

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John B. Clemmons, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Clemmons, John B., 1912-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr.,
Dates:	January 22, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:52).
Abstract:	Math professor and physics professor John B. Clemmons, Sr. (1912 - 2012) served as acting chair Department of Mathematics and Physics at Georgia State College, and chartered the Alpha Lambda Boule' of Sigma Pi Phi fraternity. He also served as Chairman of the Board for Carver State Bank in Savannah, Georgia, and received many honors over the years for his outstanding work and philanthropic efforts in the community. Clemmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 22, 2007, in Savannah, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_025
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

College professor and scholar J.B. Clemmons was born John Benjamin Clemmons on April 11, 1912 to Lewis and Bessie Clemmons in Rome, Georgia. Clemmons graduated from high school in 1927 after completing only the tenth grade; African Americans were not allowed to go to eleventh or twelfth grade in Rome. In 1930,

he entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Clemmons then enrolled in graduate studies at Atlanta University, obtaining his M.A. degree in 1937. He then moved to Harlan, Kentucky, where he began teaching for \$100 a week and met and married Mozelle Daily. By 1942, Clemmons was the principal of the school in Harlan. In 1947, Clemmons and his wife moved to Savannah, Georgia. While his wife began her lifelong involvement in the NAACP, Clemmons taught at Savannah State College (now Savannah State University) alongside his colleague, Dr. Henry M. Collier, Jr. Together, they formed the Delta ETA Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. In the summer of 1949, he worked as a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Clemmons then decided to continue his education by attending the University of Southern California to earn his Ph.D. He received Ford Foundation and National Science Foundation grants in 1951 and 1952, respectively. After working towards earning his Ph.D. at UCLA, Clemmons decided to return to Georgia, continued his teaching career and became involved in banking. He went on to charter the Alpha Lambda Boulé of the Sigma Pi Phi in Savannah in 1963.

Clemmons served as the Chairman of the Department of Mathematics and Physics at Savannah State University for thirty-seven years. He received many honors over the years for his outstanding work and philanthropic efforts in the community. Clemmons served as Chairman of the Board for Carver State Bank in Savannah.

Clemmons passed away on June 13, 2012 at the age of 100.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr. was conducted by Denise Gines on January 22, 2007, in Savannah, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Math professor and physics professor John B. Clemmons, Sr. (1912 - 2012) served as acting chair Department of Mathematics and Physics at Georgia State College, and chartered the Alpha Lambda Boule' of Sigma Pi Phi fraternity. He also served as Chairman of the Board for Carver State Bank in Savannah, Georgia, and received many honors over the years for his outstanding work and philanthropic efforts in the community.

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:

Clemmons, John B., 1912-2012

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Clemmons, John B., 1912-2012--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Math Professor

Physics Professor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 B. Clemmons, Sr., January 22, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

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

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 B. Clemmons, Sr., Section A2007_025_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 2007/01/22

John B. Clemmons, Sr. was born on April 11, 1912 in Rome, Georgia to Bessie Turner Clemmons and Lewis Clemmons. His paternal grandfather, Green Clemmons, was a former slave, and worked as a sharecropper in Kingston, Georgia. After the death of Clemmons' grandmother, Mary Clemmons, his grandfather started a lawn care business. Clemmons' maternal grandparents, Molly Turner and Henry Turner, Sr., owned a farm near Rome called Turner's Bend. Clemmons' parents met when his father was sent to deliver a message at Turner's Bend. After marrying, they settled in Rome, where his father worked at the Fairbanks Company, a cart manufacturer. Clemmons grew up in Rome, and often visited Turner's Bend to hunt, fish and play baseball. He was the oldest of three brothers, one of whom, the middle son Eddie Clemmons, fled Rome after an altercation with a white coworker; and, from that time, lived with his maternal uncle, Willie Turner, in California.

Video Oral History Interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr., Section A2007_025_001_002, TRT: 0:31:10 2007/01/22

John B. Clemmons, Sr. grew up in Rome, Georgia. His mother, Bessie Turner Clemmons, was a housewife; and his father, Lewis Clemmons, worked at the Fairbanks Company, which manufactured dollies. His father had little formal education, but managed most of the

company's operations, including designing custom dollies for clients. Clemmons and his brother also worked there, transporting the completed carts to the warehouse. Clemmons was a member of the Boy Scouts of America, but was not given a uniform because of his race. In Rome, he attended an all-black elementary school, and later he attended Main High School. After the tenth grade, Clemmons and several of his classmates enrolled at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where they failed the entrance exam, and were placed in remedial classes. Clemmons went on to study mathematics, which he pursued at the graduate level at Atlanta University. During the summers, he worked in hotels, at Duffy's Tavern in New York City and on a tobacco farm in Connecticut.

Video Oral History Interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr., Section A2007_025_001_003, TRT: 0:28:10 2007/01/22

John B. Clemmons, Sr. obtained a master's degree in mathematics from Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia in 1937. He then moved to Harlan, Kentucky, where he became the mathematics teacher and eventually principal at Rosenwald High School. While in Harlan, Clemmons was drafted into the U.S. Army, but was excused from service, because he was the only male teacher at his school. After his girlfriend passed away, Clemmons left Harlan to become a vice principal in Cumberland, Maryland. He also waited tables and worked as barber to save for medical school. Then, Clemmons received a scholarship to a Ph.D. program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where he studied for three years, until his advisor was hired at another school. Clemmons planned to return to his position in Maryland, but was offered a mathematics professorship by Georgia State College President James A. Colston, and joined the faculty in Savannah, Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr., Section A2007_025_001_004, TRT: 0:29:40 2007/01/22

John B. Clemmons, Sr. met Louis B. Toomer, the founding president of Carver State Bank, upon moving to Savannah, Georgia in 1947. Toomer was Clemmons' banker, and also taught Clemmons about real estate investment. Eventually, Toomer invited Clemmons to join the board of Carver

State Bank, where he also served under Toomer's successors, including Lawrence D. Perry and Robert James. In Savannah, Clemmons taught mathematics, physics and computer science at Georgia State College. As chairman of the mathematics department, he initiated a relationship with the IBM Corporation that resulted in the donation of the school's first computers. He also became one of the founding members of the Alpha Lambda Boule, alongside college president William K. Payne, nuclear physicist J. Ernest Wilkins, Jr. and research chemist Percy Julian. During this time, Clemmons' students were engaged in civil rights demonstrations, including sit-in protests; and, although Clemmons was not actively involved, he supported the movement.

Video Oral History Interview with John B. Clemmons, Sr., Section A2007_025_001_005, TRT: 0:27:52 2007/01/22

John B. Clemmons, Sr. helped his students fund their education while serving as a mathematics professor at Savannah State College in Savannah, Georgia. He was a founding member of the Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity's Alpha Lambda Boule, which provided need based college scholarships. In addition, the faculty members of the mathematics department pooled money to offer seventy-five dollar loans to students in need. Although hired as a mathematics professor, Clemmons also directed the drama program at Savannah State College. In Savannah, Clemmons and his wife, Mozelle Daily Clemmons, were actively involved in the local civic organizations. Clemmons served on several boards for the Memorial University Medical Center and American Red Cross, while his wife was a member of the Savannah Symphony Women's Guild and Savannah Concert Association, and worked with President W.W. Law at Savannah's NAACP chapter. Clemmons concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.