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Guide to the

**Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project**

1992

Sc MG 671

## Summary

**Creator:** Abyssinian Baptist Church (New York, N.Y.)

**Title:** Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project

**Date:** 1992

**Size:** .4 linear feet (1 archival box)

**Source:** Preservation of the Black Religious Heritage Project, 1995

**Abstract:** The Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project consists of transcripts of interviews with ten African-American women -- all Abyssinian members -- about their recollections of Abyssinian Baptist Church as well as their Southern roots, their spiritual experiences and their political and Christian education. All of the women interviewed were more than seventy years old, and one was over ninety, at the time the interviews were conducted in 1992. The interviewees are: Helen Brown, Robbie Clarke, Susan Craig, Gwendolyn Jones, Esther McCall, Estelle Noble, Fannie Pennington, Olivia Pearl Stokes, Amy Terry, Grace Jones and Laura B. Thomas. Their remembrances date to the late 1920's, but the primary time period under discussion is from 1940 to 1970. Located in Harlem, Abyssinian was the first black Baptist church established in New York State (1808) and the fifth in the United States. The interviewer was Martia G. Goodson, an assistant professor at Baruch College at the time of the project.

**Access:** Advance notice required.

**Preferred citation:** Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

**Related Materials:**

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

## Creator History

The Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project was undertaken in 1991 as one of the activities of

the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's Preservation of the Black Religious Heritage Project. The latter, which ran from 1989 to 1993, collected and preserved material related to the African-American religious experience. Dr. Martia Goodson, a professor at Baruch College, conceived of and executed the Abyssinian oral history project, which focused on church life from 1940 to 1970. She identified and interviewed several individuals who had been longtime members of the church.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project consists of transcripts of interviews with ten African-American women -- all Abyssinian members -- about their recollections of Abyssinian Baptist Church as well as their Southern roots, their spiritual experiences and their political and Christian education. All of the women interviewed were more than seventy years old, and one was over ninety, at the time the interviews were conducted in 1992. The interviewees are: Helen Brown, Robbie Clarke, Susan Craig, Gwendolyn Jones, Esther McCall, Estelle Noble, Fannie Pennington, Olivia Pearl Stokes, Amy Terry, Grace Jones and Laura B. Thomas. Their remembrances date to the late 1920's, but the primary time period under discussion is from 1940 to 1970. Located in Harlem, Abyssinian was the first black Baptist church established in New York State (1808) and the fifth in the United States. The interviewer was Martia G. Goodson, an assistant professor at Baruch College at the time of the project. The topics discussed during the interviews include church life during the 1930's, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s social justice ministry and his City Council election campaign in the 1940's which led to his being the first African American elected to that body, as well as his election to the U.S. Congress in 1942, and the election of Communist Party member Benjamin Davis to Powell's seat in the City Council. Additional subjects include World War II, Tammany Hall in the 1950's, Sunday School and youth activities, Harlem and national Christian youth conferences, religious education, church club activities (teas, fashion shows, lectures), and campaigns against Jim Crow hiring, particularly in Harlem's 125th Street businesses. The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. figures prominently in the interviews, as well as the organizations he was affiliated with, including the Greater New York City Coordinating Committee for the Employment of Negroes, of which he was chairman, and the Alfred G. Isaac Club of Democrats in Harlem, which Powell Jr. founded. Many of the women spoke about their experiences when they became members of one of the most popular churches in Harlem, as well as their memories of the Golden Gate, a meeting hall where Powell held mass meetings. The interviewees also discussed their work lives, Powell's newspaper "The People's Voice," his attendance at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, and his exclusion in 1967 from the House of Representatives. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s campaign to move the church to Harlem in the 1920s and his vision of a community church are described. Other figures mentioned are Odell Clark, Powell Jr.'s Congressional chief investigator, the Rev. David Licorish, long-time Abyssinian assistant pastor, Hattie Freeman Dodson, secretary to both Powells, Hazel Scott, jazz musician and Powell Jr.'s second wife, Wyatt T. Walker, another Abyssinian assistant minister, photographer Austin Hansen, and Casper Holstein, a Harlem numbers mobster during Prohibition who was also a prominent philanthropist. Also discussed is the Vermont Project, a program of interracial cooperation between Abyssinian Baptist Church and churches in Vermont whereby Harlem children stayed with Vermont families for part of the summer, ca. 1944-1960.

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

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

African American churches -- New York (State) -- New York  
African American clergy -- New York (State) -- New York  
African American leadership  
African American politicians  
African American women  
African Americans -- Civil rights  
African Americans -- Religion  
African Americans -- Social conditions  
African Americans -- Social life and customs

### **Geographic Names**

Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Church history  
Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Social conditions  
Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Social life and customs  
United States -- Race relations

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Interviews  
Oral histories (document genres)

### **Names**

Abyssinian Baptist Church (New York, N.Y.)  
Brown, H. E. (Helen E.)  
Clark, Odell, 1910-1980  
Clark, Robbie L  
Craig, Susan W  
Hansen, Austin, 1910-1996  
Holstein, Casper, 1876-1944  
Jones, Gwendolyn  
Licorish, David N  
McCall, Esther  
Noble, Estelle B  
Pennington, Fannie  
Powell, A. Clayton (Adam Clayton), 1865-1953  
Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr., 1908-1972  
Stokes, Olivia Pearl, 1916-  
Terry, Amy W  
Thomas, Laura B  
Walker, Wyatt Tee  
Adam Clayton Powell Community Center (New York, N.Y.)