



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

Guide to the

Egbert Ethelred Brown papers

1914-1956

Sc MG 87

Processed by Sule Greg Wilson.

Summary

Creator: Brown, Egbert Ethelred

Title: Egbert Ethelred Brown papers

Date: 1914-1956

Source: Gift of Mrs. Dorice Leslie, daughter of Rev. Brown, 1982. SCM82-3

Abstract: The collection consists of personal papers, material related to the Community Church of Harlem, and to the Jamaica Progressive League. Personal papers including certificates, sheet music with lyrics and melodies written by Brown, and an obituary and biography, 1914-1956; incoming letters showing Brown's numerous appeals for funds for his church, and other matters relating to his ministry, 1930s-1960s; Harlem Unitarian Church records consisting of by-laws, correspondence, marriage records, order of service records, prayer books, 1934-1955; and sermons, 1932-1955. Also, material related to the Jamaica Progressive League, a group that worked for the independence of Jamaica.

Preferred citation: Egbert Ethelred Brown papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Sule Greg Wilson; Machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Separated Materials:

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers EGBERT ETHELRED BROWN

Accession Number SCM 82-3

The above item(s) have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

Donor: Mrs. Dorice Leslie

*Date received:*February 22, 1982

*Date transferred:*February 23, 1982

span class="emph">Schomburg Library:/span>

THE AMBASSADOR, VOL. 2, #1

THE AMBASSADOR, VOL. 2, #2

Creator History

The Reverend Egbert Ethelred Brown was born in Falmouth, Jamaica, British West Indies, in 1875, the first of five children of James Alexander and Florence Adelaide Brown. While Brown was still a child, the family moved to Montego Bay, where Ethelred (he stopped using Egbert while still a youth) grew up. In 1894, at age 19, Ethelred placed third in an Island-wide civil service placement examination. In 1898, with a secure job, he married Ella Matilda Wallace, whom he had known since childhood. The following year he was promoted to first clerk of the treasury and transferred to Spanish Town.

In 1907, with a wife and four children, Brown was dismissed from the civil service. He saw this change of fortune, which he later termed both "tragic" and "providential," as a sign to change careers and enter the ministry. Making a "decision of conscience" based on exposure by an uncle and subsequent studies, Brown had chosen the Unitarian faith. Despite this inward belief, however, he continued to serve in Methodist churches as a lay preacher and musician. After his dismissal from his civil service job, Brown turned his back on the security of an African Methodist Episcopal church in favor of the more doctrinally compatible Unitarian church. He therefore wrote to the Meadville Theological School in Meadville, Pennsylvania, on the referral of Rev. George Badger, Secretary of the Fellowship Committee of the American Unitarian Association, requesting enrollment and ordination. Though accepted to enroll in the Fall of 1907, upon entering the United States Brown was immediately deported to Jamaica as a "contracted alien." His second attempt to return to the United States was stopped at the eleventh hour by his father, who took back the money he had given his son for the trip. Ethelred had to continue working as an assistant accountant for another year to pay for his passage to the United States. He finally arrived in the United States and began his studies in September 1910.

Ethelred Brown was ordained a Unitarian minister in 1912. He returned to his native island and began work towards establishing Unitarianism among blacks in Jamaica. He spent two years in Montego Bay (1912-14) and six (1914-20) in Kingston trying to make that vision come true, but financial and church problems forced the family to relocate to the United States in 1920.

Arriving in New York City in 1920, Brown founded the Harlem Community Church, organized "in honor of John Haynes Holmes, the only ministerial friend [in] those early days," and services were held at 149 West 136th Steet. In 1928 Brown changed the name of the church to the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church (A Temple and a Forum), in honor of the late orator and writer from the then-Dutch West Indies. Harrison, like Brown, was dedicated to his work to the exclusion (and detriment) of all else, and died in 1927 at age 44. The name of the church was again changed in 1937 to The Harlem Unitarian Church.

