JAMES S. WATSON

PAPERS

The New York Public Library

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture 515 Malcolm X Boulevard New York, New York 10037

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Biography

James S. Watson was born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, West Indies on May 29, 1882, the son of Elizabeth Jones Watson and James Michael Watson, a Sergeant of the Jamaica Constabulary and Dispatcher of the Jamaica Railway Company. He received his education in the public schools of Jamaica and after graduation was employed in the hotel industry. He was bookkeeper, chief clerk and cashier at the Myrtle Bank and Constant Spring Hotels respectively, two of the largest hotels in the island.

In June of 1905 Watson immigrated to the United States. From 1905 to 1910 he attended New York Evening High and Harlem Evening High schools from which he received a diploma upon completion of a five-year General course. From the Fall of 1910 until 1913 Watson attended evening sessions at The City College of New York; during the same period he attended New York Law School from which he received the LL.B. in 1913. He was admitted to the New York State Bar on April 6, 1914 and admitted to practice, United States District Court, Southern District of New York, May 1, 1914.

Watson received his practical law training and experience in the law offices of House, Grossman & Vorhaus at 115 Broadway where he was employed in various capacities from 1908 to 1920. From 1908 to 1914 he was a law clerk and later as a member of the legal staff he headed the firm's Department of Corporation and Tax Laws, a position he occupied until March of 1920. In the same year he opened his own law practice at 240 Broadway, specializing in corporation, contract and tax law. From 1922 to December 31, 1930 Watson was Special Assistant Corporation Counsel of the City of New York in the Special Franchise Tax Division. While serving in this capacity his private practice was handled mainly by two black Attorneys, Sidney T. Christian and John E. Stevens; on December 31, 1930 he turned the practice over to Messrs. Christian and Stevens who later formed a partnership.

Watson successfully campaigned for Municipal Court judge in 1930 and along with running mate Charles E. Toney became one of the first two justices of African descent elected to judicial office in New York City. At the time a member of the Cayuga Democratic Club and the United Colored Democracy, Watson was designated to run in the newly-created Tenth Municipal District. This District which was bordered by 110th Street to 155th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue to Fifth Avenue was created in 1929, after much agitation, to assure the election of judiciary candidates of African descent. Watson and Toney won by a landslide beating out Republican opponents Francis E. Rivers and John C. Hawkins in what was then a heavily Republican district. Watson was inducted on January 1, 1931.

The Municipal Court, also known as the "poor people's court," decided tenant and landlord cases and small civil cases in The new Tenth District Municipal Court was especially heavy in tenant-landlord cases and had experienced a large increase in such cases by 1931 due to rising unemployment caused by the Depression. Initially Watson held court in the Municipal Court's temporary quarters at 125th Street and Fifth Avenue, but owing to the Municipal Court Code he rotated within the Borough of Manhattan and in emergencies also held court in Brooklyn and the In Brooklyn, Watson became the first justice of African descent to sit in judgment over white litigants. In 1932 he substituted in the Bronx and his services were so highly thought of that the Bronx County Bar Association officially requested an extension of his time, not only out of necessity but because his work was so highly acclaimed. According to some sources, during his first 196 days on the bench, Justice Watson heard 1,080 inquests, 896 non-jury trials, 123 jury trials, 2,381 motions, 4,294 summary proceedings and 2 ex-parte actions. One source reports that by 1937 the Appellate Division had upheld him in 157 cases and only reversed him in 93.

In 1940 Watson and Toney ran for re-election. While Toney was again designated as a candidate by the Democratic Party, Watson, despite the unanimous endorsement of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and the New York County Lawyers Association was denied re-designation by local Democratic leader Danny Burrowes in favor of Vernon J. Reddick, an Assistant Attorney Concerned supporters formed The Citizens' Non-Partisan General. Committee to Re-Elect James S. Watson headed by George Gordon Battle as the citywide chairman and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. as co-chair and chairman of the Harlem Division. Scores of lawyers of varied political affiliation were members of the Committee and there was also a physicians' and dentists' division. Watson ran as an independent candidate but was endorsed by the American Labor Under pressure, Tammany Hall eventually backed Watson, overriding the decision of local Democratic leaders. Watson was nominated in the Primary, Reddick withdrew and Independent opponent Richard E. Carey placed third. Watson won the election by the majority of votes in what was said to be a record-breaking re-election, running ahead of the entire Democratic ticket by 9to-1.

