



# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John W. Barfield

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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>	John W. Barfield
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 28, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacam SP videocassettes (3:42:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Maintenance company chief executive John W. Barfield (1927 - ) founded The Bartech Group, named 1985 "Company of the Year" by Black Enterprise. Barfield received The George Romney Award recognizing lifelong achievement in volunteerism. Barfield was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 28, 2007, in Livonia, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_191
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Maintenance company chief executive, entrepreneur and businessman John W. Barfield was born Johnny Williams Barfield on February 8, 1927 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama to Lena James and Edgar Barfield, both of whom worked as field hands. His father also worked in the coal mines and moved north in search of work. In 1932, when Barfield's father had earned enough money to send for his family, they joined him in Washington, Pennsylvania. While living in Washington, Barfield began his first job, selling dry soap on commission for a white shop owner.

At the age of fifteen, Barfield relocated with his family to Ypsilanti, Michigan, where his father began working in a bomber plant in Willow Run. In 1945, Barfield dropped out of Ypsilanti Public High School and enlisted in the United States Army, serving two years in France and Germany. Upon his return, Barfield began working as a custodian for the University of Michigan, and, in 1949, he married Betty Jane Barfield. With his wife, Barfield cleaned newly constructed houses for additional income.

Barfield quit his job with the University of Michigan in 1955 because his cleaning job after hours had become more lucrative than his full-time one. He began his first company, a contract cleaning group called the Barfield Cleaning Company of Ypsilanti, Michigan, which employed 200 people. Barfield cleaned businesses at night and promoted his business during the day, always sure to wear a shirt and tie. The same year, Barfield also wrote the Barfield Method of Building Maintenance, which would set a standard for the commercial building maintenance industry. In 1969, Barfield Cleaning Company was acquired by the International Telephone and Telegraph Company in one of the highest multiples ever paid for a commercial cleaning company. Barfield and his wife continued working for the company for three additional years. Then, Barfield reentered the maintenance business when he incorporated the Barfield Building Maintenance Company and began promoting his business to different

building managers. Also in 1974, when General Motors Corporation was unable to find minority and female suppliers, Barfield incorporated John Barfield and Associates, an organization that provided staffing services to General Motors, broadening its reach to include such companies as the Ford Motor Company, DaimlerChrysler and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan.

In 1978, General Motors requested that he manufacture transmission pins for them, and soon thereafter, Barfield founded the Barfield Manufacturing Company. In 1981, Barfield turned John Barfield and Associates over to his son, Jon. Three years later, the company was renamed The Bartech Group. The following year, Bartech would be named 1985 "Company of the Year" by Black Enterprise Magazine. In 1986, the Barfield Building Maintenance Company was acquired by Unified Building Maintenance Services, Inc., and in 1991, Barfield Manufacturing was purchased by Mascotech Industries, an automotive supplier. The following year, Barfield began his Share Products initiative, established to bring attention to the issue of homelessness in the United States. Barfield was a recipient of the The George Romney Award in 1996, recognizing lifelong achievement in volunteerism.

Barfield and his wife have six children and reside in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

John W. Barfield was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on June 28, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John W. Barfield was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 28, 2007, in Livonia, Michigan, and was recorded on 8 Betacam SP videocassettes. Maintenance company chief executive John W. Barfield (1927 - ) founded The Bartech Group, named 1985 "Company of the Year" by Black Enterprise. Barfield received The George Romney Award recognizing lifelong achievement in volunteerism.

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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:

Barfield, John W.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

John W. Barfield--Interviews

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African American businesspeople--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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Bartech Group

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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 John W. Barfield, June 28, 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 8/9/2011 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, June 28, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10  
2007/06/28

John Barfield discusses his knowledge of his family's history. He discusses the poverty and danger of living in the South during the 1930s. Barfield shares the circumstances of his family's migration from Alabama to Pennsylvania during this time, specifically how his father, Edgar Barfield, hopped a train and had to jump off before the train approached the town. Barfield, his sister Gladys, and his mother joined Edgar Barfield in Pennsylvania once he had found a job in a coal mine. Barfield goes on to discuss the dangerous conditions of the coal mines and the workers effort to unionize. He also shares the information he recalls about his father's twelve siblings, two of whom died tragically. Barfield recalls the funerals quite vividly and describes the custom of laying out the body on a "cooling board" before burial. He then begins to discuss his Edgar, describing him repeatedly as a "remarkable" man.

African Americans--Migrations--History--20th century

Coal mines and mining--Pennsylvania

Coal miners--Labor unions--Pennsylvania

African Americans--Funeral customs and rites--History.

African American families--Pennsylvania

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:10  
2007/06/28

John Barfield discusses his grandparents' recipe for syrup. Barfield explains the impact of his mother's illness on the family. He then describes how his parents met—in Tuscaloosa, Alabama when they were both very young. Barfield also discusses his lack of knowledge of the origin of his last name. He remembers attempting to research family history and discovering a number of black Barfields and white Barfields in Alabama and assumes that the blacks took the name of the whites many years ago. Barfield continues to share various family stories from his early childhood such as when he cut his hand very deeply trying to climb a fence and accidentally starting a large fire in the woods when he was playing with matches with his sister. The fire story is one Barfield has never told anyone before. He remembers one of his first employers, Mr. Lutton.

