

# OPRAH'S ROOTS

Thirteen/WNET New York  
450 West 33rd Street  
New York NY 10001-2605  
thirteen.org

## press information



OPRAH WINFREY DISCOVERS UNSUNG HEROES AMONG HER ANCESTORS  
WHEN HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. GUIDES A REMARKABLE JOURNEY THROUGH  
HER FAMILY HISTORY IN **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, AN *AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES*  
SPECIAL PREMIERING JANUARY 24 ON PBS



Co-Produced by  
Thirteen/WNET New York,  
Kunhardt Productions  
and Inkwell Films.

One-Hour Documentary Is Produced By Thirteen/WNET New York, Kunhardt Productions  
And Inkwell Films, With Major Corporate Funding Provided By The Coca-Cola Company  
And Additional Funding Provided By McDonald's

*"I feel empowered to say, 'This is who you are, this is where you've come from. You've come from strength and power and endurance and pain and suffering and triumph. You've come from all of that. And so imagine now how much more you can be.'"*

- Oprah Winfrey, in **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, an *African American Lives* Special

When *African American Lives* premiered on PBS in February 2006, the series was hailed by *The New York Times* as "the most exciting and stirring documentary on any subject to appear on television in a long time." Among the many vivid stories told in that four-part series, audiences and critics nationwide were especially drawn to the powerfully moving discussions between Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., series host and executive producer, and TV pioneer and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey, which revealed the struggles and accomplishments of Winfrey's ancestors.

Now, combining new genealogical and historical research with state-of-the-art DNA analysis, Winfrey and Professor Gates continue their dramatic and illuminating quest to discover a fuller history of Winfrey's ancestry when **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, an *African American Lives* Special premieres Wednesday, January 24 at 8 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). The program features a wealth of previously unseen material, including portions of Professor

-more-

Major corporate funding is provided by The Coca-Cola Company.  
Additional funding provided by McDonald's.

*The Coca-Cola Company*



Gates' original *African American Lives* interview with Winfrey and new revelations about her family history.

“Our first *African American Lives* series made for riveting viewing and was a life-changing experience for each of the participants, myself included,” says Gates, Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. “Now, with an in-depth focus exclusively on my friend Oprah Winfrey, we bring to life in even greater detail the remarkably rich and always inspiring stories of her ancestors.”

**OPRAH'S ROOTS** offers many new insights into how one of the world's most famous people emerged from an exceptional family. It includes an account of how Elmore Winfrey, Oprah's paternal grandfather, was courageously involved in the Civil Rights movement. The program tracks down the two Civil Rights workers whom Elmore once housed and worked alongside, returning with them to Mississippi where 40 years earlier they led voter registration and desegregation efforts.

**OPRAH'S ROOTS** also uncovers Winfrey's maternal great-grandmother Amanda Winters' remarkable achievements in the field of education. The program features an interview with a surprising distant cousin of Winfrey's, Mavis Staples, of the the renowned gospel music family, showing how their family trees intersect four generations back.

The story of Winfrey's great-great-grandfather Constantine Winfrey, a former slave, is one of amazing success amid the difficult and dangerous years after Emancipation and Reconstruction. As *African American Lives* documented, Constantine acquired 80 acres of land through backbreaking labor. Now, in **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, newly discovered land deeds allow Professor Gates to explore his story even more deeply, explaining how Constantine used the income he made from his farm products to add to his land holdings - an astounding accomplishment for a man who'd recently been property himself, and another of Oprah's ancestor's achievements that show

the roots of her own success a century later.

Finally, when the genealogical trail ends, **OPRAH'S ROOTS** turns to modern science. The program presents the dramatic results of Winfrey's genetic analysis, which locate her matrilineal ancestors among the Kpelle people of Liberia on the western coast of Africa.

“Through our genealogical research into Oprah's roots, viewers will see how census records, land deeds, archival newspapers and maps, tombstone inscriptions, and even the estate records of slave holders can help locate their own ancestors,” says Gates. “And just as importantly, they'll see how fascinating and dramatic historical investigation and discovery can be.”

In addition, **OPRAH'S ROOTS** will be accompanied by the publication of a major new book written by Professor Gates. ***Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own***, published by Crown, a division of Random House, will be available on [www.shoppbs.org](http://www.shoppbs.org) and in bookstores on January 23, 2007. A special DVD of **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, available on [www.shoppbs.org](http://www.shoppbs.org) in March 2007, will feature 30 minutes of excerpts from the broadcast plus more than an hour of additional comments and research guidance from genealogists, historians and geneticists featured in the program and in the original *African American Lives* series.

Major corporate funding for **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, an *African American Lives* Special is provided by The Coca-Cola Company. Additional funding provided by McDonald's.

**OPRAH'S ROOTS**, an *African American Lives* Special is a co-production of Thirteen/WNET New York, Kunhardt Productions and Inkwell Films. Graham Judd is producer and director; Dyllan McGee is senior producer for Kunhardt Productions. Executive producers are Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William Grant and Peter Kunhardt.

.....

**About Thirteen/WNET New York**

Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public

broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as The Ethnic Heritage Specials, The Thirteen Walking Tours, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects - including the Celebration of Teaching and Learning - as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: [www.thirteen.org](http://www.thirteen.org).

**About Kunhardt Productions**

For nearly 20 years, Kunhardt Productions has been responsible for critically acclaimed historical programming with a reputation for high editorial standards. In addition to *Oprah's Roots*, most recently Kunhardt Productions co-produced *African American Lives* (2006) for PBS. Previously, the company produced *Freedom: A History of US*, an eight-hour PBS series based upon Joy Hakim's award-winning books. Other notable works from Kunhardt Productions include *Lincoln*, a four-hour series for ABC; *In Memoriam*, a one-hour co-production with HBO about Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; and *The American President*, a 10-hour PBS series profiling all forty-one presidents of the United States.

**About Inkwell Films**

Inkwell Films was founded by Henry Louis Gates Jr. to produce sophisticated documentary films about the African-American experience for a broad audience. In addition to *Oprah's Roots*, Inkwell Films co-produced *African American Lives* (2006) and is currently developing *The History of the African American People*, an eight-part series tentatively slated for national broadcast premiere in 2009-2010.

.....

Thirteen/WNET New York Press Contacts:

**Donna Williams**  
212.560.8030  
[williamsd@thirteen.org](mailto:williamsd@thirteen.org)

**Gloria Park**  
212.560.2063  
[parkg@thirteen.org](mailto:parkg@thirteen.org)