



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Harry Wills collection

1922-1960

Sc MG 191

Home to Harlem Project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Summary

Creator: Wills, Harry, 1892-1958

Title: Harry Wills collection

Date: 1922-1960

Size: 0.02 linear feet (2 folders)

Source: Gift, Vaughan, Lillian, 05/20/1981

Revision History: This finding aid was updated by Allison Hughes.

Abstract: Harry Wills was a professional boxer and leading heavyweight contender in the 1920s. The Harry Wills collection consists of passports, correspondence, clippings, a program of his fight with Luis Firpo in 1924, a poster, and two volumes of the Everlast Boxing Record, 1922 and 1925, listing Wills's major matches.

Preferred citation: [Item], Harry Wills collection, Sc MG 191, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Separated Materials:

Photographs have been transferred to the Photographs and Prints division.

Creator History

Harry Wills was a professional boxer and leading heavyweight contender in the 1920s. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Wills began his boxing career in 1911. He is credited with winning 475 out of 480 bouts, scoring 31 knockouts. At the height of his career in 1920, Wills was the number one heavyweight contender. He was denied the opportunity to challenge Jack Dempsey, who had won the heavyweight crown in 1909, as Dempsey refused to fight Black boxers. Wills, after fighting the same Black fighters repeatedly, went to Panama, where race was not a factor. On his return to the United States in 1920, as number one contender, Dempsey still refused him a match. In 1924, the Dempsey-Tunney match was

held in Philadelphia because Dempsey was legally bound to fight Wills in New York State. Although Wills was reportedly paid \$50,000 for the forfeit, the Dempsey-Tunney fight proceeds, the largest purse in boxing history at that time, equalled almost two million dollars. Wills's biggest fights were with Luis Firpo at Boyles Thirty Acres, New Jersey in September 1924, and with Charley Weinert at the Polo Grounds in New York City in 1925. Wills also travelled to Europe—France, Poland and Germany—giving exhibition bouts in Berlin and Karlsbad. After retiring from boxing in 1934, Wills engaged in the real estate business, acquiring holdings including an apartment building in New York City and estates in upstate New York and Dinwoodie County, Virginia.

Scope and Content Note

The Harry Wills collection consists of passports, correspondence, clippings, a program of his fight with Luis Firpo in 1924, a poster, and two volumes of the Everlast Boxing Record, 1922 and 1925, listing Wills's major matches.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American athletes
African American boxers
African Americans -- Sports -- United States
Boxers (Sports) -- United States
Boxing -- United States
Businessmen -- New York (State) -- New York
Discrimination in sports -- United States
Race discrimination -- United States

Names

Dempsey, Jack, 1895-1983
Wills, Harry, 1892-1958