

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mahlon T. Puryear

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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>	Puryear, Mahlon T.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 15, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:49:08).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Nonprofit executive Mahlon T. Puryear (1915 - 2007 ) is the former deputy director of the National Urban League. He also served the Urban League as Director of the Southern Field Division and Director of the Economic Development Department. Puryear was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 15, 2003, in Baltimore, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_268
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former deputy director of the National Urban League, Mahlon Puryear was born January 27, 1915, in Winston Salem, North Carolina. One of six children of a contractor, Puryear attended Columbian Heights High School, graduating in 1930 at age fourteen. He also received a diploma from Hampton Institute in 1936 and a B.S. in 1942 before earning a master's from Columbia University Teachers College in 1948. He later studied at Colorado College in Greeley, Colorado.

From 1936 to 1940, he was part owner with his father of Puryear and Sons Builders before teaching at Hampton Institute and Delaware State for three years. From 1943 to 1945 Puryear worked as personnel counselor for Wright Aero Company in New Jersey, when he left to work for the American Red Cross in Maryland and Okinawa. Puryear then went on to serve as a dean at Arkansas A.M. & N College from 1947 until 1951. That year, the National Urban League hired him, and he went on to hold twenty-five different titles including Director of the Southern Field Division. In 1957, Puryear left to direct Tuskegee Institute's Technical Education Program in Indonesia. Returning to the Urban League after a year, Puryear was transferred to New York in 1962. By 1972, he was Director of the Economic Development Department with a staff of seventy-five persons and a budget of more than \$30 million dollars. He opened new affiliates in Charlotte, North Carolina, and in Orange County California in 1982 and 1983, respectively. Primarily focused on education, Puryear worked along side Whitney M. Young and Vernon Jordan to bring opportunities to African American youth.

Retiring after fifty-three years of service, Puryear lives in Baltimore where he enjoys visits from his two daughters and grandchildren.

Puryear was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 15, 2003.

Mr. Puryear passed away on September 26, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mahlon T. Puryear was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 15, 2003, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Nonprofit executive Mahlon T. Puryear (1915 - 2007 ) is the former deputy director of the National Urban League. He also served the Urban League as Director of the Southern Field Division and Director of the Economic Development Department.

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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:

Puryear, Mahlon T.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Puryear, Mahlon T.--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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National Urban League.

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### Occupations:

Nonprofit Executive

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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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 Mahlon T. Puryear, November 15, 2003. 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).

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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 Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Mahlon T. Puryear was born on January 27, 1915 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His first name comes from a bible story in the Book of Ruth. His last name comes from the family that his paternal ancestors were enslaved by in

Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Puryear's mother, Beatrice Sharpe Puryear, was born in 1891 in Winston-Salem. Her parents were born after slavery ended and worked for the Hanes family, of Hanesbrands, Inc. His mother was well educated and was a housewife. Puryear's father, Royal Puryear, only had a 3rd grade education but was a painting contractor with his own business, which he later called Royal Puryear and Sons. Royal Puryear was strict and stressed the importance of a college education for his seven children; he wanted them to attend Hampton Institute and expand the family business from painting to building construction. Mahlon Puryear talks about his career, focusing on his sixty-plus years with the Urban League-- he held twenty-five different titles within the organization.

Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:30  
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Mahlon T. Puryear grew up around older members of his maternal family, but was not allowed to ask about their history. His father's family was from Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Puryear's father learned to paint in Pennsylvania, before coming to Winston-Salem, North Carolina to find a wife. Puryear's father, not only owned his own painting business, but was also assistant superintendent of the Sunday school and was active in the NAACP. Puryear grew up in a privileged family, all of the children took piano and voice lessons, and the family had the first telephone in their neighborhood. His father paid all the children's expenses on the condition that his children would work for him. Puryear remembers traveling in the drawing-room of a Pullman train car, one summer, on his way to visit his aunt in New Jersey. After recounting the story at school, he was beaten by his teacher for lying. He attended Depot Street School in Winston-Salem, and graduated from Columbia Heights High School when he was fifteen.

Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:30  
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Mahlon T. Puryear remembers cooking large meals for his family. He entered Columbia Heights High School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina as a ten-year-old, and felt too young to participate in extracurricular activities. He graduated in 1930. He entered Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia where he studied building, in 1931 when he was sixteen years old. At Hampton, Puryear learned to dance and met his wife, Ruby Hamilton Puryear. Mahlon Puryear graduated from college in 1936, and worked for his father, who had expanded his painting business to building construction, calling it Royal Puryear and Sons. The business thrived until World War II, when the government bought all of the available building supplies such as lumber and paint. Puryear returned to Hampton to teach, but left in 1942 to become the director of the division of trades and industries at Delaware State University in Dover, Delaware, to avoid being drafted for the war.

Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:40  
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Mahlon T. Puryear spent approximately a year in Okinawa during World War II working for the American Red Cross in the division of clubs and recreation. He returned to the U.S. in 1947, and became the dean of the division of mechanic arts at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. In 1951, Puryear was recruited to work for the National Urban League by Julius A. Thomas who had been impressed by Puryear's work on a technical program at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The Urban League's mission is to help African Americans find economic security through jobs, housing and education. Puryear held twenty-

five different job titles with the Urban League, one of which was deputy executive director, where he worked directly under Whitney Young, overseeing the administration of the organization and their budget. Puryear left the Urban League for a year, in 1957, to act as director of Tuskegee Institute's Technical Education Program in Indonesia, working remotely from Tuskegee, Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:01  
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Mahlon T. Puryear describes the strategy of the National Urban League. Unlike other civil rights organizations, the Urban League tried to work collaboratively with business leaders to create opportunities for African Americans. Puryear explains how each branch of the Urban League operates differently and explains the importance of populating local Urban League boards with people from diverse career backgrounds. Puryear talks about the importance of breaking down racial barriers and the importance of schools preparing students for future employment. Puryear considers what he would have done differently in his life and describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Mahlon T. Puryear, Section A2003\_268\_001\_006, TRT: 0:20:42  
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Mahlon T. Puryear narrates his photographs.