



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Willis Richardson papers

1910-1974

*T-Mss 1974-002

Processed by Mary Ellen Rogan.

Summary

Creator: Richardson, Willis, 1889-1977

Title: Willis Richardson papers

Date: 1910-1974

Size: 1.5 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: The Willis Richardson papers were donated in 1974 most probably by Willis Richardson.

Abstract: The Willis Richardson papers document through correspondence, ephemera and scrapbooks his career as a playwright. Coverage is sketchy and there are major gaps in the collection.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Photocopying prohibited.

Conditions Governing Use: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Preferred citation: Willis Richardson Papers, *T-Mss 1974-002. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Mary Ellen Rogan; Machine-readable finding aid created by Mary Ellen Rogan. The Willis Richardson papers were reprocessed in 2003. The collection was formally contained in Call No. 8-MWEZ + n.c. 25333-25336.

Creator History

Playwright Willis Richardson (1889-1977) was the first African-American dramatist to have a non-musical work staged on Broadway when his play *The Chip Woman's Fortune* opened in May 1923. The first writer to win two first prizes during the Harlem Renaissance he is called by some the "Father of Black Drama". Born in Wilmington, North Carolina on November 5, 1889, Willis Richardson was a child of nine when a race riot in his hometown resulted in the deaths of sixteen African-Americans. He and his parents moved soon thereafter to Washington, D.C., where Willis was educated at the M Street School, later named the Dunbar High School, the first public high school for blacks in the United States. Having taken correspondence courses in playwriting as well as poetry, Richardson staged his early plays in black high schools and colleges, including Howard University, and also had his work published in magazines. On May 15, 1923, Richardson's play *The Chip Woman's Fortune* opened at the Frazee Theatre (later known as the Wallack Theatre), where it played 31 performances. His other plays include *Mortgaged* (1924) and *The Boot Black Lover* (1925). In later years Richardson edited the anthologies *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* (1930) and *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* (1935). He married Mary Ellen Jones in 1914, and the couple had three daughters. Richardson earned his living at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, where he worked from 1911 to 1954. Willis Richardson died on November 7, 1977, two days after his 88th birthday.

Scope and Content Note

The Willis Richardson papers consists of correspondence, ephemera and scrapbooks and document his career in theater. Though sketchy with many gaps there is some correspondence from noted black playwrights and actors including Eulalie Spence, Ridgely Torrence, Paul Robeson and Frank H. Wilson. There are some interesting programs from early black theater companies, high schools and universities. Of special note is a program for an awards dinner given by *Opportunity* magazine.

Arrangement: Series I: Correspondence Series II: Personal Papers Sub-series 1 - Ephemera Sub-series 2 - Programs Series III: Scrapbooks

Key Terms

Subjects

African American dramatists
African Americans in literature
African Americans in the performing arts
Blacks in literature

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Scrapbooks

Names

Richardson, Willis, 1889-1977
Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963
La Farge, John, 1880-1963
Locke, Alain, 1885-1954
Robeson, Paul, 1898-1976
Spence, Eulalie, 1894-1981
Torrence, Ridgely, 1875-1950
Walton, Lester A., 1882-1965
Wilson, Frank, 1886-1956
Dramatists Guild

Dunbar High School (Washington, D.C.)
Howard University

Container List

Series I: Correspondence 1910-1975 (49 folders)

The correspondence series contains letters written to Willis Richardson from friends and professional acquaintances. Included are letters from Heywood Broun, Walt Disney, W.E.B. DuBois, Randolph Edmonds, John LaFarge, Alain LeRoy Locke, Richard Nixon, Raymond O'Neil, Paul Robeson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Eulalie Spence, Ridgely Torrence, Carl Van Vechten and Frank H. Wilson, among others.

Alphabetical

- b. 1 f. 1 Correspondence "A" 1928-1975
Includes correspondence from the Aldridge Players.
- b. 1 f. 2 Broun, Heywood 1923 Aug. 3
- b. 1 f. 3 Correspondence "B" 1910-1933
- b. 1 f. 4 City College of the City University of N. Y. 1970-1974
Correspondence from James V. Hatch.
- b. 1 f. 5 Correspondence "C" 1926-1939
- b. 1 f. 6 Disney, Walt 1957 Mar. 20 (1 letter)
- b. 1 f. 7 Dramatist Guild 1947-1972
- b. 1 f. 8 Du Bois, W. E. B. 1925-1928 (3 letters, 1 telegram)
- b. 1 f. 9 Correspondence "D" 1921-1975
- b. 1 f. 10 Edmonds, Randolph 1928-1934
- b. 1 f. 11 Exposition Press 1956-1958
- b. 1 f. 12 Fauset, Jessie Redmon 1920-1922
- b. 1 f. 13 Correspondence "F" 1927-1974
- b. 1 f. 14 Correspondence "G" 1922-1935
- b. 1 f. 15 Howard, Althea V. 1934 Mar. 16
- b. 1 f. 16 Howard University 1922-1940
Correspondence primarily about the Howard Players.
- b. 1 f. 17 Correspondence "H" 1931-1974
- b. 1 f. 18 Correspondence "J" 1927-1934
Includes correspondence from Harold Jackman, James Weldon Johnson and the Harlem Experimental Theatre.
- b. 1 f. 19 Correspondence "K" 1929-1963
- b. 1 f. 20 LaFarge, John 1936-1953
- b. 1 f. 21 Locke, Alain LeRoy 1922-1929, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 22 Correspondence "L" 1925-1974
- b. 1 f. 23 McKay, Claude 1921, n.d.
Correspondence from Claude McKay, editor for *The Liberator*.
- b. 1 f. 24 Mathews, John F. 1929-1934
- b. 1 f. 25 Correspondence "M" 1925-1968
- b. 1 f. 26 Negro History Study Group of the Thirteenth Division 1942 May 18
- b. 1 f. 27 New York Public Library 1923-1930
- b. 1 f. 28 Nixon, Richard M. 1957 Mar. 25
- b. 1 f. 29 O'Neil, Raymond 1922-1924, n.d.

