

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

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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>	Barfield, Jon E., 1927-2018
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Sr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 28, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:42:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Maintenance company chief executive John W. Barfield, Sr. (1927 - 2018 ) founded The Bartech Group, named the 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 Barfield 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 Williams 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 had six children and resided in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

John W. Barfield, Sr. passed away on January 2, 2018.

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, Sr. was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 28, 2007, in Livonia, Michigan, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Maintenance company chief executive John W. Barfield, Sr. (1927 - 2018 ) founded The Bartech Group, named the 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, Jon E., 1927-2018

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Barfield, Jon E., 1927-2018--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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**Occupations:**

Maintenance Company 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 John W. Barfield, Sr., 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 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 John W. Barfield, Sr., Section A2007\_191\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr. was born on February 8, 1927 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama to Lena James Barfield and Edgar Barfield. Barfield's paternal great-grandfather was a former slave, and was known for always carrying a large axe. His father was one of thirteen children born in Meridian, Mississippi to Mary Clark Barfield and John Barfield; and worked as a sharecropper, lumberman and coal miner in Alabama. When Barfield was five years old,

his father hopped a freight train, and found work in the mines of Washington, Pennsylvania. Shortly after, the rest of the family joined his father in Washington. When Barfield was a child, his mother developed cancer and was bedridden until her death. Barfield's father became his primary parent, and left the mines to become the head chef of a local restaurant. He often provided food to Barfield's family and neighborhood during the Great Depression. In 1940, Barfield and his family moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, where his father worked in the Willow Run bomber manufacturing plant.

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, Sr., Section A2007\_191\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:10 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr.'s maternal grandparents, Minnie James and Harvey James, were successful farmers in Alabama. Barfield's parents met in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, although they were both born in Meridian, Mississippi. Barfield's mother, Lena James Barfield, was a member of a strict Pentecostal church; and, due to her strong faith, refused to seek medical care after being diagnosed with cancer later in life. In Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Barfield and his family lived in a shotgun house in the Calls Quarters community, where he played with his neighbors; made sorghum molasses; and nearly died of rheumatic fever at five years old. When he was six years old, Barfield moved with his family to Margaret, Alabama, where his father, Edgar Barfield, found work in a mine. His family later moved to Washington, Pennsylvania, where his father worked in the local coal mines, and his mother became a domestic. In Washington, Barfield worked for soap salesman Bert Lutton, who fostered Barfield's aspiration to become an entrepreneur.

African American parents--Pennsylvania--Washington.

African American families--Alabama.

Cooking (Maple sugar and syrup).

African Americans--Genealogy.

African Americans--Religion.

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

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Sr., Section  
A2007\_191\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr. lived in the segregated coal mining town of Margaret, Alabama, where his father, Edgar Barfield, worked as a miner when Barfield was five and six years old. There, John L. Lewis organized a union to improve working conditions for the miners. Eventually, Barfield's father left Margaret to find a mining job in Pennsylvania, while Barfield lived with his mother and sister in his uncle's home in Birmingham, Alabama. His father sent for them after establishing himself in Washington, Pennsylvania. There, Barfield's family joined the local Pentecostal church, where the minister was Sister Johnson, and lived in a small community with their fellow congregants and their paternal aunt and uncle. In Washington, Barfield played with his friends, and learned from local entrepreneur Bert Lutton. When Barfield was fifteen years old, his father found work in the Willow Run bomber plant near Ypsilanti, Michigan. There, Barfield attended Ypsilanti High School until the tenth grade.

African American families--Pennsylvania.

Coal miners--Labor unions--Pennsylvania.

Depressions--1929.

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

African American business enterprises--Michigan--  
History.

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

John W. Barfield, Sr. enlisted in the U.S. Army at seventeen years old, and was stationed in France and Germany after World War II. He was discharged in 1947; and, upon his return, married Betty Williams Barfield, whom he had met as a teenager. Soon after their wedding,

Barfield's mother, Lena James Barfield, passed away from cancer, after several years of illness. He found work as a custodian at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and cleaned cars for additional income. In 1954, Barfield left the University of Michigan to found J and B Cleaning Company with his wife. The company soon transitioned from residential cleaning to contract cleaning for local businesses. Barfield's first contractual job was with the Ypsilanti Savings Bank. The company grew in size and prestige, and was purchased by the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation in 1969. Barfield attributed the company's success to his methods of cleaning, organizing and delegating.

African Americans--Military service.

African American couples--Michigan.

African Americans--Religion.

African American business enterprises--Michigan.

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

John W. Barfield, Sr. lived in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which was strictly segregated in the 1950s and 1960s. Barfield's business, J and B Cleaning Company, grew in size after transitioning to contract cleaning with local businesses in and around Ypsilanti. To share his successful business practices, Barfield wrote a book, 'Barfield Method of Building Maintenance,' which outlined his business model, training and cleaning methods. He also held training courses for his employees in a facility at his office. Barfield attended the first meeting of the National Association of Building Service Contractors, and was invited to join its board of directors. Eventually, he sold his business to the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation. After the sale, Barfield briefly remained on staff as a consultant. He then obtained a real estate license, and started a second business, the Barfield Building Maintenance Company, which was later bought by the black-owned Unified Building Maintenance Services, Inc.

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, Sr., Section  
A2007\_191\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:10 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr. began working for General Motors Corporation in 1975. Following the Montgomery Bus Boycott, General Motors wanted to employ more minority suppliers, and Barfield was asked to identify minority businesses that were potential clients. Eventually, Barfield decided to open his own automotive supply company, and created the Barfield Manufacturing Company to produce screw washer assemblies. While running the company, Barfield also created a staffing agency, John Barfield and Associates, which later became The Bartech Group, Inc. The agency worked with major automotive companies and other service companies like Blue Cross Blue Shield Association. At the time of the company's creation, staffing agencies were relatively new; and, despite financial challenges, the company succeeded. His oldest son, Jon Barfield, left his position at a law firm in Chicago, Illinois to run The Bartech Group, Inc., while Barfield became involved with the National Minority Supplier 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, Sr., Section  
A2007\_191\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:10 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr. learned to hunt from his father, and pursued it as hobby during his adulthood. He travelled to Denmark, England, South America and Mexico to hunt birds and foxes; and trained to hunt on horseback in Ireland. Throughout his life, Barfield contributed to his community through a number of charities, including his own organization, Share Products, which sold privately

labelled goods, like baby oil and popcorn, to raise money for the homeless. Barfield was also involved in the United Negro College Fund and the Ronald McDonald House of Detroit, where he served as the endowment chair. Barfield was an avid art collector and patron. He first began collecting the works of artist Paul Collins, whom he sent to New York City to paint scenes of Harlem for Barfield's office. He also purchased works from local artists, like Carlos Lopez Cano in Mexico. Barfield talks about the history and future of African American businesses, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy.

African Americans--Hunting.

African Americans--Charitable contributions.

Homelessness.

Video Oral History Interview with John W. Barfield, Sr., Section  
A2007\_191\_001\_008, TRT: 0:09:20 2007/06/28

John W. Barfield, Sr. describes how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.