

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thomas Barnwell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Barnwell, Thomas, 1935-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell,
Dates:	January 30, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:23:14).
Abstract:	Real estate entrepreneur and social activist Thomas Barnwell (1935 -) helped secure affordable housing, health care and employment for fellow natives of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Barnwell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 30, 2007, in Hilton Head, South Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_034
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Thomas Curtis Barnwell, Jr. was born on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina on June 2, 1935. His parents were Hannah White, a schoolteacher, and Thomas Barnwell, a farmer. Barnwell grew up on Hilton Head Island when the only transportation on and off the island was by boat. The native islanders were self sufficient by growing fresh vegetables, raising cows and hogs, fishing, catching shrimp and crabs and hunting deer, rabbit and raccoon. Barnwell graduated from St. Helena High School on St. Helena Island, South Carolina in 1954 and enrolled in Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

After one year at Claflin College, Barnwell joined the United States Air Force. In 1959, he received an honorable discharge and enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. In 1960, he began working as a longshoreman, Local 1414 in Savannah, Georgia.

Barnwell traveled extensively to continue his education. He studied sociology at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in 1961; community development at the University of West Indies in 1963; group dynamics at the University of Ontario in Bethel, Maine in 1964 and community development and community education at the University of Puerto Rico.

Barnwell began his work in community service at Penn Community Service, Inc. While at the Penn Center, he worked in community organization, program planning, federal program orientation and implementation. His community service work continued as he held positions as Assistant Director for Beaufort-Jasper Hampton Economic Opportunity Commission, Executive Director of Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services, Inc. and the Regional Director of National Consumer Cooperative Bank, Charleston South Carolina branch. Barnwell is a former board member of the Bluffton Oyster Cooperative and the Hilton Head Fishing Cooperative. He testified before the United States Committee on Hunger and Malnutrition and Human Needs in 1969, and participated in President John F. Kennedy's To Fulfill These Rights Committee.

Barnwell, who was involved in securing affordable housing, healthcare and employment for the natives of Hilton Head Island, is a land developer and a private business owner of rental properties.

Barnwell is married to Susan, his wife of over forty years. They have three adult children.

Barnwell was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 30, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thomas Barnwell was conducted by Denise Gines on January 30, 2007, in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Real estate entrepreneur and social activist Thomas Barnwell (1935 -) helped secure affordable housing, health care and employment for fellow natives of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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:

Barnwell, Thomas, 1935-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Barnwell, Thomas, 1935- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Nonprofit Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Thomas Barnwell, January 30, 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 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 Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_001, TRT: 0:29:57

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Thomas Barnwell was born on June 2, 1935 on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina to Hanna White Barnwell and Thomas S. Barnwell. Barnwell's maternal great-grandfather, Renty Greaves, was a coroner, teacher and landowner on Hilton Head Island. Barnwell's maternal grandfather, Benjamin White, also owned land on the island, where he farmed crops to sell in Savannah, Georgia, and raised fifteen children, including Barnwell's mother. After attending the Mather School for Girls in Beaufort, South Carolina, she trained as a nurse at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina. She interned at the Roper Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina before returning to the island as a midwife. In addition to advising neighbors on healthcare, she belonged to a women's society that provided childcare to ill community members. Barnwell's paternal grandparents, Georgianna Miller Barnwell and Jerry Barnwell, also owned a farm on the island, where they raised Marsh Tacky horses, and harvested pecans and oysters.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_002, TRT: 0:28:21
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Thomas Barnwell's father, Thomas S. Barnwell, apprenticed as a mortician upon completing the twelfth grade at the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Barnwell was his father's only child, and grew up on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. There, his father taught him to farm, and saved the money from the crops he raised for his education. Barnwell also hunted rabbits and raccoons, and learned to catch crabs, fish and sharks. The community was close-knit on Hilton Head Island, where neighbors shared food, helped cultivate each other's land and cared for the sick and elderly. As there was no running water or electricity on the island at the time, the residents used water pumps and wood stoves. Barnwell's community also attended church service and prayed together, and often used the time to also mediate conflicts. His father served as the secretary and deacon at Mount Calvary Baptist Church, and often relayed messages between the island and mainland.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_003, TRT: 0:28:07
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Thomas Barnwell grew up on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, where he learned to hunt wild turkeys and crabs. With his family, Barnwell attended the Mount Calvary Baptist Church; which, like most of the island's churches, was predominantly African American. The island had a constable but no jail, and Barnwell recalls only one occasion when someone was arrested and sent to the mainland. Barnwell began his education at the island's Squire Pope Elementary School and Robinson Junior High School. Although the primary modes of transportation on the island were walking and wagon, the island's few trucks were used to transport Barnwell and his classmates to school. After completing junior high school, some of Barnwell's peers lived with relatives while attending high school on the mainland. Others boarded at institutions like the all-girls Mather School, or the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, where Barnwell enrolled around 1950.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_004, TRT: 0:29:51
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Thomas Barnwell attended Squire Pope Elementary School on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, where Barnwell's mother, Hanna White Barnwell, was one of two teachers. Like the island's other Rosenwald schools, it was designed to heat efficiently. The school was maintained by the students, including