In May 1950 Watson resigned his position in the Municipal Court to accept the presidency of the Municipal Civil Service Commission, a post previously held by Ferdinand Q. Morton. The Commission's responsibilities included administering the civil service examination and recruiting qualified personnel for all departments of the city government. Under Watson's brief leadership the Commission was able to replace a large number of provisional employees with permanent personnel. He also won all legal actions brought against the Commission. In October of the same year, former Municipal Court Justice Nathan Sweedler tendered a luncheon

in Watson's honor in a tribute to his services and contributions to the legal community and in the spirit of interracial fellowship.

Watson was considered one of the most able jurists in New York and was one of the most popular judges on the bench. Known for his learned ability and fairness, he was lauded by the legal community and the public alike. He was a member of the Rules Committee and the Landlord and Tenant Committee, both of the Municipal Court. Several of his decisions have made history in the annals of law. Chief among them is his ruling in Perry v. Norddeutscher Lloyd (North German Lloyd Steamship Company) which was upheld by the higher court. In a 1934 decision, Watson ruled that the moratorium decree of the German government was not binding on persons owning bonds of German corporations issued in the United States and The company in question was therefore payable in dollars. obliged to pay the bondholder the semiannual interest accrued. Some other outstanding decisions rendered by Watson include National Surety Corporation v. Federal Reserve and Nickobon, Inc. v. Ross. In recognition of his impressive public service record he was honored by a testimonial dinner in 1938, sponsored by the Bar Association of the City of New York. More than 500 persons attended and those paying tribute included Sir Gerald Campbell, British Counsel General, Lester A. Walton, United States Minister to Liberia and Pelham St. George Bissell the President-Justice of the Municipal Court of the City of New York. At times Watson was suggested for higher office and in 1949 he was recommended to President Truman for a federal judgeship in the United States District Court of New York; he was also recommended to the Department of the Interior for the post of Governor of the Virgin Watson received honorary doctorates from Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina and Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.

Watson was active in various professional associations and in 1943 was the first attorney of African descent nominated to the American Bar Association since 1912. He also held membership in the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the New York County Lawyers Association, on whose Administrative Law and Civil Rights Committees he served, the Harlem Lawyers Association and the National Bar Association of which he was a one-time Regional Director. He also lectured at the Practicing Law Institute in New York City in post-admission education for lawyers.

Watson also played an active part in civic and community affairs and was a member of various civic, fraternal and charitable organizations. Memberships included the New York Urban League, Grand Street Boys' Association, the Grand Street Boys' Foundation, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and the Prince Hall Masons. His favorite charities were the Hope Day Nursery in Harlem, Forrest Neighborhood House, Bronx, New York and the Wiltwyck School for Boys, Inc. He was charter member of St. Martin's Episcopal Church

in Harlem and served as Junior Warden and on the Vestry. He was a frequent guest speaker for religious, civic, fraternal, social, educational and legal organizations and was once quoted as saying, interfiled "It is my conviction that the appearance of a Negro judge can be most encouraging to members of our race, young as well as old." He strongly believed that those elected to public office should participate in such activities as an example of service and inspiration to youth. His concern with juvenile problems led him to readily lecture before school, Sunday school and youth groups. He also served as a member of the Board of Managers of the Young Men's Christian Association in addition to participating in other community activities concerning juvenile issues.

Watson was equally interested in race-related matters and believed in the solidarity of native born and foreign born peoples of African descent in finding a solution to common problems. During the 1939 World's Fair, Watson rejected the command invitation of the King and Queen of England to attend the fair because he strongly believed that members of the African-American community should also have been invited to participate in the celebration. Watson often spoke before groups of various ethnic backgrounds and was elected to honorary membership in the Free Sons of Israel. As a member of the West Indian community he was held in high esteem by his fellow Islanders. He frequently spoke to different groups, oftentimes traveling to other cities. From 1919 to 1930 he represented West Indians from various islands, particularly Jamaica, at the request of the British Consulate. For this and other work he was appointed Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. He also incorporated and represented various organizations and held membership in a few such as the British Jamaicans Benevolent Association.

Watson was a family-oriented man and often credited his wife Violet Mae (nee Lopez), a fellow Jamaican, with much of his success. The two met in the United States and were married in 1917. This union produced four offspring, two boys and two girls. The eldest, Barbara, was a former United States Ambassador to Malaysia and the youngest, James is a former New York State Senator now with the United States Court of International Trade.

On May 9, 1952 after a brief illness, James S. Watson died at his home at 117 West 120th Street, in Harlem. Funeral services were held at St. Martin's Church with internment in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York. It is estimated that over 3,000 mourners attended the services alone, while over an additional 7,000 viewed the procession. The list of honorary pallbearers, headed by Mayor Vincent R. Impelliteri, included virtually every high-ranking city official and civic leader.

