tuskegee Institute  
1982 Plaque for service to Tuskegee Public Schools  
1983 Faculty Achievement Award, Tuskegee Institute  
1983 Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Award for Outstanding Service and  
Contributions to Education  
1983 Tuskegee Lions Club Award  
1983 Certificate of Service for Outstanding Service in Lionism and the  
Tuskegee Eye Bank  
1984 Certificate of Service for Outstanding Service in Lionism and the  
Tuskegee Eye Bank  
1984 The Woman of the Year Award received from the Alpha Xi Chapter of  
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority  
1985 Certificate of Service for Outstanding Service in Lionism and the  
Tuskegee Eye Bank  
1985 Academic Tenure awarded by Tuskegee University  
1985 Certificate of Appreciation and Recognition awarded for Eminent  
Volunteer Service and Sincere Dedication in the District Court of  
Macon County-Juvenile and Outreach Service  
1985 Plaque awarded by the East Tennessee Chapter of the National  
Contractor Management Association  
1987 Certificate of Distinguished Service to the Federal Reserve System and  
Excellent Contributions to the Federal Reserve Bank and to Economic  
Progress of the Sixth Federal Reserve District

1988 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Fellow  
1996 Women's History Month Award Certificate of Appreciation from  
Women in Science Technology/Argonne National Laboratory  
1996 Among the women honored with a luncheon and program at the White  
House during the "Women Making History" celebration  
1997 The Chicago Operations Office/U.S. Department of Energy  
Performance Award  
1998 The Chicago Operations Office/U.S. Department of Energy  
Performance Award  
1998 Secretary of Energy Pride Award for Community Service  
1999 The Chicago Operations Office/U.S. Department of Energy  
Performance Award  
1999 Chicago-Tuskegee Alumni Club President's Merit Award  
2000 The Chicago Operations Office/U.S. Department of Energy  
Performance Award  
2000 Honoree in the Museum of Science and Industry's "Black Creativity  
Exhibit: African-American Women in Science and Technology"  
2000 Honored by the U.S. Department of Energy as it focused on advancing  
the status of women in the program titled "Women in Science"  
2001 The Chicago Operations Office/U.S. Department of Energy  
Performance Award  
2001 Women of Color in Government and Defense Technology Award in  
Managerial Leadership  
2001 Appreciation Plaque from the Albuquerque Operations Office/U.S.  
Department of Energy  
2005 Performance Award from the National Science Foundation  
2007 The Dr. George Washington Carver Distinguished Service Award from  
Tuskegee University

## ABSTRACT

**Margaret E. M. Tolbert** was born in Suffolk, Virginia at a time when rural Virginia was still very segregated. She and her siblings were raised by their grandmother within a large extended family. Growing up, Tolbert took cleaning jobs in her community to make money. In this way, she met Mr. and Mrs. Cook, who, as educated and relatively well-off African Americans, encouraged her to get a good education. Her high school had limited resources, but she found excellent mentors and graduated class valedictorian. She decided to attend Tuskegee University for her undergraduate degree, with the intention of entering medicine.

At Tuskegee, she was drawn to chemistry and research, a career path she had not been exposed to before. Though she was the only female student in her class, Tolbert found a community of supportive professors and students with an interest in her well-being. She went on to complete her master's degree in chemistry at Wayne State University, but immediately returned to Tuskegee as a technician to be with her husband. She was interested in becoming a chemistry professor, so at the Cooks' urging she applied to a Ph.D. program at Brown University, which was recruiting minority students. By this time, Tolbert's first marriage had ended, and the Cooks cared for Tolbert's son while she earned her degree. At Brown, she met her second husband, Henry Hudson Tolbert. After completing her doctorate, Tolbert returned to Tuskegee as a faculty member, but soon took guest research and management positions at the University of Texas, Florida A&M University, and Brown University. She also completed a postdoctorate in Brussels, Belgium, where her Congolese colleagues were fascinated by her African-American heritage.

While Tolbert had intended to stay in research, she found herself drawn to management positions. In 1979, she took the opportunity to become the first woman director of the Carver Research Foundation at Tuskegee University. In this position, she oversaw institutional development in the university's research programs, but she also traveled to affiliated institutions as far away as Liberia and Libya. After almost a decade at the Carver Research Foundation, she went to Standard Oil of Ohio on sabbatical. From that point onward, she transitioned permanently to science management positions, working for BP America, the National Science Foundation, Argonne National Laboratory, and the New Brunswick Laboratory. In these positions, her responsibilities included overseeing development, funding, and diversity-based initiatives.

Tolbert is currently at the National Science Foundation, funding programs and developing policy focused on increasing diversity in science and technology. During the interview she spoke repeatedly about the importance of mentoring, and the opportunities networking provides to develop mentors, colleagues, and future opportunities. She concludes the interview by giving young women the advice to get a strong math/science background, and to make informed decisions. She also speaks to the unique ability of minority-serving institutions to provide an education while still cultivating the whole student.

## INTERVIEWER

**Jeannette E. Brown** has a research MS degree from the University of Minnesota and a BS degree in the Field of Chemistry from Hunter College. She started her industrial career at CIBA

Pharmaceutical Co. as a junior chemist, working there for eleven years, and she held the position of Research Chemist at Merck & Co. Inc. for twenty-five years. Brown is a former Faculty Associate in the department of Pre-College Programs at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, holding the title of New Jersey Statewide Systemic Initiative (NJSSI) Regional Director. She was appointed to the National Science Foundation Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women Minorities and Persons with Disabilities (CEOSE) and served on that committee for six years. She is the 2005 recipient of the American Chemical Society Dreyfus Award for mentoring minorities in science and she is currently working on a book about the history of African-American women chemists.

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