

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Whitley

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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>	Whitley, James M., 1934-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Whitley,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 12, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:25:01).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Architect and business chief executive James Whitley (1934 - 2021) founded Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners LLC. Whitley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 12, 2014, in Beachwood, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_035
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Architect and business executive James M. Whitley was born on April 29, 1934 in Rochester, New York and raised in Warren and Cleveland, Ohio. Whitley's father was a chemist; his mother an actress. He graduated from Kent State University in 1957 with his B.S. degree in architecture.

In 1963, Whitley founded Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners LLC, a full service architectural and planning firm specializing in institutional design, sport facility design, and commercial housing design, where he has served as president and designer. He went on to expand the firm alongside his brother, William, and his sister, Joyce, and moved Whitley/Whitley Architects to Shaker Heights, Cleveland in 1969.

Whitley/Whitley Architects has provided a substantial amount of work in Cleveland and the State of Ohio for various city and state public agencies, as well as services for cities and community groups in cities throughout the United States, including Saint Louis, Missouri; Indianapolis, Indiana; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Gary, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; Saginaw, Michigan; Buffalo, New York; Rochester, New York; New York City, New York; Orlando, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; Reading, Pennsylvania; Washington, D.C. and San Diego, California. Whitley/Whitley was involved with work on Cleveland's Tower City Center, the Cleveland State University Convocation Center, Lincoln Junior High School, the Lee-Harvard Branch of Cleveland Public Library, the Central Area Multi-Service Center, and the Cleveland Clinic Guesthouse development. Other projects have included Kent State University's Fashion Museum, Cuyahoga County Community College's Learning Center, and Cleveland's John F. Kennedy Recreation Center. Whitley's firm has also designed numerous housing units and worked on several rehabilitation projects.

Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners LLC has received many awards and honors, including the Progressive Architecture Design Award, the HUD Biennial Design Award, Burlington Awards, the House and Home Award, the Ohio Prestressed Concrete Design Award, the Ohio Masonry Council/ASO Award for Excellence in Masonry Design, the Cleveland Chapter of Architect's Building Design Award, the East Ohio Energy Conservation Award,

and the ASO Honor Awards Certificate of Merit.

Whitley's son, Kent, is a project manager and architect at Whitley/Whitley.

James Whitley was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 12, 2014.

Whitley passed away on September 9, 2021.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Whitley was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 12, 2014, in Beachwood, Ohio, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Architect and business chief executive James Whitley (1934 - 2021) founded Whitley/Whitley Architects and Planners LLC.

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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:

Whitley, James M., 1934-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Whitley, James M., 1934---Interviews

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Architect

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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 James Whitley, February 12, 2014. 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 James Whitley, Section A2014\_035\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:23 ?

James Whitley was born on April 29, 1934 in Rochester, New York to Beatrice Nivens Whitley and Moses Whitley. One of his maternal ancestors was a white North Carolinian who fought for the Union Army in the Civil War despite being a slave owner. After the war, he received land for his service and bequeathed it to his African American children. Whitley's father was born in the rural community of Marked Tree, Arkansas. He was the first in his family to attend college, and met Whitley's mother at Fisk University, where she studied business. Whitley's father studied chemistry, and became a chemistry teacher at the State Teachers College in Montgomery, Alabama after graduation. A short time later, they moved to Rochester, where Whitley and his twin brother, William Whitley, were born. They grew up with three sisters in a middle class black neighborhood. When Whitley was seven years old, his father secured a job at the Ravenna Army Ammunition Plant in Ravenna, Ohio, and his family relocated to Warren, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with James Whitley, Section A2014\_035\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:54 ?

James Whitley attended the Nathaniel Rochester School No. 3 until the first grade, when his family moved to Warren, Ohio. There, he enrolled at Roosevelt Elementary School, where his third grade teacher noticed his talent for drawing. Whitley and his twin brother, William Whitley, often built structures in the woods by their house, and began playing football upon entering Central Junior High School. His family then moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where his father secured a position in a government laboratory. In Cleveland, Whitley attended the all-black Rawlings Junior High School, and transferred to Alexander Hamilton Junior High School after his mother realized he was being tracked at a lower level. He went on to attend John Adams High School, where he and his brother excelled on the football team. Whitley also participated in soapbox derbies, the Hi-Y club and drafting classes. He and his brother both aspired to become architects, and received football scholarships to attend Kent State University.

Video Oral History Interview with James Whitley, Section A2014\_035\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:03 ?

James Whitley competed with the football and track teams at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. He also pledged to the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, and served as a summer intern at Robert P. Madison's architectural firm. Upon graduating in 1957, Whitley joined Joseph Baker and Associates, where he and his brother were the first African American employees. After one year, he was drafted into the U.S. Air Force and stationed at the Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. Whitley aspired to form an architectural firm with his brother, and saved \$5,000 by the time he was discharged in 1961. He worked briefly for Keith Haag, his former professor from Kent State University; and then left to found Whitley and Whitley, Architects and Planners in 1963. His first contract was to design the Advent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio. A few years later, Whitley's sister joined the practice as an urban planner after studying under Jack Meltzer at the University of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with James Whitley, Section A2014\_035\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:44 ?

James Whitley and his twin brother, William Whitley, founded Whitley and Whitley, Architects and Planners shortly before the election of Carl Stokes as the first African American mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. Under Mayor Stokes' administration, the firm obtained its first city contract to build a recreational facility. During the project, they faced racial discrimination from outside contractors, but succeeded by doing most of the work within the firm. Whitley secured their first private contract with the Cleveland Clinic after meeting the clinic's chairman at a party. At this point in the interview, Whitley describes his

design process, which began by determining the client's needs and desires. He avoided unusual designs, which often faced structural issues. Whitley also talks about his hopes for the African American community and the problems faced by black-owned architectural firms, which received fewer government contracts over the years even as African American political power increased in Cleveland.

Video Oral History Interview with James Whitley, Section A2014\_035\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:57 ?

James Whitley's firm, Whitley and Whitley, Architects and Planners, won a Progressive Architecture Award in 1970 for the design of a recreational facility in Cleveland, Ohio. The firm secured more business following the mayoral election of Carl Stokes in 1968, but the number of government contracts awarded to minority businesses declined after Mayor Stokes' tenure ended in 1971. Whitley's firm obtained a city contract to design eight school buildings in 1998. At this point in the interview, Whitley shares his thoughts on architectural organizations. He terminated his membership in the American Institute of Architects after the group questioned the competence of minority firms, and he critiqued the National Organization of Minority Architects for its reluctance to advocate for its members. Whitley occasionally collaborated with architect Robert P. Madison, and mentored several young African American architects. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered.