



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

Guide to the

**William N. and Isabele T. Spiller papers**

1906-1958

Sc MG 62

Processed by Berlena Robinson.

## Summary

**Creator:** Spiller, Isabele Taliferro, 1888-1974

**Title:** William N. and Isabele T. Spiller papers

**Date:** 1906-1958

**Source:** Gift of Isabele Taliaferro Spiller, 1959

**Abstract:** Collection consists of a few of William Spiller's personal papers, programs, and news clippings of William and Isabele Spiller's European and American tours, 1912-1942, and of the Spiller School of Music. Bulk of papers contain material pertaining to Isabelle Spiller's work as a music supervisor and orchestra conductor in New York City public schools. Of particular interest is her work as head of the Federal Music Project in New York. Also, a scrapbook containing her published articles.

**Access:** Advance notice required.

**Preferred citation:** William N. and Isabele T. Spiller papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

**Processing note:** Processed by Berlena Robinson; machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

## Creator History

Born in Goodson, Virginia, May 4, 1876, William Newmeyer Spiller was the son of Dr. Richard Spiller, clergyman and educator, and Mary Still Spiller of Philadelphia, whose relatives had been active in the Underground Railroad. William Spiller began his musical education in Hampton, Virginia at the Spiller Academy, a school founded by his father. He attended Hampton Institute and later studied under the noted organist, Dr. Melville Charlton, with whom he concentrated on theory, harmony, piano and instrumentation. Spiller is also known to have studied in Europe. In 1899 Spiller joined William A. Mahara's *Colored Minstrels*, one of the largest white-owned and managed minstrel companies in the United States. Starting with the company as a singer, he later played tenor saxophone and alto horn with this group, which at the time was under the direction of William C. Handy. Handy noted in his

autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, that Spiller's involvement with the tenor saxophone during his tenure with Mahara's Minstrels was a catalyst for the formation of the Musical Spillers vaudeville act. In 1903, Spiller moved to Chicago where he concertized locally as a singer with Nathaniel Clark Smith. Smith organized Chicago's first black symphony orchestra with Spiller as one of the featured artists at its March 1903 debut. While in Chicago Spiller organized a vaudeville act - the *Musical Spillers* - with two other musicians, later augmented to thirteen. His specialty was a trombone dance. In *The Tom Fletcher Story; 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business!*, published in 1954, Fletcher wrote, "Newmeyer Spiller [is] the only person I ever saw who did a dance while playing a slide trombone." He also played the xylophone and other brass and woodwind instruments. A pioneer in the theatrical profession, Spiller performed throughout the world for more than forty years. William Spiller married Isabele Taliaferro, who was a member of his troupe for many years. In 1926 they opened a music school in Harlem, specializing in band and orchestral instruments. Many former students of the Spiller School of Music ultimately organized their own bands. One of their more renowned pupils was jazz pianist, Hazel Scott. After a five year illness, William Spiller died on September 3, 1944 in New York City. On April 1, 1945 the Negro Actors Guild of America held a special memorial service for him and several other musicians. The Guild passed a special resolution placing the papers of this founding member in its archives. Isabele Taliaferro Spiller, also the daughter of a minister, was born on March 18, 1888 in Abington, Virginia. Isabele's early years were spent in Philadelphia, where she regularly attended concerts at Wanamaker's Department Store, the Academy of Music, St. Peter Claver's Church and Willow Grove Park. Her first music instruction was provided by her mother, Josephine Benjamin Outlaw Taliaferro. Isabele attended Philadelphia public schools, and later graduated from the New England Conservatory (1909) and the Juilliard School of Music. Isabele continued her musical training with Madam Azalia Hackley (voice) and Melville Charlton (theory). In her youth Mrs. Spiller played the organ, piano and mandolin in the family orchestra. Accompanying her were her mother on guitar and two family friends on harp and violin. She also played piano at her father's church. In 1912 Isabele joined the Musical Spillers. Her primary instrument was the tenor saxophone, but she also doubled on alto and baritone saxophone, and occasionally trumpet and piano. Sid Hawkins of the Chicago *Defender* wrote, "Mrs. Spiller tickles a mean set of ivories and toots a mean moaning saxophone, too." Additionally, Mrs. Spiller served as co-director of the group. Her sister, Bessie Taliaferro, also played with the Musical Spillers and was secretary of the group. Although Mrs. Spiller no longer performed with the Musical Spillers after she and her husband established the Spiller School, she remained active in band work. She played with Della Sutton's All Girls' Band, and in 1935 the Monarch Symphonic Band had Isabele Spiller at the keyboard. From the late 1920's until her death, Mrs. Spiller's major musical impact was as a teacher and musical director. Among her many positions, she served as Director of Music of the Young Women's Christian Association in Brooklyn from 1928 to 1930. She also organized and directed the music department of the Columbus Hill Center (later the Harlem Boy's Club) from 1929 to 1933, when the Depression forced it to close. While at the Columbus Hill Center she received a scholarship to Teachers College, Columbia University for a Boys' Clubs of America course. Mrs. Spiller was the only woman in the graduating class. From 1934 to 1940 Isabele Spiller supervised the Woodwind, Brass and Percussion Institute of New York City's Federal Music Project (Work Projects Administration), and supervised the instrumental program at Bellevue Hospital. For the next twelve years she was orchestral supervisor of Wadleigh Senior High School, the only evening school orchestra in New York City. In addition to her various school and Federal Project instrumental groups, Mrs. Spiller directed the Women's Excelsior Temple Band. Finally, Mrs. Spiller was the author of many articles on the supervision of public school music. The 1958 Fall issue of the *Juilliard Review* announced Isabele Spiller's retirement from public school orchestra work. She conducted her final concert for the Harlem Evening High School on June 26, 1958 at their commencement exercises. Mrs. Spiller died on May 14, 1974 at her brownstone residence, which she shared with her sister Bessie, in New York City. The Musical Spillers vaudeville troupe headlined in vaudeville all over the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, South America, Europe and Africa, and made a silent film with Alice Brady. The act was unique for its repertory using both jazz and classical works, and for the fact that it was one of the