Series I: Correspondence (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 30 *Opportunity (Periodical)* 1924
- b. 1 f. 31 Correspondence "O" 1931-1957
- b. 1 f. 32 Correspondence "P" 1921-1956
- b. 1 f. 33 Roberts, Flora 1971-1972
- b. 1 f. 34 Robeson, Paul 1924, n.d.
Includes letter from Eslanda Goode Robeson.
- b. 1 f. 35 Roosevelt, Eleanor 1957 Feb. 19
- b. 1 f. 36 Correspondence "Q-R" 1924-1974
- b. 1 f. 37 Shay, Frank 1926
- b. 1 f. 38 Spence, Eulalie 1927-1929 (3 letters, 1 postcard)
- b. 1 f. 39 Correspondence "S" 1930-1943
- b. 1 f. 40 Torrence, Ridgely 1927-1939 (3 letters)
- b. 1 f. 41 Correspondence "T" 1911-1921, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 42 Correspondence "U" 1927-1954
- b. 1 f. 43 Van Vechten, Carl 1946-1950 (2 letters)
- b. 1 f. 44 Walton, Lester A. 1928-1930
- b. 1 f. 45 White House (Washington, D.C.) 1957 Feb. 4
- b. 1 f. 46 Wilson, Frank H. 1929-1936
- b. 1 f. 47 Works Progress Administration 1938
- b. 1 f. 48 Correspondence "W" 1925-1976
- b. 1 f. 49 Correspondence "Y" 1933-1934

Series II: Personal Papers 1910-1971 (23 folders)

This series consists of personal papers, ephemera and programs from the life and career of Willis Richardson. Missing from the collection are photographs and clippings.

Sub-series 1 - Ephemera 1910-1971 (13 folders)

Ephemera contain contracts, personal notes and cards, drafts of writings and programs including Richardson's graduation exercises from M Street High School in Washington, D.C.

- b. 1 f. 50 Associated Publishers, Inc. 1935 June 13
Contract between Willis Richardson and Associated Publishers, Inc.
- b. 1 f. 51 Exposition Press 1956
Contract between Willis Richardson and Exposition Press.
- b. 1 f. 52 Cards
- b. 1 f. 53 Celebration of Negro History Week 1962
Program for the Negro History Week celebration at the Shrewsbury Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church in Red Bank, N.J.
- b. 1 f. 54 *Crisis (Periodical)* 1971 June
Issue devoted to James Weldon Johnson.
- b. 1 f. 55 Dunbar High School 1926-1945
Programs from Dunbar High School including one for Class Night Exercises and one for an Historic Pageant.
- b. 1 f. 56 Harlem Cultural Council 1966 Apr.
Newsletter from the Harlem Cultural Council.
- b. 1 f. 57 M Street High School (Washington, D.C.) 1910
Programs for Commencement Exercises and Class Night.

Series II: Personal Papers (cont.)
Sub-series 1 - Ephemera (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 58 Mailing List
- b. 1 f. 59 Notes and drafts
- b. 1 f. 60 *Opportunity (Periodical)* 1925 May 1
Awards Dinner Program
- b. 1 f. 61 Reader's Report 1952
- b. 1 f. 62 Winston-Salem Teachers' College 1937
Invitation to Commencement Exercises.

Sub-series 2 - Programs 1915-1973 (10 folders)

This series contains programs from a variety of plays featuring either black plays, playwrights or theater companies.

- b. 1 f. 63 Allied Arts Players 1927
Program from the 1st season of the Allied Arts Players.
- b. 1 f. 64 Fourth Annual One Act Play Tournament 1944
Program from the tournament.
- b. 1 f. 65 *The House of Sham by Willis Richardson* 1973
Program for the Willis Richardson play.
- b. 1 f. 66 Howard Players 1915-1923
Programs from various productions.
- b. 1 f. 67 *In Abraham's Bosom by Paul Green*
Program for the production in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- b. 1 f. 68 Karamu Theatre 1929
Program for *The No 'Count Boy* by Paul Green.
- b. 1 f. 69 Krigwa 1927-1928, n.d.
Programs and a typescript on the history of Krigwa.
- b. 1 f. 70 Morgan College Dramatic Club 1935
- b. 1 f. 71 *Rachel by Angelina Grimke* 1916
- b. 1 f. 72 Shaw Junior H.S. 1931
Program for a production of *The Black Horseman* by Willis Richardson.

Series III: Scrapbooks 1925-1965 (2 volumes)

Scrapbooks document both the life and career of Willis Richardson as well as early black plays and playwrights. Included in the scrapbooks are newclippings, correspondence and programs all pertaining to black theater history of the early to mid 20th century.

- b. 2 Scrapbooks 1925-1965 (2 scrapbooks)
Included are programs and newspaper clippings about the Krigwa Players and the Little Negro Theatre. Of special note is a telegram from W.E.B. DuBois announcing Richardson's winning a play contest.