

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John E. Wilson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilson, John E., 1932-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John E. Wilson,
Dates:	July 21, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:58:00).
Abstract:	Accountant John E. Wilson (1932 - 2013) was a former auditor for the State of Illinois Commerce Commission, and assistant treasurer of the Public Building Commission of Chicago. In addition to these duties, he founded John E. Wilson, Ltd., an accounting firm based in Chicago, Illinois. Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 21, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_168
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

John Ethelbert Wilson was a business executive and accountant. Known by his friends and family as Big John, Wilson was born on December 9, 1932, in Chicago, Illinois, to Carrie Simpson Wilson and Leroy Wilson. Among members of Wilson's extended family were his uncle, Arthur Jewell Wilson, the first African American certified public accountant in Illinois, and his grandmother, Dora McDermott, a building owner and manager with property in Chicago's Bronzeville/Grand Boulevard. Wilson grew up in the Bronzeville/Grand Boulevard area, and attended Wendell Phillips Elementary and High School, which counted amongst its alumni members of the original Harlem Globetrotters, Nat "King" Cole, Dinah Washington, and John H. Johnson.

Wilson went on from Wendell Phillips High School to Northwestern University's School of Commerce, where he received his B.S. degree in 1954, and was the first African American to graduate from the program. Following college, Wilson served in the United States Navy from 1955 to 1957, returning to Chicago to work for his uncle from 1957 to 1963. It was during this period that Wilson married Velma Brown in 1960; they subsequently had two children, Ginger and Kelly.

In 1963, Wilson was hired by the State of Illinois Commerce Commission as an auditor. From there, Wilson went to work at Bowey's, Inc., as general accountant in 1964. Wilson became a certified public accountant in 1965, and became Capitol Food Industries, Inc.'s treasurer and Bates Packaging Company's controller in 1969. Wilson also served as the president of John E. Wilson, Ltd., and assistant treasurer of the Public Building Commission of Chicago.

In addition to these responsibilities, Wilson was a member of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants; the Illinois Society of Certified Public Accountants; the National Association of Minority Certified Public Accountants; Kappa Alpha Psi; Sigma Pi Phi; and Trinity United Church of Christ. He was awarded with

the Alumni National Award in 1996.

John Wilson passed away on October 16, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John E. Wilson was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 21, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Accountant John E. Wilson (1932 - 2013) was a former auditor for the State of Illinois Commerce Commission, and assistant treasurer of the Public Building Commission of Chicago. In addition to these duties, he founded John E. Wilson, Ltd., an accounting firm based in Chicago, Illinois.

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:

Wilson, John E., 1932-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wilson, John E., 1932-2013 --Interviews

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American accountants--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Accountant

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 John E. Wilson, July 21, 2005. 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 John E. Wilson, Section A2005_168_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

John E. Wilson was born on December 9, 1932 in Chicago, Illinois to Carrie Simpson Wilson and Leroy Wilson. His mother was born in 1903 in Mississippi and was raised by her aunt. She had little formal education and worked at North Shore Overall Company in Evanston for around forty years after moving to Chicago at the age of twenty. Wilson's father was born to Dora McDermott, who owned several buildings on Chicago's South Side. Wilson's uncle, Arthur Wilson, was the first African American certified public accountant in Illinois. Wilson's parents separated after a year together. His father was a porter for several stores on Chicago's North Side where Wilson often met him and helped him with his work before school. Wilson grew up in the Ida B. Wells Homes, which were managed by Oscar Brown, Sr. who provided legal counsel to his grandmother. Wilson delivered the Chicago Defender as a child and sold stockings to his teachers. He attended Northwestern University where he held various odd jobs to pay for tuition.

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American accountants--Interviews.

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with John E. Wilson, Section A2005_168_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

John E. Wilson recalls being mugged as a child while selling newspapers. Growing up, Wilson was responsible and thrifty and inherited his mother's sense of honesty. He attended Wendell Phillips Elementary School and was a member of Gorham United Methodist Church. At Wendell Phillips High School, Wilson played basketball. His senior year, he captained the team and was elected class treasurer. He recalls his classmates, lawyer James Montgomery and banker HistoryMaker Jacoby Dickens. Although he excelled at math, he also enjoyed English class. After graduating in 1950, Wilson planned to attend Southern University in New Orleans on a basketball scholarship, but a deferred start date led him to enroll at Northwestern University where he believed he had a scholarship from the Methodist church. When the registrar told him he did not, Wilson used his savings to pay his tuition. His freshman year, Wilson was one of about twenty African American men in campus housing.

Video Oral History Interview with John E. Wilson, Section A2005_168_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

John E. Wilson lived at Northwestern University's International House with African Americans, students from foreign countries and John McKnight, who later joined the faculty. Wilson held several jobs while completing his accounting degree in the university's Commerce School. Professors like Raymond W. Mack encouraged Wilson, and he graduated in 1964. The racism of the accounting industry kept Wilson from finding a job, but he was hired by his uncle, Arthur Wilson, whom he worked for until being drafted into the U.S. Navy in November 1955. He served on the U.S.S. Barton for twenty-three months as a third class storekeeper. Upon returning to Chicago in 1957, he worked for his uncle part-time and as an auditor for the State of Illinois. Wilson then was hired by Bowery, Inc., where he advanced until he eventually obtained a position as treasurer of its parent company, Capital Food Industries, where he remained until 1979. He recalls his marriage to Velma Brown Wilson in 1960 and becoming a certified CPA in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with John E. Wilson, Section A2005_168_001_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

John E. Wilson worked at Capital Food Industries for nineteen years before starting his own firm, Wilson and Gills, with Thurman C. Gill. Following Gill's departure, Wilson opened John E. Wilson, Ltd. where he worked with Greg Kenner and handled mostly small accounts. During Harold Washington's term, Wilson worked with the mayor to encourage the administration to hire more minority firms. Wilson describes the competition within the accounting industry and the trend of larger firms poaching clients from smaller firms. Wilson had two daughters, Ginger Wilson and Kelly Wilson. He describes his volunteer and social activities, his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered. Wilson also shares advice on good accounting practices and reflects upon his life and legacy.