

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James McQuay

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McQuay, James, 1924-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay,
Dates:	September 21, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:00:46).
Abstract:	Furrier James McQuay (1924 - 2012) opened his first shop, Furs by James, in Harlem, New York in 1950. His furs can be seen in the 1970s films, "Cleopatra Jones" and, "Foxy Brown." McQuay was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 21, 2007, in Mt. Vernon, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_269
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Furrier James McQuay was born on November 15, 1924 in Baltimore, Maryland to Sarah and Thomas McQuay. Shortly after birth, McQuay and his family moved to Yonkers, New York. He grew up in a small black community on the second floor of a three-family housing unit. Heavily influenced by his mother and grandmother, they provided him with examples of hard-work and determination. He attended Hawthorne Junior High School and graduated in 1943 from Yonkers High School. Prior to graduation, McQuay began working for Nathan Ginsberg in 1939, a local Yonkers furrier. McQuay and Ginsberg cultivated a friendship that lasted generations. It was through Ginsberg that McQuay realized that he had a dream to own a fur shop.

Immediately after graduating from Yonkers High School, McQuay was drafted into World War II, where he served in the South Pacific until 1946. Upon McQuay's return, he went back to school working for Nathan Ginsberg, before venturing out on his own four years later. In 1950, McQuay opened his first shop in 1950, Furs by James. He became one of, if not the only, African American furriers in New York City. The store remained open for six years before McQuay closed it in 1956 to open another store of the same name in Mt. Vernon, New York. Furs by James stayed open for seven years, until he closed it in 1963 to pursue freelance opportunities. By the early 1970s, McQuay's furs could be seen in many blaxploitation films of the time, including *Cleopatra Jones* and *Foxy Brown*. In the early 1980s, McQuay participated in the Congressional Black Caucus' annual fashion show as the only furrier.

Throughout his career, McQuay has received numerous accolades for his achievements, including being featured in *Essence* magazine and in the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.'s "Furs, the Final Touch" fashion show.

He passed away on June 23, 2012 at the age of 87.

James McQuay was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 21, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James McQuay was conducted by Adrienne Jones on September 21, 2007, in Mt. Vernon, New York, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Furrier James McQuay (1924 - 2012) opened his first shop, Furs by James, in Harlem, New York in 1950. His furs can be seen in the 1970s films, "Cleopatra Jones" and, "Foxy Brown."

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:

McQuay, James, 1924-2012

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McQuay, James, 1924-2012 --Interviews

African American entrepreneurs--interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Furrier

HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

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 James McQuay, September 21, 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 James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_001, TRT: 0:29:32 ?

James McQuay was born on November 15, 1924 in Baltimore, Maryland to Sarah McQuay. His mother was born in New York City, and raised by her mother, Mittie Dickson, in Yonkers, New York. McQuay's mother and grandmother both worked as domestics in Yonkers, where his mother raised

three children, of whom McQuay was the oldest. From a young age, he helped his mother clean homes, and delivered newspapers in the mornings before walking to class at School 3. Around the time that McQuay enrolled at Nathaniel Hawthorne Junior High School, his work ethic attracted the interest of local furrier Nathan Ginsberg, who invited him to work at Yonkers' Exclusive Fur Shop. McQuay was hired as a gofer for shop's employees, and worked there until graduating from Yonkers High School in 1943. At that time, McQuay was drafted into the U.S. Army. He trained at Camp Upton in New York before being deployed to the South Pacific, where he worked to prepare landing strips for invasions.

African American families--New York (State)--Yonkers.

Yonkers Public Schools (N.Y.).

Education--New York (State)--Yonkers.

Fur trade--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_002, TRT: 0:30:53 ?

James McQuay served as the sergeant of an all-black U.S. Army platoon during World War II. Upon his discharge, he returned to work at Nathan Ginsberg's Exclusive Fur Shop in Yonkers, New York, and was soon promoted from gofer to apprentice. Although he was forced to practice late at night to avoid the shop's racist white employees, McQuay became Ginsberg's mentee and close friend. He was often invited to dinner with Ginsberg's family, and was influenced to pursue a career as a furrier. McQuay decided to open a fur shop, but lacked funds to establish the business. Instead, he borrowed display furs and sewing machines; and secured a storefront in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where he negotiated free rent in exchange for repairing the building. At James Furs, McQuay initially focused on repairs. He transitioned to merchandise sales with help from Ed Smalls, who recommended McQuay's work to entertainers at the Small's Paradise nightclub.

Fur trade--New York.

African American soldiers--Social conditions--20th century.

Minority business enterprises--New York (State).

Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_003, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

James McQuay was the first furrier in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, and was barred from the union because of his race. His business was promoted by Ed Smalls at the Club Harlem in Atlantic City, New Jersey; and, as his clientele grew, McQuay moved the shop from Harlem to a storefront on 30th street in the Garment District. During the transition, he showed his furs in a shop owned by white furrier Alex Macquist, who required McQuay to receive clients in the back warehouse. When Macquist retired, McQuay took over the lease for the space. To further promote James McQuay Furs, Inc., he exhibited merchandise at the Ebony Fashion Fair in New York City and Washington, D.C. McQuay describes his clientele, who were primarily wealthy African Americans; and remembers briefly operating a shop in Mount Vernon, New York, until the small customer base forced it to close. He also remembers the impact of both the Civil Rights Movement and animal rights activism on his business.

Fur trade--New York.

Animal rights movement--United States.

African American business enterprises--New York (State).

Civil rights movements--United States--20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_004, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

James McQuay was raised in the majority-white town of Yonkers, New York. There, his brother, Buel McQuay, was the second African American member of the fire department, and eventually became the department's chief. McQuay describes the history of segregation in Yonkers, where restrictive housing covenants barred African Americans from homeownership. As a result, many from the black community purchased property in the nearby town of Mount Vernon, New York. In addition, McQuay remembers those who helped build his career, including his mother, Sarah McQuay; and talks about mentoring the young employees at his furrier shop. McQuay concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

African American families--New York (State)--Yonkers.

Celebrities--Clothing.

African Americans--Social conditions--New York (State)--Yonkers.

African Americans--Migrations--New York.

Fashion shows--United States.