Barnwell, who gathered firewood and washed the blackboard. Barnwell excelled in history and civics, but struggled in math due to undiagnosed dyslexia. While a student at Robinson Junior High School, Barnwell drove his classmates to school in his father's truck. He also aspired to become a funeral director and teacher like his parents, and enrolled at the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School, a boarding school on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. He paid fifty to seventy-five dollars per month to attend; and, as each student was assigned chores, cleaned the classrooms and assisted in the principal's office. In addition to the liberal arts, Barnwell studied animal husbandry and carpentry.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_005, TRT: 0:28:23
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Thomas Barnwell transferred to St. Helena High School after the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School closed in 1953. The next year, he enrolled at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina; and, after a few months, volunteered for the U.S. Air Force. Barnwell trained at the Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, and then served in the fire and rescue division of the Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico, where he was denied multiple promotions due to his race. He complained of this treatment to South Carolina's U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, and was subsequently promoted to the position of chief alarm room operator. In 1959, Barnwell returned to Hilton Head Island, where he worked as a longshoreman. He later enrolled at Tuskegee Institute, where he met Professor Charles G. Gomillion, who had been the plaintiff in the Gomillion v. Lightfoot voting rights case in 1960. After nine months of study, Barnwell returned to the island, where he married Allaphae Gantlin Barnwell and joined the NAACP.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_006, TRT: 0:28:15
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Thomas Barnwell worked with the NAACP to address concerns about blacks losing ownership of their property on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. He was hired as the field director for community development at St. Helena Island's Penn Center; and, in preparation, studied at Fisk University and the University of the West Indies. As field director, Barnwell identified and addressed community needs like school desegregation and treatment for intestinal parasites, and worked with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Judge Thurgood Marshall. Later, Barnwell was hired by the Beauford Jasper Economic Opportunity Commission, where he worked for ten years on the Beauford Jasper Comprehensive Health Service, a program for low-income residents of Beauford and Jasper counties. He then served for two years as the regional director of the National Consumer Cooperative Bank in Charleston, South Carolina, before returning to Hilton Head Island to develop apartments on his property for low income families.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Barnwell, Section A2007_034_001_007, TRT: 0:30:20
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Thomas Barnwell developed the Sylby Tub Apartments, Wild Horse Court and Cedar Well Apartments on his family's land for low to middle income residents of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Together, he and his family formed the Barnwell Family Associates, LLC, and leased their property to a developer under the condition that it return to the family after forty-five years. Barnwell explains the history of Hilton Head Island's tourism industry, which began with attorney Charles E. Fraser's acquisition of timber rights on the island. In 1957, Fraser created the Sea Pines Plantation, the first of numerous large resort developments that raised property taxes, forcing native residents to sell their ancestral lands. At the time of the interview, Barnwell was writing a book about

his community. He describes the changes on Hilton Head Island, and his hopes and concerns for the Gullah culture. He also reflects upon his legacy and his message to future generations, and then narrates his photographs.