African American parents--Pennsylvania--Washington

African American families--Alabama

Cooking (Maple sugar and syrup)

African Americans--Genealogy--Alabama

African Americans--Religion

African American neighborhoods--Pennsylvania--Washington--History

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40

2007/06/28

John Barfield expounds on smells from his youth in Margaret, Alabama and explains he is named for an Uncle Johnny, a Pullman Porter cook the family lived with briefly in 1933. He describes his father's job as a chef after quitting the coal mine. Barfield mentions John L. Lewis, a man who dedicated his life to improving conditions for coal miners. Barfield's family often attended a church in Pennsylvania that was led by Sister Johnson, but adds that he did not attend church for many years later in life. Barfield then discusses his education, noting that he attended Ypsilanti High School in Michigan before dropping out in the tenth grade. He explains that most opportunities for blacks involved getting industrial jobs. So, Barfield felt it was more important to quit school and work. He remembers Ypsilanti was once a "hot bed" of entrepreneurship, but when segregation ended, black-owned businesses began to die.

African American families--Pennsylvania

Coal miners--Labor unions--Pennsylvania

Great Depression--African-Americans

African Americans--Education--Michigan--History--20th century

African American business enterprises--Michigan--History

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:40  
2007/06/28

John Barfield describes feeling "different" at fifteen—due to the influence of Mr. Lutton. Barfield was determined to improve his life. Barfield joined the army willingly at age seventeen, spent his military tour in Germany and France and was discharged in 1947. He mentions learning harsh realities from the war. Barfield recalls meeting his wife; they wed in 1949 when Betty was 17 and have been married for 60 years, with 6 children, 11 grandchildren, and 3 great grandchildren. Barfield returns to his mother's death, citing it as why he became a Christian. From 1949-1955, he worked as a custodian at the University of Michigan. There, he washed cars and cleaned professors' houses, soon realizing he was making more money with his part-time work. He founded J&B Cleaning Company, which became the largest house cleaning business in Michigan. Barfield emphasizes his wife's collaboration in all his businesses and outlines business strategies.

African Americans--Military Service--1860-1950

African American couples--Michigan

African Americans--Religion

African American business enterprises--Michigan

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:10  
2007/06/28

John Barfield describes Ypsilanti as a segregated town. He mentions he was taught to remain humble when speaking about money and success. Barfield describes his businesses' growth and his book, *The Barfield Method of Building Maintenance*. Barfield's business eventually extended beyond standardized janitorial training and sold for \$1 million. As part of this sale, Barfield was required not to enter the business for the next three years. During this time, he sold real estate, hunted, and managed a facility. After three years, Barfield re-entered the cleaning business and was sued on the grounds that the Barfield name was a trademark and prohibited from any use. Barfield won the suit and sold another company. He prefers creation and sale of businesses, not becoming over-attached to endeavors. Barfield sold one business to a "white conglomerate" and another to a black-owned company then discusses his tenure

as President for the United Negro College Fund.  
African American business enterprises--Management  
Consolidation and merger of corporations  
Trademarks--United States--Cases  
Building cleaning industry--Management  
Entrepreneurship--United States  
United Negro College Fund

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:10  
2007/06/28

John Barfield discusses his businesses' growth in the 1970s. In 1975, Barfield was approached by General Motors to find additional black companies as customers during a boycott. Barfield and GM only found one, a re-packaged cardboard company, owned by Mr. Tussy. Unimpressed, GM asked Barfield if he would start a factory. Out of this endeavor, Bartech and Barfield Manufacturing were created. After the establishment of Bartech, GM asked Barfield if he would begin a screw washer assembly. Employees grew from 6 to nearly 3,000 and the companies formed The Bartech Group. During this time, Barfield's son Jon returns to work for the family business after leaving the law profession. Eventually, Ford, Blue Cross, Delphi and others approached Barfield's company to manage operations for them. Barfield briefly discusses how his son, Jon, became president and CEO of Bartech. Barfield uses his "semi-retirement" to become involved with the Minority Business Development Council.

African American business enterprises  
African American businesspeople--Michigan  
General Motors Corporation  
Automobile industry and trade--United States  
Automobile supplies industry--United States

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:10  
2007/06/28

John Barfield discusses his passion for hunting; he was twelve when he bought his first shotgun. Barfield explains that his father taught him to hunt and shoot. As his businesses grew to be more successful, Barfield hunted in Denmark, England, Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico. He prefers to hunt birds because of their speed. Barfield began riding horses at the age of sixty, and his wife bought him a horse named Beauford, whom he rode for seven years. Barfield answers philosophical questions about the state of black businesses and discusses the Share Products Initiative, which brought awareness to the plight of homelessness. Barfield sold food and general goods under the private name "Shared Products" and 50% of the profits went to finding shelter and food for homeless people. Ultimately, the initiative was not successful due to a lack of money and expertise. Barfield examines decision-making strategies he utilized when deciding on philanthropic endeavors and discusses his involvement with several philanthropic organizations. Barfield mentions his love for art collecting, especially the work of Paul Collins.

African Americans--Hunting  
African Americans--Charitable contributions  
Homelessness

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Section A2007\_191\_001\_008, TRT: 0:09:20

2007/06/28

John Barfield answers philosophical questions such as, “What do you want to be remembered for?”, “What do you consider to be your legacy?”, and “What is the key to success for black people in business?” He replies he wants to simply be remembered as a good person, “somebody that loved and cared and tried to be an example to my friends, my family, and my community”. Barfield prefers his legacy to be that of “a good father, a good husband, and somebody that has done all that he could possibly do to make his race and my country proud of me. I want to be known as someone who really cared about people—who really loved people”. Barfield suggests that anyone in business always exceeds expectations.