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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Fredi Washington papers, [microform]

1922-1981 [bulk 1922-1941]

Sc Micro R-5002

Processed by Andre Elizee.

Summary

Creator: Washington, Fredi, 1903-

Title: Fredi Washington papers, [microform]

Date: 1922-1981 [bulk 1922-1941]

Source: Gift of Mrs. Fredi Washington Bell in 1982. SCM 82-65

Abstract: The Fredi Washington Papers, 1922-1941, 1981, n.d., reflect both her private life and her professional career as an actress and activist.

Conditions Governing Access:

Researchers are restricted to microfilm copy.

Preferred citation: Fredi Washington papers, [microform], Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Andre Elizee; machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Creator History

Born in Savannah, Georgia in December 1903, the third of nine children, Fredericka ("Fredi") Washington came to New York at the age of 16, in 1919. She started her career in show business in 1921 as a chorus girl at the Alabam Club, and later won a spot in the landmark play *Shuffle Along*. In 1926, she obtained an acting role in the play *Black Boy*, starring Paul Robeson, and at the closing of that show sailed to Europe with Al Moiret as part of a dance act called *Fredi and Moiret*. Upon her return to the U.S. in 1928, her career accelerated and she appeared in three movies: *Black and Tan Fantasy*, a short feature with Duke Ellington (1930); *Emperor Jones* with Paul Robeson (1933); *Drum in the Night* (1933); and an equal number of plays, *Singing the Blues* (1930), *Sweet Chariot* (1930) and

Run Lil' Chillun (1933), within a five year span.

During this period, Ms Washington married Lawrence Brown, a trombonist in Duke Ellington's band (July 1933). The marriage ended in divorce fifteen years later. Her career, meanwhile, took a leap with her highly successful role in the two movies *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *One Mile from Heaven* with Bill Robinson (1937), and the play *Mamba's Daughter* with Ethel Waters and Georgette Harvey (1939). She also played a leading role in an all-black production of *Lysistrata* on Broadway in 1946.

In the 1930's, Ms Washington actively participated in the boycott campaigns and the picket lines organized on 125th Street by her brother-in-law, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (who had married her sister Isabel), to force Harlem stores, utility companies and bus lines to hire blacks. In 1938, she was a co-founder and subsequently Executive Director of the Negro Actors Guild, an organization which included among its officers Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Ms Washington also wrote a regular feature *Headlines and Footlights* (1944) and *Fredi Speaks* for *The People's Voice*, a weekly paper founded by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in 1938. In the 1940's and '50's, she actively participated in the Cultural Division of the National Negro Congress and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, two organizations dedicated to the equality of opportunity for black artists and the eradication of racial stereotypes in all forms of American culture.

Ms Washington remarried in 1952 to Anthony Bell, a Connecticut dentist. She worked at the Stanford branch of Bloomingdale's from 1954 to 1980.

Scope and Content Note

The Fredi Washington Papers, 1922-1941, 1981, n.d., reflect both her private life as a married woman and her professional career as an actress and activist. The collection is divided into three series: Personal Papers, Professional Correspondence and Activities and Printed Matter. It consists of correspondence, contracts, programs, files from the Negro Actors Guild and the Cultural Division of the National Negro Congress, scripts, newspaper clippings, photographs and one scrapbook.

Arrangement: I. Personal Papers; II. Professional Correspondence and Activities; III. Printed Matter

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors -- Societies, etc
African American actresses
African American dancers
African American entertainers
African Americans -- Social life and customs
African Americans in the performing arts
Music-halls (Variety-theaters, cabarets, etc.) -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Scrapbooks
Scripts

Names

Washington, Fredi, 1903-
Brown, Lawrence, 1905-
National Negro Congress (U.S.). Cultural Division
Negro Actors Guild of America

Container List

Personal Papers

The series contains two draft resumes, chronologically listing the main events in her life from 1903 to 1941; two marriage certificates (1933) and one separation agreement (1948) between Ms Washington and Lawrence Brown; one 1935 notebook and newspaper clippings.

