



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

Guide to the

Richard B. Harrison collection

1898-1935

Sc MG 205

Summary

Creator: Harrison, Richard B.

Title: Richard B. Harrison collection

Date: 1898-1935

Size: 0.67 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: Purchase from Olyve Jeter Haynes, 1983.

Revision History: Finding aid updated by Lauren Stark.

Abstract: This collection consists of material pertaining to Harrison's portrayal of "de Lawd" in the play *The Green Pastures*, written by Marc Connelly. Material primarily includes news clippings about Harrison and the play; Harrison's death in 1935; drafts of lectures given by Harrison; letters to Harrison from family members and others, including Paul Lawrence Dunbar; programs and playbills; and a biography of Harrison entitled "Even Playing 'De Lawd': Some Experiences from the Life of Richard Harrison" written by Olive L. Jeter. Jeter used the materials in this collection and her notes from discussions with Harrison for the biography. Additionally, there are two scrapbooks compiled by Jeter after Harrison's tours with *Green Pastures*."

Preferred citation: [Item], Richard B. Harrison collection, Sc MG 205, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Accessioned by Diana Lachatanere, October 1983.

Creator History

Richard Harrison (1864-1935) was an African American actor, appearing most notably in *The Green Pastures*. He was also a skilled reader and interpreter of Shakespeare, teacher, and lecturer.

Richard Berry Harrison's parents had escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad and made it

to London, Ontario, Canada. His mother named him Richard after seeing a performance of Shakespeare's Richard III; her interest in theater influenced Harrison. After moving to Detroit, Harrison began his dramatic studies at the Detroit Training School of Dramatic Art, and privately with Edward Weitzel, a British drama coach and drama editor for the *Detroit Free Press*. From 1892-1896, Harrison traveled, performing as a dramatic reader of Shakespeare and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry.

In 1895, Harrison married Gertrude Janet Washington, who was the first Black person to graduate from the Chicago Conservatory of Music. They had two children, Lawrence Gilbert and Marian Ysobel.

Harrison became well known nationally for his recitations in both Black and white communities. While on tour, he became aware of a great desire for dramatic training among the people for whom he performed. After convincing the president of North Carolina A and T, James B. Dudley, of the need for a dramatic program of study, he began to offer summer courses there in 1922. At the same time, he moved his family to New York, and began reading and teaching in churches and performing on stage.

Harrison's stage credits include Pa Williams's *Gal* at the Lafayette Theatre, and *The Green Pastures*, which opened February 26, 1930, at the Mansfield Theatre on Broadway. The latter show ran for 16 months, went on a national tour, and won the Pulitzer Prize. Harrison's portrayal of "De Lawd" was important to its success and won him additional acclamation.

Harrison received the NAACP's 1930 Spingarn Medal for Distinguished Achievement and honorary degrees from a number of colleges and universities. On March 14, 1935, Harrison died of heart failure.

Scope and Content Note

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Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors
African American families
African Americans in the performing arts
American drama

Names

Connelly, Marc, 1890-1980
Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 1872-1906.
Harrison, Richard B.

Container List

Correspondence

b. 1 f. 1 Family 1930-1935

b. 1 f. 2 Friends and associates 1898-1933

Includes letters from Paul Laurence Dunbar; Dunbar and Harrison were friends and it is reported that Dunbar wrote his poem "Li'l Brown Baby" for Harrison's son, who was named for Dunbar. Harrison was Dunbar's best man at his wedding to Alice Moore. Harrison helped Dunbar by including Dunbar's poetry in his dramatic readings to black audiences around the country. Their friendship is noted as significant in Dunbar's biographical sketch in the *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*.

b. 1 f. 3 Spingarn Medal 1931

Includes programs and clippings.

The Green Pastures

b. 1 f. 4 Tour clippings 1930-1931

b. 1 f. 5 Clippings on Harrison 1930-1936

b. 1 f. 6 Tour clippings 1931-1933

b. 1 f. 7 Obituaries 1935

b. 1 f. 8 Programs 1930-1935

Jeter, Olyve L

b. 1 f. 9 "Even Playing De Lawd" draft

b. 1 f. 10 Other writing on Harrison 1931-1935

b. 2 Scrapbooks 1930-1931