

**The New York Public Library  
Manuscripts And Archives Division**

**Masters - Davis  
Collection, 1928-1978**

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## SUMMARY

**Title:** Masters-Davis Collection, 1928-1978 (bulk dates 1928-1955)

**Size:** 2.11 linear ft. (8 archival boxes)

**Source:** Gift of Alice E. Davis Tibbetts, 1944 and 1982.

**Restrictions:** No photocopying of Edward C. Caswell's letters with color illustrations; photographs only.

**Historical statement:** The poet Edgar Lee Masters (1869-1950) is best known for his *Spoon River Anthology*. His other works include a biography of Abraham Lincoln entitled *Lincoln, the Man*, a book that created a storm of protest because of the unfavorable light that it cast upon Lincoln. During Masters' later years, he fell upon misfortune. In 1944, he was found starving and ill in the Hotel Chelsea in New York City. He was removed to a convalescent home in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, and was placed under the care of his second wife Ellen Coyne from whom he was separated. Masters died at the age of 81 and was buried in Petersburg, Illinois. Alice Elizabeth Davis (Mrs. Charles Tibbetts) was Master's secretary and close companion for many years.

**Description:** The papers, 1928-1978, consist mainly of letters from Masters to Alice Elizabeth Davis, 1928-1955. Noted correspondents to Masters or Davis are Edward C. Caswell (illustrator and traveler), August Derleth, Theodore Dreiser, John Dewey, H.L. Mencken and Norman Vincent Peale. The collection includes manuscripts of Masters' poetry, Davis's *Life With Edgar*, and a picture scrapbook of Davis's reminiscences of Masters, as well as ephemera, printed material and positive photoprints.

Special formats: Photoprints; a scrapbook.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950), poet and author, was born in Garnet, Kansas, on August 23, 1868, the son of Emma Dexter Masters and Hardin Wallace Masters. Masters grew up in Petersburg and Lewistown, Illinois. He initially chose the career of his father, Hardin, who was a lawyer. Edgar Lee Masters established himself successfully in association with his law partner Clarence Darrow. During this period, he divided time between his practice and writing poetry. The work that established Masters was *Spoon River Anthology*. This collection of related poems was inspired by a visit from his mother to Chicago. During a conversation with her, Masters asked where his childhood friends were. She purportedly told him that they were in their graves sleeping on the hill.

The poems which would later comprise *Spoon River Anthology* were first published under the pseudonym Webster Ford by William Marion Reedy, editor and publisher of *Reedy Mirror*, a literary magazine in St. Louis. Upon publication, the work drew the public's immediate interest. When the MacMillan Company published *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, Masters went from obscurity to world wide-fame. A successful lawyer at the time of the anthology's publication, Masters gradually abandoned this profession and turned exclusively to writing by 1923. He left the Midwest, his wife and three children, moved to Europe and finally settled in New York City's Hotel Chelsea. Masters divorced his wife Helen Jenkins, and many years later married Ellen Coyne.

During his long literary career, Masters published numerous poems and books. His first novel was *Mitch Miller*, the story of a boy, published in 1920. Two years later, Masters published a historic novel about one of his heroes, Stephen A. Douglas, entitled *Children of the Market Place*. Other poetry and novels followed. In 1931, his biography of Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln, the Man*, stirred controversy; his unvarnished and unsympathetic portrait of Lincoln drew widespread criticism. Despite his critics, Masters continued to receive public attention throughout his career. He did not live to see *Spoon River Anthology* turned into a successful Broadway play in 1963 starring Betty Garrett, Robert Elston and Joyce Van Patten. Masters may not have been pleased with the continued success of *Spoon River Anthology* because he did not consider it to be his best work. He counted *Domesday Book* (1920) as one of his favorite works. Masters' other poetical works include *Songs and Satires*, *The New Spoon River*, *Invisible Landscapes*, and *The Tide of Times*. His novels and biographical works include *The Tales of Chicago*, *Vachel Lindsay*, *Whitman*, *Mark Twain*, and *The Sangamon*.

