



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

Guide to the

Florence Mills collection

1896-1974 [bulk 1923-1927]

Processed by Lela J. Sewell-Williams.

Summary

Creator: Mills, Florence, 1895-1927

Title: Florence Mills collection

Date: 1896-1974 [bulk 1923-1927]

Size: .9 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: Helen Armstead-Johnson, December 1996.

Abstract: Florence Mills (1886-1927), world renowned entertainer during the 1920s. She starred in Lew Leslie's Plantation Revue and Blackbirds after a successful run as the lead in Shuffle Along. Collection contains personal papers that include biographical information and letters; and professional papers, including letters, contracts and printed materials.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Florence Mills Papers, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theatre Collection, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

Processing note: Processed by Lela J. Sewell-Williams; machine readable finding aid created by FAKER. "Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project," funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City and State of New York.

Related Materials:

Ulysses S.Thompson Collection, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection. Schomburg Center.

Florence Mills Artifacts, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection. Schomburg Center .

Florence Mills Portrait Collection, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center.

Creator History

Florence Mills, world renowned entertainer during the 1920s, began her career at the age of five by winning a dance contest. By the age of eight, she had made her stage debut, billed as "Baby Florence Mills," in the Williams and Walker production of *Sons of Ham*, singing "Miss Hannah from Savannah," taught to her by vaudeville artist Aida Overton Walker, wife of George Walker. A native of Washington, D.C., Mills performed "in the drawing rooms of various Washington diplomats" during the early years of her career. She went on to perform with the Bonita Company as one of the "picks" - the singing and dancing "pickaninnies." After leaving the Bonita Company, Mills and her two sisters, Olivia and Maude, formed a trio (1910), which eventually became a duo after the departure of Olivia. Maude later left the duo and Mills teamed up with Ada "Bricktop" Smith and Cora Green to form the Panama Trio. At some point the Trio performed on the same bill as the Tennessee Ten and Mills became involved with one of the troupe's members, Ulysses S. Thompson. In 1923, Mills and Thompson married. Although Mills performed widely, a career transforming opportunity came to pass when she replaced Gertrude Saunders as the lead in *Shuffle Along* (1921). She became an instant success with both the Harlem community and the larger white audiences. After a year of performing in *Shuffle Along*, she left to star in Lew Leslie's *Plantation Revue* (1922), which was enlarged and renamed *From Dover to Dixie*. After a Broadway run, the production retitled *From Dixie to Broadway*, toured London and in 1924 returned to New York. In 1926, Lew Leslie starred Mills in *Blackbirds*, which also toured London as well as Paris. In London as in New York, Mills was received by enthusiastic audiences and praised for her outstanding talent. On various occasions the Prince of Wales came to see the show. Her English popularity was so vast that dolls were named after her and "shops designated light brown goods as the Florence Mills' shade." Upon returning to New York on October 12, 1927, Mills was hospitalized suffering from pelvic tuberculosis. She died on November 1, 1927, after undergoing an unsuccessful operation. The news shocked the world and shook the Harlem community. Five thousand people attended Mills' funeral at Mother Zion A.M.E. Church in Harlem. It was reported that more than 100,000 people packed the streets for her funeral procession. The newspapers reported that as the procession reached 145th Street, "a low flying airplane released a symbolic flock of blackbirds." Mills was buried in the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York.

Custodial History

The collection was donated to Helen Armstead-Johnson, by Ulysses S. Thompson, the widower of Florence Mills in 1970. It was subsequently donated by Helen Armstead-Johnson, along with other theater-related collections to the Schomburg Center.

Scope and Content Note

The Florence Mills Papers spans the years, 1896-1974, with the bulk of material encompassing the years, 1923 -1927. The collection reflects her life as a world renowned entertainer, and is divided into two series: PERSONAL and PROFESSIONAL PAPERS. Included are letters, contracts, programs, fan mail, clippings and a scrapbook.

Arrangement: The Florence Mills Papers are organized in the following series: Personal Papers
Professional Papers

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actresses
African American dancers
African American women
African American women entertainers

African American women singers
African Americans -- Music
African Americans in the performing arts

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Reviews (Criticism)
Scrapbooks

Titles

Schomburg NEH Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project

Names

Mills, Florence, 1895-1927
Johnson, Helen A.
Leslie, Lew, 1886-1963
Thompson, Ulysses S.
Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection

Container List

Personal Papers

The PERSONAL PAPERS, 1896-1967 (bulk dates 1922-1927) series, consists of biographical information, letters, 1922-1927, and miscellaneous materials. The Letters contained in the file include an invitation for Mills to judge a Charleston dance competition as well as an appreciation letter for her participation in a street fair benefiting crippled children. The miscellaneous file contains receipts for charitable donations by Mills, calling cards, invitations and a ticket to a performance of *Plantation Revue*.

Alphabetical

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical - Birth Certificate, Burial Plot and Passport 1896, 1926, 1967
- Letters
- b. 1 f. 2 Personal 1922, 1926
- b. 1 f. 3 Miscellaneous 1924, 1926-1927

Professional Papers

The PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, 1921-1974 (bulk dates 1921-1929) series, documents Mills' performance history. The series is divided into four subseries which includes Letters, Professional Files and Printed Material. Within the Letters subseries are many messages of support and good wishes via telegrams which Mills received from fans, friends, fellow performers and others, among them Arthur F. Lyons, Hazel Coles and Maude Russell. The Professional Files contain contracts for *Shuffle Along*, 1921 and *Plantation Revue*, 1922. Printed Materials include programs for Mills' performances nationally and abroad, as well as a souvenir program for the Florence Mills Memorial Fund, 1927 and clippings. The Scrapbook primarily contains clippings, bulk dates 1921-1927. The clippings feature Mills' professional (national and international) and personal life. Several caricatures of Mills can also be found in the scrapbook. A few clippings feature Ulysses S. Thompson, Mills' husband and fellow performer.

Alphabetical

Letters

- b. 1 f. 4 Letters / Telegrams 1923-1927
- b. 1 f. 5 Fan Mail 1923, 1925-1927
- b. 1 f. 6 Acknowledgments 1923, 1925-1927

Professional

- b. 1 f. 7 Contracts 1921-1922
- b. 1 f. 8 Lyrics undated

Printed Material

- b. 1 f. 9 Clippings 1914, 1925-1927, 1967, undated
- b. 1 f. 10 Programs 1921, 1923, 1925 - 1927
- b. 2 Scrapbook 1922-1929, 1946, 1969, 1974