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical 1934-1941
- b. 1 f. 2 Lawrence Brown/Freda Washington Correspondence 1932-1939
- b. 1 f. 3 Lawrence Brown - Family Correspondence 1939
- b. 1 f. 4 Marriage and Divorce Papers 1933-1948
- b. 1 f. 5 Newspaper Clippings re Freda Washington's Divorce 1948
- b. 1 f. 6 Miscellaneous

Professional Correspondence and Activities

Correspondence

Includes *Correspondence* between Ms Washington and Lawrence Brown from 1932 to 1939; three letters written to Mr. Brown by his parents in 1939; a general correspondence file containing telegrams, letters and greetings from Duke Ellington, her sister Isabel, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Bette Davis and Joe Louis, among others; one letter from the National Committee of Independent Voters for Roosevelt and Wallace (5 Nov. 1940) praising her for her active role in the presidential campaign of that year, and another from Senator Robert Wagner of New York in reference to her previously stated interest in the Wagner-Van Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill (27 Nov. 1937). Letters and telegrams of congratulation on the opening of the plays and movies she appeared in have been arranged chronologically and by title of play.

- b. 1 f. 7 General Correspondence 1929-41, 1978, n.d
- b. 1 f. 8 Fan Letters 1926-1935
- b. 1 f. 9 Freda and Moiret 1929
- b. 1 f. 10 Sweet Chariot 1930
- b. 1 f. 11 Singing the Blues 1931
- b. 1 f. 12 Run Lil' Chillun 1933
- b. 1 f. 13 Mamba's Daughter 1939-1941
- b. 1 f. 14 Contracts 1926-1950

The file contains various contracts negotiated by and on behalf of Ms Washington through the Actors Equity Association, a trade-union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) of which she was a member for more than 25 years. Also included are one union card issued to Edith Warren, a pseudonym she used in the production of *Singing the Blues*, and one letter from the law firm of Barron, Rice and Rockmore, discussing her 1934 contract with Universal Pictures Corporation.

Programs

The subseries is divided into two subgroups: one folder containing programs and other printed material from the 1927-1928 European tour of Freda and Moiret; and a general folder containing, in chronological order, programs of Ms Washington's and Lawrence Brown's performances as well as a "Who's who for *August Heat* and *Soldadera*," two plays in which Ms Washington was cast around 1952.

- b. 1 f. 15 Freda and Moiret European Tour 1927-1928 1922, 1926-30
- b. 2 f. 1 General 1922, 1926-1930

Professional Correspondence and Activities (cont.)

b. 2 f. 2 **Negro Actors Guild 1938-1941**

This folder includes: a partial list of people associated with NAG and some letters from its executive board; copy of a newsletter published by NAG (May 1941) and the draft of a statement prepared by Ms Washington to announce her return to the organization in 1941 after a two year leave of absence during the production of *Mamba's Daughter*; one telegram from the executive board of NAG expressing full confidence in Ms Washington, followed by the draft of a letter sent to the executive board to confirm her decision to resign from the organization (May 1941); some printed material and the 1938 Souvenir/Program book of the NAG.

b. 2 f. 3 **National Negro Congress, Cultural Division 1947**

Includes: minutes of the Administrative Committee meeting; and a summary of material presented at a conference held under the auspices of the National Negro Congress to survey the position of blacks in the theater, radio, screen, music and advertising (16 March 1947).

Scripts

The subseries consists of three playscripts performed by Ms Washington, arranged chronologically; playscripts submitted to Ms Washington, arranged alphabetically by title; and one folder containing radioscripts of the black baritone, Joseph James, in 1943.

b. 2 f. 4 **Radio Scripts - Fredi Washington 1937**

b. 2 f. 5 **Play Scripts - performed by Fredi Washington 1946. n.d.**

b. 2 f. 6 ***Play Scripts - Barrack Session - Men to the Sea***

b. 2 f. 7 ***Play Scripts - Nine September - Soon Bright Day***

b. 2 f. 8 ***Play Scripts - Take a Giant Step - To my Husband***

b. 2 f. 9 **Radio Scripts - James, Joseph**

Printed Matter

Newspaper clippings

Include: reviews and articles written about Ms Washington and the movies and plays she performed in; and a general file containing various articles written by and about Adam Clayton Powell Jr., her sister Isabel Powell, Laurence Brown and the Duke Ellington band.

b. 3 f. 1 ***One Mile to Heaven* 1937**

b. 3 f. 2 ***Mamba's Daughter's* 1939**

b. 3 f. 3 **Miscellaneous Clippings 1933, 1937-1939**

b. 3 f. 4 **Scrapbook 1922-1928**

The subseries consists of correspondence, programs, newspaper clippings and other printed matter from the production of *Black Boy* - in which Ms Washington appeared under the name of Edith Warren - and the *Fredi and Moiret* European tour.