largest black acts in the early 1900s. In the act, William Spiller used a family of saxophones, trumpets, fluegel horns, trombones, clarinets, drums, and singers and dancers. Many musicians who later became successful had their first professional training and experience with the Musical Spillers act, including Cricket Smith, who was a fellow member of Mahara's Minstrels, Sam Patterson, Rex Stewart (solo trumpeter with Duke Ellington's Orchestra), Russell Smith, Noble Sissle, Willie Lewis, Walter (Jack) Bennett (who later played with Fletcher Henderson's band), Laurence Henderson, and Peek-a-Boo Jimmie. Rex Stewart and Willie Lewis went on to form their own bands. On the distaff side, the following saxophonists played with the Musical Spillers: Alice Calloway, Mildred Creed, Helen Murphy, May Yorke, Mayday Yorke, and Leora Meoux Henderson (Mrs. Fletcher Henderson), who later went on to organize an all-women's combo called the Vampires. The Musical Spillers are credited with the phrase, "You ain't heard nothing yet," which they claimed Al Jolsen stole from their act after appearing on the same bill with them.

### **Scope and Content Note**

The papers of William Newmeyer and Isabele Taliaferro Spiller have been divided into four series: Personal Papers, the Musical Spillers, the Spiller School of Music, and Isabele Taliaferro Spiller. Although the papers encompass the years 1906 to 1958, it is a small collection. The Spiller photograph collection should be used in conjunction with the papers as the information written on the backs of the photographs adequately documents the activities of the Musical Spillers act, as well as Mrs. Spiller's work with bands and orchestras and her public school work.

**Arrangement:** The arrangement of each of the series is chronological within the series.

### **Key Terms**

#### **Subjects**

African American entertainers  
African American entertainers -- Europe  
African American musicians  
African American women teachers  
African Americans -- Music  
Conservatories of music -- New York (State) -- New York  
Music -- Instruction and study  
Music and state -- United States  
Vaudeville -- United States

#### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Scrapbooks

#### **Geographic Names**

United States -- Social life and customs

#### **Names**

Spiller, Isabele Taliferro, 1888-1974  
Spiller, William, 1876-1945  
Federal Music Project (N.Y.)  
Spiller School of Music (New York, N.Y.)

## Container List

### Personal Papers 1928-1958

The series contains William Spiller's passports and visas, and the Negro Actors Guild memorial program, as well as the *Julliard Review* announcing Isabele's retirement.

- b. 1 f. 1 William Newmeyer and Isabele Taliaferro Spiller

### Musical Spillers

The series contains programs of their European and United States tours from 1912 to 1942, and clippings and reviews of their act. One of William Spiller's compositions, the *New York Tango Blues* has been removed from the collection and placed in the Schomburg Center's Sheet Music Collection.

- b. 1 f. 2 First European Tour - Programs and Memorabilia 1912-1913
- b. 1 f. 3 Second European Tour - Programs 1923-1942, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 4 Programs 1919, 1922
- b. 1 f. 5 Clippings 1906-1944, n.d.

### Spiller School of Music

The series consists of programs and clippings concerning the school's activities.

- b. 1 f. 6 Circulars 1926, 1933
- b. 1 f. 7 Programs 1927-1940, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 8 Clippings 1929-1932

### Isabele T. Spiller

The final and largest series contains material pertaining to her work as a music supervisor and orchestra conductor in the New York City public schools. Of particular interest is her work as head of the Federal Music Project in New York. A scrapbook containing Mrs. Spiller's published articles gives one a good perspective of her philosophy about, and methods of, teaching music, particularly to children. She was an avid proponent of orchestral participation.

### Young Women's Christian Association

- b. 1 f. 9 Programs 1928-1930, 1940, n.d
- b. 1 f. 10 Clippings 1927-1930

### Columbus Hill Center

- b. 1 f. 11 Programs 1929-1931
- b. 1 f. 12 Clippings 1929-1931

### Federal Music Project (W.P.A.)

- b. 1 f. 13 Correspondence 1936, 1938
- b. 1 f. 14 Instruction Material 1938
- b. 1 f. 15 Programs 1937-1942
- b. 1 f. 16 Clippings 1934, 1938
- b. 1 f. 17 Civilian Conservation Corps - Publication 1937
- b. 1 f. 18 Wadleigh High School 1943-1954
- b. 1 f. 19 Harlem Evening High School 1952-1958, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 20 Writings 1927-1932, 1939, 1947
- b. 1 f. 21 Clippings 1929-1930, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 22 Scrapbook 1927-1929, 1932, 1936