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

Guide to the

Wyatt Tee Walker papers

1963-1988

Sc MG 216

Processed by Michael R. West.

Summary

Creator: Walker, Wyatt Tee

Title: Wyatt Tee Walker papers

Date: 1963-1988

Source: Donated by The Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, January 30, 1987 SCm 87-6

Abstract: The Wyatt Tee Walker Papers consist principally of manuscripts of published and unpublished works, a few sermons and programs of events held at Canaan Baptist Church, including an anniversary souvenir journal. The manuscript titles are "The Scaffold of Faith," "Hush! Somebody's Calling My Name" (a history of the music of the African American religious experience), "Spirits that Dwell in Deep Woods," and "Past Traditions and its Meaning for Future Ministry."

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Wyatt Tee Walker papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Michael R. West; Machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Creator History

The Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, pastor and civil rights leader, was born August 16, 1929 to John Wise and Maude Pinn Walker in Brockton, Massachusetts. After attending primary and secondary schools in Merchantville, New Jersey, he attended Virginia Union University (VUU), where he received his bachelor's degree in 1950. Upon graduation, he entered the school's seminary, where as president of the student body he met and made a lasting friendship with another seminarian and student body president, Martin Luther King, Jr., at a meeting of the Inter-Seminary Movement. He received the Master of Divinity degree from VUU in 1953, and that year became minister of the Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia, embarking on a career that would make him one of the central figures in the civil rights struggles of the late 1950s and 1960s. As pastor of Gillfield Baptist, Walker was one of a

number of generally younger, more activist ministers--the most famous of whom was King in Montgomery, Alabama, but also including men like Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham and T. J. Jemison in Baton Rouge--who would become the stalwarts of the modern civil rights movement. Replacing an older, more conservative clergy, they led congregations that had become larger and relatively more able to withstand the intimidation and violence brought to bear on them by defenders of the Southern status quo. Like his clerical peers in other cities, Walker assumed a leadership role in a number of organizations; in addition to his ministerial duties, Walker was president of the local chapter of the NAACP, state director of the Congress for Racial Equality, and founder of the Petersburg Improvement Association, a group patterned after the organization King had led to victory in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956. King chose Walker to be a member of the board of his newly-created Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1958, and in the two years that followed, Walker and activist clergy from across Virginia inaugurated a "massive organizing effort" that led to the establishment of the SCLC's organizational structure in that state (Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, [New York: The Free Press, 1984], p. 183). In 1959 he participated in meetings at the Institute on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation at Spelman College along with Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, James Lawson, and Glenn Smiley. The next year, King asked Walker to become Executive Director of the SCLC, overseeing the organization's internal operations which were in some disarray. Walker accepted and during his tenure from 1960 to 1964 he was able to impose a greater degree of order over the SCLC's farflung and usually chaotic activities, while also helping systematize its fundraising efforts. Walker, however, was more than simply an office manager. According to historian Taylor Branch, Walker preached "dazzling sermons" in support of the student sit-ins that sparked the second phase of civil rights organizing after 1960. His "finest hour" with the SCLC came in the Birmingham campaign. Walker's "Project C" (for Confrontation) was a blueprint for the movement's success in that city in 1963, envisioning, Branch has written, "a precisely organized march into history by an organization that had taken four years to find a mimeograph machine." (Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years*, [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988], pp. 300, 689) In Birmingham, both Walker and his wife, Theresa Edwards Walker, were assaulted by law enforcement officers. In 1964, Walker left the SCLC to become marketing specialist for the Negro Heritage Library, and in 1966 he became president of that organization, which sought to convince school boards to include in their curricula "the role of black people in the American experience and in world affairs." During this period, Walker also served for a short time as pulpit minister at Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, and he began a more lasting relationship with Nelson Rockefeller as the New York state governor's Special Assistant on Urban Affairs. It was in this latter capacity that Walker was able to plan and help secure the construction of the state's new office building (named for Powell) in Harlem. In 1967 Walker became chief minister of Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in Harlem, a position he continues to hold in 1991. In addition to his pastoral duties, Walker was able to complete his doctoral dissertation, receiving his Ph.D. from Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1975, and to publish several works on the relation of music to social change and the black religious tradition, including *Somebody's Calling My Name* and *The Soul of Black Worship*. He also made an unsuccessful run for the New York State Assembly. In 1978, Walker organized the International Freedom Mobilization to publicize the victims of apartheid in South Africa. Under his leadership, Canaan Baptist has been involved in the sponsorship of senior citizen's, housing, and drug rehabilitation programs.

Scope and Content Note

The Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker Papers, 1963, 1982, n.d., consist of documents from Walker's professional career following his involvement with the civil rights movement. The papers have been divided into two series: *Writings* and *Printed Material*.

The Black Church Looks at the Bicentennial, with Harold A. Carter and William A. Jones, Jr., (Elgin, Ill.: Progressive National Baptist Publishing House, 1976).

Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change, (Valley Forge, PA : Judson

Press, 1979).

The Soul of Black Worship: A Trilogy--Preaching, Praying, Singing, (New York: Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows Press, 1984).

Road to Damascus: A Journey of Faith, (New York: Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows Press, 1985).

Common Thieves! A Tithing Manual for Black Christians and Others, (New York: Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows Press, 1986).

Arrangement: Papers organized into two series: I Writings; and II Printed Material

Key Terms

Subjects

African American churches -- New York (State) -- New York

African American clergy -- New York (State) -- New York

African Americans -- Music

African Americans -- Religion

Church music -- United States

Titles

Preservation of the Black Religious Heritage Project funded by the Lilly Endowment

Schomburg NEH Automated Access to Special Collections Project

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Sermons

Names

Walker, Wyatt Tee

Canaan Baptist Church (New York, N.Y.)

Container List

Writings

Writings consists of manuscripts of published and unpublished scholarly works by Reverend Walker, mainly on music and the black religious tradition, including the text of Walker's *Somebody's Calling My Name*. Also included are sermons and photocopies of published articles.

"The Scaffold Of Faith"

b. 1 f. 1 Manuscript

b. 1 f. 2 Chapter 5

"Hush! Somebody's Calling My Name"

b. 1 f. 3 Chapters 1-6

b. 1 f. 4 Chapter 7

b. 1 f. 5 Manuscript Revisions

b. 1 f. 6 Introduction And Chapter 2 Manuscript Revisions

"Spirits That Dwell In Deep Woods"

b. 1 f. 7 Unpublished Manuscript

"Past Tradition And Its Meaning For Future Ministry" ca. 1974

b. 1 f. 8 Unpublished Manuscript

b. 1 f. 9 "The Soulful Journey Of The Negro Spiritual," 1963

b. 1 f. 10 "The Soul Of Black Worship," 1988

b. 1 f. 11 Sermons 1972, 1974, n.d

Printed Material

Printed Material contains Canaan Baptist Church programs, and the Church's 50th anniversary commemorative yearbook which includes a history of the Church and its activities.

b. 1 f. 12 Programs

v. Canaan Baptist Church Of Christ Year Of Jubilee 1932-1982, Yearbook