Masters moved into the Hotel Chelsea in 1931. A landmark hotel known as a home for writers and artists, the Hotel Chelsea, located on West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City, became Masters' residence for the next thirteen years. There is little mention in the obituaries written after Masters' death, or in contemporary biographical sketches about his personal life there, especially regarding his relationship with Alice Davis (later Mrs. Charles Tibbetts). According to Davis' recollections (see: picture scrapbook) she met Masters during The Great Depression in the lobby of the Hotel Chelsea in 1936. She became his secretary, constant companion and confidante until the early 1940's. Although it is not clear what happened to Masters' fortune in the early 1940's, a friend found him malnourished and living in poverty at the Hotel Chelsea. Masters was first removed to Bellevue

Hospital. Later, the Authors League financed his removal to another hospital, and finally to a convalescent home in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania. His second wife, from whom he had been long separated, cared for him until his death.

On his 80th birthday, Masters gave an interview to the *New York Herald Tribune* that was to appear in its August 24, 1949 issue. Masters stated that if he could live his life over again he would have started writing sooner and would not have been a lawyer. He practiced law as a young man because of his father's wishes, while he wrote poetry on the side. The success of *Spoon River Anthology* gave him the financial stability to write full time. Masters died a year after that interview, and was buried in Petersburg, Illinois.

**Alice Elizabeth Davis** (Mrs. Charles Tibbetts [c1899-1988]) was Masters' secretary and lover for many years. She was a major influence in his life. They shared the fact that both were from the Midwest, Masters was from Illinois and Davis from Kansas. As his secretary and companion, Davis provided friendship, inspiration and moral support. Despite their long romance, the couple did not marry. In a letter written to Masters' son Hardin dated August 1, 1971, Davis revealed her feelings about her relationship to Masters. She remarked that the ten years she spent with Masters were some of the most productive of his life, and she understands that it was Masters' wife's desire to obliterate this information from the record of his life. When Masters was hospitalized in the nursing home after having been found living in poverty, Davis visited him. On her last visit she was accompanied by H.L. Mencken. Recognizing the fact that she was unable to care for him financially or legally, she did not return. (This may have also been due to the fact that Masters' wife returned to care for him.) In despair, Davis married a merchant sailor who turned out to be an alcoholic. Her second marriage to Charles Tibbetts proved to be successful. Although Davis was out of Masters' life, she saved many of the letters that he sent to her and donated them to The New York Public Library. Mrs. Tibbetts died in New York City on September 29, 1988.

**Note on Provenance:** The collection was donated to the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library in 1944 and 1982 by Alice Elizabeth Davis (Mrs. Charles Tibbetts). The two donations have been integrated into one collection.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection (1928-1978; bulk dates 1936-1955) of letters, writings, printed material and photographs, primarily documents the relationship between Edgar Lee Masters and Alice Elizabeth Davis. The **Masters-Davis Correspondence**, 1936-1944, chronicles their close relationship, particularly from the perspective of Masters. These letters date from their meeting in the lobby of the Hotel Chelsea during the Great Depression through the period of Masters' impoverishment during the 1940's. Although Masters lived until 1950, no other letters were passed between the two of them, due to changed personal circumstances of their lives. With few exceptions, the letters are from Masters to Davis. Since both parties lived in the Hotel Chelsea, many of the letters were written when one or the other was away on business or personal matters.

Articles written about Masters indicate that he could appear abrupt in manner or reserved in public. However, his letters to Davis reveal a side to his personality not often seen by others; the tone is poetic, the manner, light and playful. Often Masters wrote whole pages of poetry to Davis without any accompanying correspondence; other letters appear as if they were part of a diary. Masters occasionally signed his favorite nickname: "Lute Puckett." Several months after they met, in a letter dated September 20, 1936, Masters gave Davis the copyright of his "Anita" poems; Anita was one of his favorite pen names for her. Masters also enjoyed referring to Davis as a "precious hen" or "sweetest hen." Once in a while, Masters sketched pictures of a rooster chasing a hen. On Valentine's Day, Masters showered Davis with several Valentine cards declaring his love for her (signed in pseudonym). Only one of Davis' responses to these letters is in this collection.