Financial problems plagued the Browns in the United States as in Jamaica. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association and the American Unitarian Association both sponsored him at different periods in his ministerial career. The American Association's (AUA) relationship with Brown was a stormy one.

They periodically withdrew financial support and censured him for solicitation of funds from other Unitarian congregations.

To generate income Brown took other, non-church related jobs, as his small congregations, in the United States and Jamaica, could never support him and his family. In Jamaica he had worked as an accountant. He was also organist and choirmaster for the Spanish Town Wesleyan Methodist Church, as well as organist for the Montego Bay Wesleyan Methodist Church. After his move to New York in 1920, Brown was forced to take a job as an elevator operator, a position he detested but held for nearly six years, ministering on alternate Sundays in the rented chapel of the Harlem Young Women's Christian Association. He then worked sporadically as a speaker for the Socialist Party in America for three years. After a period on public relief, Brown was hired as office secretary of "The World Tomorrow," a magazine which represented the views of "socialist and pacifist religionists and liberals." John Haynes Holmes, A. J. Muste and Paul H. Douglas contributed to the magazine. Brown maintained this position until "The World Tomorrow" merged with "The Christian Century" in 1934. After another period of destitution, Brown finally received an appropriation from the AUA for nearly two years. And, at age 65 he became eligible for a pension, which he received until his death.

Brown was also active in the political affairs of his community. He was a founder and the first president of the Montego Bay Literary and Debating Society in Jamaica, and helped organize the Negro Progressive Association and the Liberal Association in Kingston, both of which were geared toward civil and economic rights for blacks. In 1919 the *Journal of Negro History* published Brown's "Labor Conditions in Jamaica Prior to 1917," in which Brown decried the cruel hours and low wages of black workers on his native island.

After emigrating to New York City, Brown continued his community activities. In the founding congregation of the Harlem Community Church were the noted West Indian activists W. A. Domingo, Frank Crosswaith, Grace P. Campbell and Richard B. Moore. These 'black socialists' and literary figures exemplified the type of thinkers Brown wanted for his church: "A Forum and a Temple." Here heated discussions were chaired and encouraged by Brown. With Domingo and others he founded the Jamaica Progressive League, an organization dedicated to maintaining political ties with their island of origin. Additionally, Brown was chairman of the British Jamaican Benevolent Association and vice-president of the Federation of Jamaican Organizations.

In 1936 Brown became first Secretary of the Jamaica Progressive League and, in 1938 he represented the League before the West Indies Royal Commission, which convened in Jamaica to review the feasibility of independence for the island nation. In 1952, Norman Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica, invited Brown "home" as a guest of the People's National Party, of which Brown was chief fundraiser in the United States.

These outside interests were very much a part of Brown's ministry. The format of the services of the Harlem Unitarian /Hubert Harrison Memorial Church often consisted of forums on the topics of the times, sometimes with guest speakers. Discussion was invited even from "rival" organizations such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.), with which Brown differed after he emigrated to the United States. In Jamaica, Brown had been a featured speaker in a 1915 U.N.I.A. forum. In New York, Brown also served as guest speaker at Unitarian churches and those of other denominations, such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Brown's drive and spirit enabled him to keep his church going for over fifty years, but apparently his personal life bore the brunt of his financial and organizational woes. His wife suffered mental collapse; one son, an alcoholic, was eventually committed to an asylum; another son committed suicide, his body discovered by Brown himself.

Egbert Ethelred Brown maintained a forum for debate and a social and spiritual gathering place for Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans for more than thirty years; through the Harlem Renaissance, the Depression, World War II and the early 1950's. Among his accomplishments, he endorsed the politicization of his community and interdenominational harmony.

Scope and Content Note

The Egbert Ethelred Brown Papers (1914-1956) reflect Brown's intense religious viewpoint, as well as his self-analytical nature. His autobiographical writings and sermons depict the social concerns of a religion with traditionally few African American adherents in a time of intellectual and political upheaval in the United States.