Scope and Content

The James S. Watson Papers, 1913-1991, document his professional career, his numerous civic and community activities and his personal and family life. The Papers consist of correspondence, legal documents, minutes, writings, financial records, clippings and printed material, and are divided into six series: PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, SPEECHES AND WRITINGS, GENERAL FILE and FAMILY PAPERS.

The PERSONAL PAPERS, 1914-1952, (.6 lin. ft.), series includes resumes and other biographical material and correspondence with friends and acquaintances. The family members, correspondence consists of letters from his father James M. Watson and his brother Charles M. Hinchcliffe, both in Jamaica, West Indies, and letters from his wife, two daughters and two sons. The bulk of the family correspondence is from his immediate family and was written primarily between September and October 1947 while Watson was in Jamaica, West Indies on family business. The letters from his son James were written primarily between 1943 and 1944 while the latter was serving in the United States Army; some are written from camp and others from the front in Italy. Additional letters from James written during World War II are in Violet Watson's files in the Family Papers. The remaining correspondence is with friends in Jamaica, many of whom were prominent citizens of that island, and friends in the United States such as Philadelphia attorney Raymond Pace Alexander and Sidney T. Christian, one of Watson's ex-law partners. All correspondence has been arranged chronologically. Rounding out this series are get well notes, invitations and general personal notes received during his 1947 visit to Jamaica, one folder of personal financial items and one folder pertaining to the estate of his brother Charles M. Hinchcliffe.

The PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, 1914-1952, (.4 lin. ft.), series is divided into the following subseries: General File, 1914-1952, (.4 lin. ft.), Municipal Court of the City of New York, 1931-1950, (.8 lin. ft.), and Municipal Civil Service Commission, 1950-1952, (.2 lin. ft.). Documentation on Watson's career prior to 1930 is somewhat sketchy. His years in the law offices of House, Grossman & Vorhaus, his years in private practice at 240 Broadway and 101 West 135th Street and his tenure as Special Assistant Counsel to the Corporation Counsel of the City of New York are documented only through resumes, cover letters, letters of reference and a few newsclippings.

1914-1952, (.4 lin. ft.), General File, correspondence with colleagues, copies of letters recommendation written by and on behalf of Watson; correspondence from professional organizations such as the National Bar Association, Association of the Bar of the City of New York and the New York County Lawyers Association; congratulatory notes on

his nomination to the American Bar Association and on various rulings; and newsclippings and printed material pertaining to lawyers of African descent. Of special interest are two files dealing with cases filed by the Newspaper Guild of New York The New York Amsterdam News in 1936 and respectively, regarding the firing of city editor Ted Poston and reporter Henry Lee Moon in 1936 and editor Obie McCullum and sports writer and theater critic Roi Ottley in 1937. On both arbitrator; occasions Watson acted as files correspondence, contracts and transcripts of the hearings. Material on the 1948 testimonial dinner in Watson's honor and copies of sponsoring affidavits for admission to the New York State Bar written on behalf of various individuals round out this Texts of speeches and other items relating to speaking engagements of a professional nature are filed within the Speeches and Writings series.

The Municipal Court of the City of New York, 1931-1950, (.8 lin. ft.), subseries includes material on Watson's 1930 and 1940 Materials include personal letters electoral campaigns. colleagues, support from friends and endorsements from organizations, references sent to the Committee on Courts of Limited Jurisdiction of the Bar Association of the City of New York and the Committee on Practice and Procedure in the Municipal Court of the New York County Lawyers Association. Support groups such as the Citizens Non-Partisan Committee for the Re-Election of James S. Watson co-chaired by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and the Independent Professional Committee for the Re-Election of James S. Watson, composed of physicians and dentists within the Harlem community, are represented; included is a list of names and addresses of physicians and dentists of African descent practicing in the Harlem community at the time. Articles from the African American press as well as the mainstream press and from other publications are also represented. The remainder of the subseries includes correspondence regarding Watson's decisions and opinions; copies of his opinions; appeals of his decisions; articles regarding his decisions especially in Perry v. Norddeutscher Lloyd and Nickobon, Inc. v. Ross; correspondence relating to general court business; committee meeting notices; memoranda relating to housing and rent acts; copies of local laws; and assignments and court schedules. Watson's opinion on Perry v. Norddeutscher Lloyd is not contained among the papers, only portions are quoted in an article filed in the Printed Material folder. Copies of Watson's legal opinions not found in the papers and other information regarding cases tried before him are most likely to be found in the Municipal Archives of the City of New York as they are the property of the Municipal Court.