From late 1943 to 1944, the period during which Masters' mental and physical health began to deteriorate, he continued to write to Davis. His letters were finally reduced to pencil notes in an almost illegible hand. Despite these dire conditions, his letters to her remained upbeat. In the one extant from Davis to Masters, dated February 4, 1944, she hints at the trouble in both of their lives. In her opening statements, she asks about his health, remarking that it has been two months "since you embarked upon your illness." Davis does not specify what the illness is. The tone of the letter is one of despair over the fact that Masters is no longer living at the Hotel Chelsea and that she is alone. She quickly shifts the subject to World War II and anguishes over the United States' involvement in the war. Throughout this four-page typewritten letter, Davis covers a number of topics, including local gossip and family matters, finally returning to Masters' state of health. This is a most interesting and revealing letter marking the breakup of their relationship.

The remainder of Masters' letters consists of correspondence with friends and colleagues; the most prominent correspondent is H.L. Mencken, a friend to both Masters and Davis. Masters' writings consist of a poetry scrapbook (1935-1936) and an assortment of miscellaneous poetry.

**Alice Elizabeth Davis'** one surviving letter to Masters discloses little about her relationship with Masters. Her **General Correspondence** is more revealing with regard to this aspect of her personal life as well as to her relationships with others. The bulk of the letters are incoming to Davis. These indicate that she had an extensive group of friends and colleagues separate from Masters. For example, the prominent illustrator and traveler Edward C. Caswell sent Davis close to a dozen

beautifully illustrated letters, an indication that they were good friends. Among the friends that Davis and Masters shared were Theodore Dreiser and H.L. Mencken. Mencken's letters (1942-1955) to Davis indicate that the two shared many sociable evenings together and that he gave her moral support during the years of Masters' declining health. A dozen interesting letters were sent by Dorothy Fitzgerald (Mrs. James Edward) in response to letters sent from Davis. (There is one surviving copy of a Davis letter to Fitzgerald in this series.) Fitzgerald's letters are not dated. However, they were evidently written shortly before and after Masters' death. One undated letter (c. 1949) was written shortly after Davis married her first husband; Fitzgerald's comments appear to be based on what Davis told her. In reply, Fitzgerald writes back, "Of course I don't expect you to make this marriage last, it does not sound like you in the least; but it sounds like what it needed to be a drug, a stop-gap, a bridge between one life and another..." In other letters, Fitzgerald reminisces about what Masters said about Davis. In an undated letter to Fitzgerald, Davis writes about Masters' awkward social skills with people and his uneasy and distant relationship with his children.

Another interesting side of Davis' personality is the relationship she developed with Masters' relatives, including his children. One of the most revealing letters is one written by Davis when she was 70 years old to Hardin Masters, Edgar Lee Masters' son. Davis wrote about the difficulties she faced after her breakup with his father. Other letters from Masters' relatives reveal a cordial relationship with her. Davis' relationship with Hardin appears to be particularly close; she corresponded with him sporadically from 1944 to 1978. Other relatives wrote as well, including Marcia Masters, Edgar Lee Masters' daughter. While this collection is highly reflective of Masters and Davis' relationship with one another, and to a certain extent their relationships with others, it sheds little light on Masters' relationship with his two wives, and provides very little information about his children. The same may also be said about Davis' feelings about Masters' wives and about her relationship with her own family and relatives.

The collection contains writings by Davis, including her manuscripts for *Evenings with Edgar*, (typed with handwritten annotations), "After Spoon River--What?" and "Scrutiny of a Port". A photograph album contains pictures of Davis, Masters and others with annotations. The balance of the material consists of an assortment of printed material chiefly pertaining to Masters, and photographs of Masters taken at various locations (see: Photoprints list).

## **SERIES DESCRIPTIONS**

The Masters-Davis Papers are contained in eight archival boxes and are arranged into eight series. I. Masters-Davis Correspondence; II. Edgar Lee Masters' General Correspondence; III. Masters' Writings; IV. Alice Elizabeth Davis' General Correspondence; V. Davis' Correspondence with Relatives of Edgar Lee Masters; VI. Davis' Writings; VII. Printed Material; VIII. Photoprints.

### **Series I. Masters-Davis Correspondence (Containers 1-3)**

Masters-Davis Correspondence, 1936-1944 (1 linear ft.), is chronological in its arrangement. Most of the letters are from Edgar Lee Masters to Alice Elizabeth Davis. Interspersed with poetry, the letters reflect Masters' love for Davis.

### **Series II. Edgar Lee Masters' General Correspondence (Container 3)**

Masters' General Correspondence, 1928-1943 (.2 linear ft.), is alphabetical in its arrangement. The letters are both incoming and outgoing to friends and relatives. H.L. Mencken is the most prominent correspondent.

### **Series III. Edgar Lee Masters' Writings (Container 4)**

Masters' Writings, 1925-1943 (.5 linear ft.), is arranged by group. The writings contain a poetry scrapbook and a assortment of poems, which are holograph and typed with annotations.

### **Series IV. Alice Elizabeth Davis' General Correspondence (Container 5)**

Davis' General Correspondence, 1936-1971 (.3 linear ft.), is alphabetical in its arrangement. The Correspondence is incoming and outgoing. Prominent correspondents include Edward C. Caswell, August Derleth, Theodore Dreiser, Dorothy Fitzgerald (Mrs. James Edward), Lillian Gish, H.L. Mencken, Dudley Nichols, Norman Vincent Peale and Jessie Stuart.

### **Series V. Alice Elizabeth Davis' Correspondence with the Relatives of Edgar Lee Masters (Container 5)**

The correspondence, 1943-1978 (.2 linear ft.), is alphabetical in its arrangement. The Correspondence is incoming and outgoing. Family correspondents include Gertrude Masters, Hardin Masters, Marcia Lee Masters and W.D. Masters.

### **Series VI. Alice Elizabeth Davis' Writings (Container 6-7)**

The Writings, 1942, n.d. (.8 linear ft.), are arranged by title. The Writings consists of the radio script, *The Sangamon*, by Masters, adapted by Davis; picture diary of Masters and Davis; "Evenings with Edgar"; "After Spoon River--What?," and "Scrutiny of a Port."



**Series VII. Printed Material (Container 8)**

The Printed Material, c1930's-1950 (.3 linear ft.), consists of newspaper clippings pertaining to Masters, magazine articles, ephemera and miscellaneous papers.

**Series VIII. Photoprints (Container 8, folders 12-14)**

The photoprints, 1935-1941 (.2 linear ft.) consist mainly of black and white snapshots of Masters and friends.

## MASTERS-DAVIS COLLECTION

### Container list

<b>Masters - Davis Correspondence</b>			
Box 1	f. 1	1936	Jan. - June
	f. 2		July
	f. 3		Aug. - Dec.
	f. 4	1937	Jan. - June
	f. 5		July - Aug.
	f. 6		Sept.- Nov.
	f. 7		Dec.
	f. 8	1938	Jan. - Mar.
	f. 9		Apr. - June
	f. 10		July - Sept.
	f. 11		Oct. - Nov.
	f. 12		Dec.
	f. 13	1939	Jan.
	f. 14		Feb.
	f. 15		Mar. - June
	f. 16		July - Oct.
	f. 17		Nov. - Dec.
Box 2	f. 1	1940	Jan. - Apr.
	f. 2		May
	f. 3		June - Aug.
	f. 4		Sept. - Oct.
	f. 5		Nov. - Dec.
	f. 6	1941	Jan. - Mar.
	f. 7		Apr. - June
	f. 8		July - Sept.
	f. 9		Oct. - Dec.
	f. 10	1942	Jan. - Mar.
	f. 11		Apr. - June
	f. 12		July
	f. 13		Aug. - Sept.
	f. 14		Oct.- Dec.