The Brown Papers consist of three series: Personal Papers, the Harlem Unitarian/Hubert Harrison Memorial Church Records, and the Jamaica Progressive League.

Arrangement: Papers organized into three series: I Personal Papers; II Harlem Unitarian/Hubert Memorial Church Records; and III Jamaica Progressive League

Key Terms

Subjects

African American clergy
African American Unitarian Universalists
African Americans -- Religion
Church music
Fund raising
Nationalism -- Jamaica
Religious institutions -- New York (State) -- New York
Unitarians -- New York (State) -- New York

Geographic Names

Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Religious life and customs
Jamaica -- Politics and government -- To 1962

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Marriage records
Prayer books
Sermons
Sheet music

Names

Brown, Egbert Ethelred
Harlem Unitarian Church (New York, N.Y.)
Jamaica Progressive League

Container List

Personal Papers 1914-1956

consist of five folders: Personal Papers, which include a letter to Brown from the Liberal Association upon the occasion of his departure for the United States, obituaries, articles about Brown and certificates; Sheet Music with lyrics and melodies by Brown, both church and Jamaica-related; Writings by Brown not specifically related to the Jamaica Progressive League or the church includes his "Fifteen Years in the Unitarian Ministry;" Brown's Scrapbook, which contains poetry, quotes and clippings of interest to and about Brown; Miscellaneous, including Socialist and Unitarian pamphlets, and a scrapbook of clippings.

- b. 1 f. 1 Personal Papers
- b. 1 f. 2 Sheet Music
- b. 1 f. 3 Writings By Brown
- b. 1 f. 4 Scrapbook
- b. 1 f. 5 Miscellaneous
- b. 1 f. 6 Morrison-Reed, Mark - Chapter From Black Pioneers In A White Denomination 1980

Harlem Unitarian/Hubert Harrison Memorial Church Records 1926-1956):

Three folders of correspondence (1930-1956), all in-coming, document Brown's numerous appeals for funds for his church, and include letters from Langston Hughes, T.J. Sellers, Frank Crosswaith, Adlai Stevenson, John Haynes Holmes and others regarding speaking engagements or writings; responses to Brown's queries to the American Unitarian Association and letters from other religious organizations and guest speakers at the Hubert Harrison Memorial Church; letters in reply to Brown's charges of racism in the *New York Times* and the New York City school system. Church records include Church By-Laws, Marriage Records, program announcements and Prayerbooks. In addition there are three boxes of Sermons (1929-1947, n.d.) written by Brown, arranged alphabetically by title. The sermons cover a variety of topics and appear to span Brown's ministerial career in the United States. Among the sermons in the collection are: "Jesus Was a Unitarian;" "God Was Tired of Him (Hitler);" "Marriage;" and "Making Religion More Satisfying."

- b. 1 f. 6 By-Laws
- b. 1 f. 7 Prayerbooks And Marriage Records
- b. 1 f. 8 Correspondence 1930-1939
- b. 1 f. 9 Correspondence 1941-1949
- b. 1 f. 10 Correspondence 1950-1956
- b. 2 Sermons
- b. 2 f. 1-11 A-M
- b. 3 f. 1-8 N-W
- b. 4 f. 1 Notebooks-Sermons 1929-January 1935
- b. 4 f. 2 Notebooks-Sermons December 1934-April 1935
- b. 4 f. 3 Notebooks-Sermons November 1935-October 1937, 1947
- b. 4 f. 4 Sermons--Fragments
- b. 4 f. 5 Sermons, Speeches By R.C. Bailey
- b. 4 f. 6 Unitarianism: Its Origins & History

Jamaica Progressive League Papers 1938-1964

consist of a memorandum presented to the West Indies Royal Commission by the Jamaica Progressive League, meeting announcements, letters to Brown from Norman Manley regarding the 1952 trip to Jamaica, copies of Brown's articles in "The Ambassador" describing his trip and the League's activities in New York, a letter of condolence at Brown's passing, and a souvenir program from the League's second anniversary celebration of Jamaican independence.