The Municipal Civil Service Commission, 1950-1952, (. 2 lin. ft.), subseries is small due to Watson's death after two years in office. These files include two reports and a self analysis done by the Commission based on a survey conducted in 1951 by an

outside agency. The bulk of the material in this subseries consists of congratulatory letters from friends, colleagues and various organizations upon his appointment as Municipal Civil Service President.

The CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, 1918-1952, (.8 lin. ft.), series documents Watson's role in the Harlem and broader New York City community as well as in the West Indian community. The correspondence files have been arranged alphabetically with organizations and individuals interfiled. Most of the information on the Caribbean community of Harlem is included here even though it is mainly represented by only the constitutions and by-laws of the various organizations. It is also sometimes difficult to determine which organizations Watson may have held membership in versus those he may simply have incorporated. The series overall includes correspondence and meeting notices from organizations such as the Harlem Branch of the Young Men's Christian Association of which he was a Board member; minutes and reports organizations such as the Harlem Adult Education Committee; and letters, some from labor and civil rights telegrams organizations, pertaining to issues such as lynching, voting rights and other civil rights issues, often seeking endorsement on a specific issue; endorsement on a specific issue; correspondence and printed material relating to various economic and social issues affecting the Harlem community such as better health care and juvenile delinquency; invitations to civic gatherings and related affairs and requests for donations and other forms of aid.

The SPEECHES AND WRITINGS, 1908-1952, (.8 lin. ft.), series mainly consists of over 100 speeches, and a few articles, poems, and messages. The speeches are primarily unpublished and are in the form of handwritten drafts, manuscripts and typewritten copies; some are incomplete; all have been arranged chronologically. The speeches were delivered before various professional, educational, fraternal, civic and religious bodies. As one of Watson's main interests was youth welfare, many of his addresses were delivered at school assemblies, commencement exercises and before various youth groups. Rounding out this series is correspondence regarding speaking engagements, articles and flyers announcing speaking engagements, quotes and poems, sometimes of favorite authors, which he often used in his speeches.

The GENERAL FILE, 1911-1952, (.4 lin. ft.), series consists of requests from those seeking advice, especially on immigration and requests for help, usually economic. matters correspondence from writer Claude McKay is of a general nature; in one letter he seeks answers to various questions regarding the Harlem political scene of the 1930s and 1940s. The letters from editor A.M. Wendell Malliet cover various subjects such upcoming meetings and functions as well as information regarding the projected autobiography which Watson had under consideration. Additional information on the autobiography may be found among Violet L. Watson's papers (in the Family Papers series), and portions of an autobiographical chapter may be found among Watson's writings.

The FAMILY PAPERS, 1917-1991, (.8 lin. ft.), series is divided into the following subseries: Violet L. Watson, Douglas C. Watson, Grace E. Watson and James L. Watson. Barbara M. Watson's papers in the Schomburg Center constitute a separate collection and are described separately. Violet L. Watson's papers include letters from her husband and four children, including letters from James L. Watson written during World War II; letters from family friend, artist Richmond Barthe; printed material on Jamaican Independence celebrations; funeral arrangements and condolence notes upon her husband's death, letters, and an outline and notes from Wendell Malliet for a proposed biography of James S. Watson. Grace and James L. Watson's papers include letters from each other and from their parents, mainly their father as well as their sister Barbara; financial records for Skiz, Inc. a joint family business; one legal opinion by James L. Watson and miscellaneous printed material.

Provenance

Gift of the Watson Family. SCM 91-35 SCM 92-60

RELATED COLLECTION:

Schomburg Center: Barbara M. Watson Papers.

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SEPARATION RECORD

The following items were removed from:
Name of Collection/Papers James S. Watson
Accession Number: SCM91-35, 92-60
Donor: Watson Family
Date received: May 1991, October 1992
Date transferred: November 1992
The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.
Schomburg Library:
Journals, pamphlets and miscellaneous printed literature
Schomburg Art and Artifacts Division: Mirrored campaign button; miscellaneous art-related publications
Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:
Two record cartons and one flat box of photographs, includes snapshots, panoramas and an unbound
family album
Other:
Typescripts of poems, radio shows, etc.; sheet music; copies of the Interstate Tattler; and programs have
been retained in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division and are filed in the Literary and
Scholarly Manuscript, Sheet Music, Black Newspapers, and Program and Playbill collections,
respectively.
Processed by: Mary Yearwood Date: November 1993