- Box 3 f. 1 1943 Jan. - Mar.  
 f. 2 Apr. - Dec.  
 f. 3 1944  
 f. 4 Assorted Greeting cards from Masters to Davis

**Edgar Lee Masters**

- f. 5-6 General Correspondence A-Z  
 f. 7 Correspondence with H.L. Mencken 1936-1943  
 f. 8 Masters, Edgar Lee. Legal documents.

Writings by Masters:

- Box 4 Poetry Scrapbook 1935-1936  
 "Pieces by Puckett." typescript.  
 "Love's Philosophy" typescript with corrections.  
 Assorted poems 1925-1943.

**Alice E. Davis**

- Box 5 f. 1 General Correspondence A-Dow  
 f. 2 Dreiser, Theodore  
 f. 3 F - G  
 f. 4 M (except Mencken)  
 f. 5-8 Mencken, H.L. 1942-1955  
 f. 9 Mencken (regarding)  
 f. 10 Nichols, Dudley  
 f. 11 N - Saunders  
 f. 12 Speyer, Leonora  
 f. 13 Stuart, Jessie - T  
 f. 14 W - Z

Correspondence to Davis from Masters' Relatives

- f. 15 Diller, Eugene - Masters, Dexter  
 f. 16 Masters, Gertrude  
 f. 17 Masters, Hardin  
 f. 18 Masters, Marcia - Masters, Wilbur

- Box 6 Greeting cards  
 Photo album with positive prints of Masters, Davis and others, with typewritten annotations.  
 Radio Script: *The Sangamon*, by Masters and adapted by Davis.

- Box 7                      Writings by Davis
- f. 1-10    "Evenings With Edgar"
  - f. 11      "After Spoon River--What?"
  - f. 12      "Scrutiny of a Port"

- Newspaper Clippings:
- Box 8
- f. 1        Masters (general) 1935-1949.
  - f. 2        Masters' biographies and obituaries.
  - f. 3        *Moroni* (play) reviews.
  - f. 4        *Spoon River* (play) Playbill and articles.
  - f. 5-6     Magazine articles
  - f. 7        Pamphlets - miscellaneous
  - f. 8-9     Ephemera
  - f.10-11   Miscellaneous papers
  - f.12-14   Positive photoprints 1935-1941

## PHOTOPRINTS IN THE MASTERS-DAVIS PAPERS

Box 8, Folders 12-14

- 10 Sept. 1935. Masters' visit to Palisades, New Jersey.
- 8 Apr. 1936. Masters seated in chair, Hotel Chelsea, Room 1010.
- 22 June 1936. Masters' visit to Walt Whitman's house (7).
- 18 Aug. 1936. Charles Coburn, Donna Earle, Masters and Mrs. Coburn at Schenectady.
- 19 Sept. 1936. Masters' visit to Carl Schurz Park (3).
- 23-25 Oct. 1936. Masters' visit to Princeton, New Jersey and Stacey Trent Hotel (includes two enlargements).
- 3 Apr. 1937. Masters' visit to Hoboken, New Jersey.
- 2 May 1937. Masters' visit to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens (7).
- 7 May 1937. Masters' visit with Theodore Dreiser and Harriet.
- 22 Aug. 1937. Masters' visit to Weston, Vermont.
1937. View of New York City from Masters' window.
- 28 June 1938. View of Prath Island.
- 22-29 June 1939. Masters and Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Mann, Old Cherry Plain, NY.
- 27-30 Aug. 1941. Masters with Dudley Nichols.
- 11 Oct. 1941. Masters and Percy Mackaye's visit to Ralph Waldo Emerson's home and grave (4).

Four unidentified Kodak color prints of a man and a house (faded).