

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William Bonaparte, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Bonaparte, William, Jr., 1942-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr.,
Dates:	July 9, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:09:28).
Abstract:	Telecommunications entrepreneur William Bonaparte, Jr. (1942 - 2019) was the first African American Private Business Exchange installer ever hired by Illinois Bell. He later formed Bonaparte Connections, a wiring company, and Bonaparte Properties, a restoration contracting firm. Bonaparte was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 9, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_151
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entrepreneur William Bonaparte, Jr., was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 11, 1942. Growing up in the South Side neighborhood of Princeton Park, Bonaparte was inspired to achieve by his seventh-grade teacher Barbara Sizemore. While in school, Bonaparte was also active in music, playing in the Bobby Blue Band, a local jazz ensemble. Bonaparte went on to attend Wilson Junior College, and then Chicago Technical College.

Bonaparte went to work for Illinois Bell in 1963, becoming the first African American PBX (Private Business Exchange) installer ever hired by the company. While with Illinois Bell, in 1968, Bonaparte was promoted to foreman of operations in the Loop, Chicago's busy financial district. By 1971, Bonaparte was working in a management role, and in 1976, he graduated from the Milwaukee School of Engineering with a degree in electrical engineering. In 1984, Bonaparte left Illinois Bell for AT&T, where he became area manager of Chicago south services.

Bonaparte went into business for himself in 1986, capitalizing on the court-ordered breakup of Bell Telephone System; he formed Bonaparte Connections, a wiring company, to fill the void left by Bell. In 1991, Bonaparte founded Bonaparte Corporation, an electrical contracting firm. From that point on, Bonaparte watched sales steadily climb, grossing more than \$8.5 million in 1996. In 1999, Bonaparte founded Bonaparte Properties, a restoration contracting firm.

Bonaparte was active in the community as well, serving on the executive board of the Electrical Contractors Association; the board of the Cosmopolitan Chamber of Commerce; and as chairman of Rotary/One Chicago. Bonaparte also served as a member of the Chicago Minority Business Development Council; the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce; and the Executives Club of Chicago. Bonaparte received the Cosmopolitan Chamber of Commerce and Kennedy-King College Small Business of the Year Award; the AT&T Keystone Award for

Excellence; and was a finalist for the Ernst & Young LLP Entrepreneur of the Year Award for High Technology.

Bonaparte passed away on May 25, 2019.

William Bonaparte, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 9, 2003.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William Bonaparte, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 9, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Telecommunications entrepreneur William Bonaparte, Jr. (1942 - 2019) was the first African American Private Business Exchange installer ever hired by Illinois Bell. He later formed Bonaparte Connections, a wiring company, and Bonaparte Properties, a restoration contracting firm.

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:

Bonaparte, William, Jr., 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Bonaparte, William, Jr., 1942---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Telecommunications Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 William Bonaparte, Jr., July 9, 2003. 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 William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_001, TRT:

0:29:09 ?

William Bonaparte shares many quietly emotional and poignant insights about his family history and his upbringing in Princeton Park. He remembers his grandfather, Papa, who survived life as a slave and the lessons he imparted to a young Billy. Bonaparte also discusses how his parents escaped the sharecropping life in rural Arkansas. William Bonaparte Sr. hoboed with his brother along the railroad as part of the Great Migration to prosperity in the North. William and his older brother, Matthew, were born in Chicago to two extremely hard-working parents, whose limited education and skills shaped the way young William perceived life. The segment closes as Bonaparte begins reminiscing about his favorite elementary school teacher.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_002, TRT: 0:28:14 ?

William Bonaparte recalls his teenage years in Chicago during the late 1950s-early 1960s, including attending the new (in 1958) Harlan High School--an experiment in integration with the races nearly evenly divided--and his experiences playing drums in a band with blues legend Bobby 'Blue' Bland. After high school, greatly disappointed that his family could not afford to send him to college, Bonaparte gets a job and then joins the Army.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_003, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Telecommunications entrepreneur, William Bonaparte, recounts several anecdotes of racist encounters, beatings and discrimination he faced after joining the army in 1961. Living in Chicago did not prepare him for the level of racism in the South. In an extended story, Bonaparte relates how he and several fellow black soldiers were arrested while driving through Kentucky. Bonaparte also served in Vietnam in 1962 as an advisor, where he saw things which still shake him to his core today. Upon returning from the service in 1963, Bonaparte joined in the picketing of area industries which refused to hire blacks for anything other than menial positions. He was hired for a communication apprentice position with Illinois Bell, which would put him on track to become a telephone installer. As one of the first black members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Bonaparte blazed trails, and endured a physical attacks and arrest from Chicago Police who could not conceive a black man could be a telephone installer.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_004, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

This segment opens with William Bonaparte sharing another story of physical abuse in the workplace when he was a Journeyman. Eventually, he worked his way into the executive offices of Illinois Bell which coincided with the political rise of Harold Washington. When Washington became mayor of Chicago, area businesses, like Illinois Bell, began to make a more concerted effort to adhere to affirmative action efforts. As an executive, Bonaparte was able to start programs which created pools of eligible black employees for Illinois Bell. Bonaparte details the massive changes during the divestiture of the Bell systems he faced as an employee and opportunities the divestiture offered.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_005, TRT: 0:29:54 ?

William Bonaparte details his decision to strike out on his own after the breakup of Illinois Bell. He seized an opportunity to provide wiring services for businesses after realizing the new Bells were not. Bonaparte also discusses in detail the challenges he faced during his first years on his own, which included

being fired from the first company he started by its board of directors. Undaunted, he formed the Bonaparte Corporation in 1991. There are several lessons Bonaparte learned in those early years, including the importance of networking, mentoring and being mentored.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_006, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

William Bonaparte reflects on the changes he's been part of during his adult life and how diligently he's worked to provide opportunity for others. He's worked with several Chicago elementary schools to upgrade their computer labs and libraries. Bonaparte reflects upon his career and offers some insights on his success as a black entrepreneur. He also speaks of the changes he's observed in race relations over the decades. Finally, Bonaparte shares what he wants his legacy to be: that he tried to work hard and help others. The segment closes with 20 photographs from Bonaparte's early years.

Video Oral History Interview with William Bonaparte, Jr., Section A2003_151_001_007, TRT: 0:12:02 ?

This segment contains 23 photos of William Bonaparte and many notable politicians, businessmen and entertainers and his 7th grade teacher Barbara Sizemore.