

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jerry O. Williams

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Williams, Jerry O., 1938-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 19, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:15:28).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Corporate chief executive Jerry O. Williams (1938 - ) was the first black Fortune 500 president when he led AM International, and was the first African American to appear on the cover of Fortune magazine. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 19, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_019
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former Fortune 500 executive and entrepreneur Jerry O. Williams was born on September 27, 1938 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Margaret Nora Stone Williams and James Oliver Williams. His mother established the “Williams Scholarship Fund,” a family savings plan that made it possible for Williams and his siblings to attend college. Growing up on the Eastside of Indianapolis, Williams attended Francis W. Parker School No. 56 where he played trumpet in the band with Freddie Hubbard. Williams went to John Hope Franklin Middle School and graduated from Crispus Attucks High School in 1956. His classmates included basketball great Oscar

Robertson, and he was taught by musicologist David Baker. Entering Indiana's DePauw University, where his fellow black classmates were artist, Willis "Bing" Davis and future civil rights lawyer Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. Enrolling his last two years at Purdue University, Williams graduated with an undergraduate degree in math from DePauw University and a degree in electrical engineering from Purdue University in 1961. Entering General Electric's (GE) Engineering and Science Training Program, Williams finished in 1964. While working for GE, Williams earned his M.S.E. degree in operations research and systems engineering from the University of Pennsylvania in 1967.

Williams worked for Stanford Research Institute in Palo Alto, California in 1968, and by 1973 returned to GE and was mentored by Lou Tomasetti. In 1975, Williams left GE to become vice president of \$400-million auto supplier, Maremont, in Chicago where he was befriended by president Richard Black. When Maremont was sold to Zurich-based Alusuisse, Ltd., Williams returned to GE. In 1981, he rejoined Black at AM International, as vice president of corporate planning and development. In 1982, Williams was appointed president of the Bruning Division of AM International, and by 1985, he became president and chief operating officer of the parent company, AM International. Acquiring Harris Graphics in 1986, Williams helped double AM sales. By 1988, AM was doing \$1.5 billion in business. Williams became the first African American to grace the cover of *Fortune* magazine as AM's future CEO and the nation's first black president of a Fortune 500 company. However, Williams resigned from AM in 1988 and by 1990 moved to the United Kingdom as chairman of the board and managing director of Monotype Corporation, PLC. In 1993, Williams founded Grand Eagle Companies in Chicago and served as president and chief executive officer of this \$215 million company – the largest independent manufacturer and repairer of electric motors and transformers in North America. In 2000, he sold the company to a private equity group and retired.

In 2002, Williams became chairman of Global Recruiters Network (GRN) offering management search services.

Williams lives in the suburbs of Chicago with his wife, Pamela Jones Williams. They have two grown children.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 19, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jerry O. Williams was conducted by Larry

Crowe on January 19, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate chief executive Jerry O. Williams (1938 - ) was the first black Fortune 500 president when he led AM International, and was the first African American to appear on the cover of Fortune magazine.

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## **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®.

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## **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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Williams, Jerry O., 1938-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Williams, Jerry O., 1938---Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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AM International (Firm)

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## **Occupations:**

Corporate Chief Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

BusinessMakers

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## **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 Jerry O. Williams, January 19, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section  
A2007\_019\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:33 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams was born on September 27, 1938 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Margaret Stone Williams and James O. Williams. His maternal great-grandfather was white, and his maternal grandfather, Thomas Stone, was a handyman. He and Williams' maternal grandmother, Nora Stone, moved their family from Tennessee to Indiana by horse and buggy. Williams' paternal grandparents, Fletcher and Laura Williams, raised their family in Lanexa, Virginia. Williams' father was a member of the Pentecostal faith, and pastor of 22nd Street Church of God in Christ in Indianapolis. He met and married Williams' mother there in 1932, and they had seven children together. Williams' mother left school to help support her family by working as a domestic, but earned her diploma later in life. She emphasized the importance of education to her children, whom she brought to the library twice a week. Williams first experienced racial discrimination at eight years old, when a woman called him a slur as he

completed his paper route.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section  
A2007\_019\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:42 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams grew up in the African American Eastside neighborhood of Indianapolis, Indiana. There, he recalls children playing in the street, as well as gang activity. Williams attended elementary school at Francis W. Parker School 56, where he enjoyed math, and was inspired by biographies of industrialists like Henry Ford. While in grade school, he studied music, and played the French horn and trumpet alongside his friend and classmate Freddie Hubbard, who became a renowned jazz trumpeter. He attended seventh and eighth grade at John Hope School 26, and then went on to Crispus Attucks High School, where he was influenced by band director Russell Brown, who taught musicians like Slide Hampton and J.J. Johnson. Williams describes his family traditions, and the popular music of his childhood. He also remembers discrimination in Indiana, and the presence of the Ku Klux Klan. Williams was refused service based on his race at a number of Indianapolis' restaurants, including one beside the Indiana Statehouse.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section  
A2007\_019\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:39 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams attended the segregated Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. There, his teachers emphasized African American history, and Principal Russell Lane, who had a Ph.D. degree, assembled an educated staff. During high school, Williams continued to pursue music alongside Freddie Hubbard, and was influenced by music teacher James Compton and jazz composer David Baker, who was a student teacher. Williams was elected vice president of his senior class, which included basketball player Oscar Robertson. Williams graduated in 1956, and enrolled at the predominantly white and wealthy DePauw University on a scholarship. He initially majored in history and math. On campus, Williams befriended the other three African American students, including civil rights leader Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. and artist Willis Bing Davis. Williams also worked at the front desk of the men's hall, where he met

Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays and poet Carl Sandburg.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:57 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams had difficulty adjusting to life at the nearly all-white DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where he enrolled in 1956. There, Williams was admitted to the dual degree engineering program. It was partly taught at Purdue University, where he experienced racial discrimination from a professor who graded him poorly, despite his high exam scores. In 1961, Williams graduated with bachelor's degrees in mathematics and engineering from DePauw University and Purdue University. Then, Williams obtained a position in General Electric's highly competitive engineer training program. He was the sole African American participant, and lived with white roommates in a white neighborhood of Syracuse, New York. In 1963, he experienced housing discrimination upon moving to California for the program. He completed his training in 1964, and relocated to Pennsylvania as a mechanical engineer for General Electric. There, he was again denied housing based on his race, and retained attorney Arlen Specter.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:24 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams became a mechanical engineer for General Electric in 1964. There, he built satellites for the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency. During this time, Williams also attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In 1967, he earned a master's degree in operations research and systems engineering. That year, he also married his wife, Pamela Jones Williams. In 1968, Williams joined the Stanford Research Institute in Menlo Park, California, where he optimized transit models for cities; worked in the new field of computerized traffic signalization; and was briefly a coworker of athlete Tommie Smith. During Williams' employment, the Stanford Research Institute was tear gassed by students protesting the Vietnam War. In 1973, Williams moved his family to Erie, Pennsylvania to return to General Electric, where he worked on strategic planning

in the transportation division. He focused on locomotive business for companies such as Metra. Williams also describes his wife and children.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:35 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams was convinced to return to General Electric by its transportation division leader, Louis V. Tomasetti, who offered him a position in strategic planning. In 1975, Williams was recruited by Chairman Richard B. Black as the vice president of corporate development and planning at Maremont Automobile Products, Inc. He later became responsible for the company's mergers and acquisitions, and regularly experienced racial discrimination from white businessmen who questioned his role or ignored him. Once, a representative for a potential acquisition refused to believe Williams was black, as he did not think an African American was capable of holding Williams' title. In 1979, the company was acquired by Schweizerische Aluminium AG, and the new president wanted to dismiss him. However, Williams proved himself by negotiating a favorable deal with American Electric Power. In 1980, Williams returned to General Electric, where he trained astronaut William Anders in strategic planning.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:34 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams accepted a position at AM International, Inc. in Chicago, Illinois as senior vice president of corporate planning and development under Richard B. Black. There, he managed the company's finances through bankruptcy; and, in 1982, became the head of operations at AM Bruning Ltd., a failing division worth 100 million dollars. In three years, he tripled its profits. Williams left briefly to work with businessman Sam Zell at Equity International; and, in 1985, returned to AM International, Inc. as president and chief operating officer. He was the first African American president of a Fortune 500 company, and subsequently the first African American to appear on the cover of Fortune magazine. In his first year as president, AM International, Inc. acquired Harris Graphics Company, and doubled its size and earnings.

Following a disagreement with the CEO and board in 1988, Williams left the company to join Richard B. Black's venture capital firm as a special partner.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_008, TRT: 0:28:20 2007/01/19

Jerry O. Williams relocated to England, and became the chairman of the board and managing director of Monotype Corporation, PLC in 1990. In 1993, he returned to the United States to found Grand Eagle Companies, Inc., an electrical and mechanical repairs and services firm. In 1995, Williams' company acquired Eastern Electric Apparatus Repair Company, Inc. for 50 million dollars. By 2000, Williams had developed Grand Eagle Companies, Inc. into a 215 million dollar, privately held company with fifty shops around the United States. Later that year, he sold the company, and retired. In retirement, Williams served as a consultant to Global Recruiters Network, Inc., and mentored senior executives, including Robert D. Blackwell's daughter, regarding mergers and acquisitions. Williams talks about his contemporaries, like executives James Kaiser, Mannie Jackson and Robert Johnson, and the discrimination against African Americans in Corporate America. Williams also describes how his family contributed to his success.

Video Oral History Interview with Jerry O. Williams, Section A2007\_019\_001\_009, TRT: 0:19:44 2007/01/19

Jerry Williams describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, particularly his concerns for the younger generation. He was encouraged by the increasing amount of young African Americans entering corporate world and obtaining quality education. Williams talks about his peers in Corporate America, such as business consultant Robert D. Blackwell, Sr. and John Rogers, Jr., founder of Ariel Investments, LLC, and their shared responsibility to mentor African American youth. Williams reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs