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**BLACK PANTHER PARTY  
HARLEM BRANCH  
COLLECTION**

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Schomburg Center for Research  
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515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
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BLACK PANTHER PARTY. HARLEM BRANCH COLLECTION, 1970, n.d.  
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### Historical Note

The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California on October 15, 1966 by Huey Percy Newton and Bobby George Seale. Originally called the "Black Panther Party for Self Defense," the name was abbreviated because Newton wanted the party to be recognized as a political organization and not merely a paramilitary group, or an organization of body guards. Their symbol, the leaping black panther, which later became identified with black militancy, had originally been used in 1965 by Alabama's Lowndes County Freedom Party.

Huey Newton, the Party's Minister of Defense, was born in Louisiana in 1942; when he was a year old, his family moved to California. Although he graduated from high school, he claimed that he became literate by "self determination," and attended Merritt Junior College. Bobby Seale, the party's Chairman, was a musician, carpenter, journeyman sheet metal mechanic and a mechanical draftsman, and was born in Dallas, Texas in 1936. He moved with his family to California, and graduated from Oakland High School after a stint in the Air Force.

Newton and Seale met at Merritt College and worked together to initiate courses in black history and lay the groundwork for the hiring of more black instructors. They also worked at the North Oakland Poverty Center and joined the Afro-American Association, a black nationalist group at Merritt, early in 1965. They left within a year, dissatisfied with the group's emphasis on cultural nationalism which made no distinction between racist whites and non-racists whites; and that a black man cannot be the enemy of black people. Besides questioning the validity of these beliefs, Newton and Seale were also disturbed by the fact that the group mainly met and talked and did nothing concrete to end oppression in the black ghetto. Shortly thereafter, they began working in the black community, knocking on doors and asking residents of Oakland's ghetto what they needed and wanted. From the responses they received, Newton and Seale developed the Black Panther Party's ten-point program - "What We Want, What We Believe" - which would become the basis for all Panther actions.

The tenets of the ten-point program included a demand for: freedom, full employment, the end of robbery by capitalism in the black community, decent housing, exemption of all black men from military service, an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people, and freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails. The Party also advocated that all black people brought to trial be tried by a jury of their peers or people from black communities, and a general program demanding land, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. The ten-point program also stipulated as one of its major political objectives, a United Nations supervised



plebiscite to be held throughout the black "colony" in the U.S. in which only black "colonial" subjects would be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.

When the Party put their ten-point program into action they began with point 7, the end of police brutality and murder of black people. Completely within the law, carrying both guns and lawbooks, the Party established a system of armed patrol cars trailing police cars through the slums of Oakland. Whenever black men or women were stopped by police, armed Panthers would be on the scene, making sure that their constitutional rights were not violated.

A month later, the first Black Panther Party headquarters opened in Oakland on January 1, 1967. In their first venture outside of Oakland, an armed group of Panthers marched into the San Francisco airport to provide an escort for Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, on her appearance at Black House in that city. Another example of how the Panthers operated in this early phase was in the action taken around the death of Denzil Dowell in April 1967. Dowell, a black youth living in North Richmond, California, a city a few miles from Oakland, had been shot and killed by the police, whose official account of the slaying was contradicted by dozens of black eyewitnesses. The Dowell family called in the Panthers to investigate, and the Party decided to hold a street-corner rally in the neighborhood to expose the facts of the slaying and the political importance of self-defense. The Panthers, assuming the police would try to stop the rally, decided to demonstrate their point on the spot and set up armed guards around the rally site. Hundreds of black people turned out, many carrying their own weapons. The police who came to stop the rally quickly turned away. Several Panthers, including Huey Newton, addressed the crowd, explaining the Party's program. That day, hundreds signed up to work with the Party.

With about forty active members, the Black Panther Party remained a local operation in the Oakland-San Francisco area. While they received attention for their self-defense activities in 1967, they were also involved in a variety of other work. The Party protested rent evictions, informed welfare recipients of their legal rights, taught classes in black history, and demanded and won school traffic lights. The installation of a street light on a corner where several black children had been killed coming home from school was an important event in the Party's early history.

May 2, 1967 marked a turning point for the organization. A floor discussion was scheduled in the Assembly that day on an Oakland Assemblyman's bill to restrict the carrying of loaded weapons within city limits. Huey Newton sent a delegation of thirty armed Panthers to the state capitol in Sacramento, led by Seale. Upon their arrival Seale read Newton's "executive mandate" on the



capitol steps. Seale and twenty-five other Panthers were arrested and subsequently served a six-month prison sentence. Despite their efforts, the gun restrictions were passed by the California Legislature, thus putting a permanent curb on the Panther's public gun displays and armed patrols in northern California. This incident however, resulted in national publicity for the Panthers, which was followed by the addition of two well known black militants to the team: Stokely Carmichael and [Leroy] Eldridge Cleaver. In May 1967, Carmichael publicly pledged support for the Panthers. Newton "drafted" the former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman, who had received a great deal of publicity as a result of his militant cross-country speaking tours, as the Party's first and only Prime Minister, invested with the rank of field marshall for the eastern part of the United States.

Although Eldridge Cleaver's formal association with the Panthers was not immediately made public, after joining the Party he became Minister of Information. Later, the publication of his widely acclaimed book Soul on Ice, gave the Party national publicity. In May 1967 - with Cleaver serving as editor - the first issue of The Black Panther, a tabloid type newspaper was sold on the streets by the Oakland Panthers. Described in the masthead as the "Black Community News Service," it was issued once or twice a month until April 1969, when a weekly publication schedule was established. It was Cleaver who devised the pose Newton assumed for a photograph which appeared in the Panther newspaper and was thereafter widely circulated in poster form, showing Newton seated in a wicker chair with a shotgun in one hand and a spear in the other. Cleaver also contributed his talents on the Panther lecture circuit, and when both Newton and Seale were in jail later that year, he took over supervision of the Party. Another national officer of the Party was H. Rap Brown, who was Minister of Justice. In August 1970, Huey Newton assumed an additional title "Supreme Commander" of the Black Panther Party.

In October 1967, the course of the party changed, when Oakland police stopped a vehicle in which Huey Newton was riding. A shootout ensued, a policeman was killed, another officer wounded, and Newton was taken to the San Quentin State Prison hospital, with four bullet wounds in his stomach. Charged with murder and kidnapping, Newton immediately proclaimed his innocence, and the Black Panther Party mobilized its forces for a "Free Huey" campaign. With its two top officers in jail, the Panther party was piloted onto its new course by Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver and Chief-of-Staff David Hilliard. They were credited with building supportive alliances with black nationalist and white radical organizations. The most successful of the coalitions established after the jailing of Newton was with the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), an emerging political force, first in California and then across the country,



consisting mainly of a coalition of white left-liberals and radicals organized as a third party electoral alternative in opposition to the war in Vietnam. The PFP allowed the Panthers to use their organizational facilities in the Newton defense campaign. Joint rallies and speaking tours, use of printing equipment and sound trucks, and the availability of numerous young militants, black and white, to write, print, and distribute thousands of buttons, posters, leaflets, and other literature helped to publicize the Newton case and the Panther program, not only nationally but also abroad. Additionally, nationwide publicity for the Panther cause was assured later in 1968 when Cleaver became a Peace and Freedom Party candidate for President of the United States.

The "Free Huey" activity spanned most of 1968. In September of that year, Newton was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to two to fifteen years in prison. In May, 1970 the California Court of Appeals reversed the conviction, and in July, Newton was released from prison pending a new trial.

#### Growth from a local operation to a national organization

By 1969, the Panthers were nationally known, and within a few months branches had been established in Los Angeles, Tennessee, Georgia, New York and Detroit. Black youth around the country were attracted to the Panther Party and its programs. In the space of only two years, the Black Panther Party grew from a local operation in Oakland to an organization of 1,500 to 2,000 members scattered in twenty-five chapters across the nation, with many additional thousands of supporters in major urban areas. Almost two years later, the party announced establishment of an "international section" headquartered in Algeria.

The Black Panther Party at one time or another, from its founding in October 1966 to early 1971, had official chapters with the same name or affiliated organizations under other names in at least 61 cities in 26 states and the District of Columbia. This activity was conducted under the supervision of 13 Black Panther Party chapters and five branches, twenty National Committees to Combat Fascism (NCCF), and two community information centers. NCCF's were Panther controlled/multi-racial local committees, sometimes referred to as "organizing bureaus," aimed at maintaining a link between black militants and whites willing to work on the Panthers' behalf. The admission of whites to NCCF membership also gave the Party a broader base for fundraising and propaganda purposes. Most of the chapters and branches functioned in large urban centers outside of the South. The rise and decline of local Panther organizations varied from city to city and the success of a chapter depended, to some extent, upon the availability of qualified leadership. After the winter of 1968-69 the trend veered away from "mass" membership and toward



small hard-core Panther chapters with "mass" support relegated to National Committees to Combat Fascism created after July 1969.

Around April 1968, a central committee, consisting of the national leaders, was formed to make policy decisions for a rapidly growing organization. Prior to that time, all policy matters were democratically decided upon by a vote of the Panther membership, which did not exceed fifty in the headquarters area, and even fewer hard-core members. When the central committee was formed, a central staff was also created to implement decisions of the committee. Chief-of-Staff David Hilliard, who had been brought into the Party by Newton in the spring of 1967, with the rank of captain, supervised the headquarters staff. In addition to the national leaders previously mentioned, also included were ministers of education, finance, culture, religion, a deputy-minister of information, an assistant chief-of-staff and a communications secretary.

During the spring of 1968 Bobby Seale and David Hilliard began "chartering" the groups in various cities of the United States that were calling themselves Black Panthers. The charter was a statement that national headquarters recognized a group as one of its official chapters, and was granted only to groups that agreed to meet qualifications established by the national office. Persons who desired to establish a new chapter were required to attend a six week training program which included political education classes, and instruction on administrative and reporting procedures of chapters' activities. Individuals approved for Panther leadership assumed the rank of deputy chairman, defense captain, or deputy defense minister. All chapter heads were directly responsible to national headquarters and required to submit weekly and monthly reports concerning their chapters' activities and financial status.

In January 1969, a complete reorganization of the Party structure from the national to the local chapter level occurred. A three month moratorium was put on the acceptance of new members, and a purge was launched against party members who had broken discipline. Sixteen new rules were added to the original ten governing party members' behaviour which were aimed principally at abuses in the areas of narcotics, alcohol, gun handling, and petty crime, and promised expulsion to any member on hard drugs. Most of the sixteen new rules dealt with administrative measures to insure activity of chapter members on paper sales and Panther community projects. Other significant additions were instructions to all Panthers to "learn to operate and service weapons correctly" and to have "first aid or medical cadres." The new rules stressed "political education" and required Panthers in leadership positions to "read no less than two hours per day to keep abreast of the changing political situation." Besides the twenty-six rules, Panther members continued to be controlled by the Party's "8 Points of Attention" and "3 Main Rules of



Discipline" taken from Mao's "little red book" and updated.

Sale of the Black Panther newspaper was one of the main sources of revenue for the organization. At a cost of twenty-five cents, national headquarters received fifty percent of all sales, with five cents from each sale sometimes going to the individual member making the sales as an incentive to meet national and local quotas. Of the national office's share, after production and shipping costs were subtracted, about five cents profit was realized. It was estimated that 140,000 copies of the paper were circulated in the United States weekly in 1970. Fees from speechmaking, donations or contributions were the other main sources of income.

Seeking to solve critical community problems, the Panthers adopted a "serve the people" program. In 1970, community centers or community information centers were added to the organizational structure of the Panther Party at the local level. The community programs, often directed and staffed by female members, included free breakfast for school children; free medical care; liberation schools; free transportation to visit relatives in prison and for senior citizens; free shoes and clothing; student action committees; political education classes for adults; petition campaigns for community control of the police; voter registration assistance; and legal aid.

Nineteen seventy-one brought the first signs of serious internal strife in the Black Panther Party. By March 1971, the dissension led to an open break between two of the most prominent Panthers, the party's founder and Minister of Defense, Newton, and Minister of Information-in-exile, Cleaver. In November 1969, Cleaver, along with his wife Kathleen, national communications secretary, had fled to Cuba and then Algeria to avoid a prison sentence. The Cleaver faction called for party emphasis on underground confrontational activity, while the bulk of the party under Newton, Seale and Hilliard's leadership appeared to prefer legal forms of activity such as community service programs, spoken and printed propaganda, rallies and conventions.

In addition to internal problems, external forces such as intense undercover activity by the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program Against Domestic Dissent), local law enforcement actions (in 1969 alone, three hundred and eighty-four Panthers were arrested on a variety of charges), and excessive media coverage, led to the decline of the Black Panthers. It should also be noted that much of the internal dissension mentioned above was traced to the FBI's COINTELPRO activities once the documentation of this program surfaced during the 1975 hearings of the United States Senate Committee on Terrorism in the United States (Church Committee). With many of its leaders jailed, exiled, expelled, or dead, a small hard-core group of Panthers, based mainly in the Oakland, California area remained active in



politics (in 1973 Bobby Seale made an almost-successful bid for the mayorship of Oakland and in 1977 the Panthers helped to elect the city's first black mayor, (Lionel Wilson) and community service programs as late as 1981.

#### New York Chapter - Harlem Branch

Although most Black Panther Party chapters and branches were formed after January 1968, there is evidence of BPP activity in Harlem as early as the fall of 1966. Located at Seventh Avenue and 141st Street, one of the Harlem Branch's first acts was a call for a September 12th shutdown of Harlem schools, and demands for two high schools in Central Harlem, a community college, African languages and arts and sciences classes in elementary and junior high schools, and the hiring of more black superintendents, assistant superintendents and principals.

The Harlem Branch operated under a forty-seven article constitution, which spelled out in detail all rules and policies governing membership, organizational structure and Party principles. The branch was made up of three basic party organizations: the Party Congress which included the total active membership; the Executive Committee which included the chairman, executive director, executive treasurer, executive secretary, the editor of the Party organ; and the Party Directors who were responsible for political, organizational and community relations, community action, housing, educational, economic, cultural and youth oriented matters. The Party leadership core came from the Executive Committee and the Party Directors.

The Harlem BPP also established a youth section called the Black Panther Athletic Club and, like most branches, organized a free breakfast program for school children similar to the one on the West Coast. A sickle cell anemia screening center was also opened as was a health clinic that was located in the Bronx. The health clinic provided medical and dental services to the community at a reduced fee. In conjunction with the Brooklyn, Bronx, Mt. Vernon and Corona branches, the Harlem BPP issued a multi-page newsletter or bulletin called the *People's Community News*. Articles were contributed by members from all the aforementioned branches concerning activities and events in their areas. Included were descriptions of new programs, police actions and arrests, world news, letters from interested observers of Panther activities, announcements of locations for free health care and free breakfast programs, upcoming Panther events, messages from national leaders and photographs.

In addition to the Harlem BPP Branch, whose offices were considered to be the central offices for the entire State, there were branches in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Mt. Vernon, Corona-East Elmhurst, Staten Island and Jamaica. The Party also operated in



White Plains, Peekskill, and Albany. The Ministry for Information for the east coast was located on Boston Road in the Bronx; a community center operated in Mt. Vernon, and east coast distribution for packaging and preparing the Panther newspaper was located in Jamaica, N.Y.

Leaders for New York State included field secretary Dhoruba bin Wahad (Richard Moore); Zayd-Malik Shakur (James Coston), Minister of Information/area captain; and David Brothers, State chairman as well as a captain for the Brooklyn BPP. Joudon Ford was the captain for New York City and Minister of Defense for Brooklyn BPP, and the Harlem BPP Branch heads included Deputy Minister of Defense Lumumba Shakur; Rashid al Fatal, section leader; Al Carroll, captain of defense; and Beth Mitchell, Minister of Information/Communications Secretary.

Although New York was one of the BPP's stronger chapters, and was at one time put in charge of the Philadelphia Branch, it had one of the highest number of expulsions during the 1969 national purge and reorganization. Further membership reductions came about when the Harlem Branch's leadership, also known as the New York Panther 21, were arrested on charges of planning to dynamite and bomb New York City department stores. Some of the Panther 21 were released before trial; those remaining became known as the Panther 13, and were acquitted of all charges against them in May 1971.

During the jailing of the New York Panthers, further dissension erupted between the national leadership and the east coast Panthers which hastened the demise of the New York Panther organization. Two of the defendants, who were out on bail, Dhoruba bin Wahad (Richard Moore) and Michael "Cetewayo" Tabor had fled to Algeria, further angering national leadership. New York Panthers told the New York Times that Oakland headquarters paid more attention to the legal defense of national officers than to New York members who had been in jail since the spring of 1969. Oakland was accused of being angry about its inability to "control" the New York Chapter. Differing ideological views brought about the expulsion of first the Panther 13, and then the entire New York Chapter. In retaliation, the New York Chapter similarly "expelled" Huey Newton and David Hilliard and announced that the group was setting up a new national headquarters of the Panther Party in New York City and would publish its own newspaper. The newspaper Right On was published beginning in March 1971 by the East Coast Black Panther Party. Despite the attempt



**Scope and Content**

The Black Panther Party, Harlem Branch Collection, 1970, nd. consists of the personal files and papers of **Cheryl Foster**, the School and Housing Coordinator of the Harlem Branch. The collection has been organized into two series, **NATIONAL OFFICE** and **NEW YORK CHAPTER**.

The **NATIONAL OFFICE, 1970, n.d., (5 folders)** series contains a copy of the Ten Point Platform and program; rules and regulations for members; and a list of chapters, branches, community centers and National Committees to Combat Fascism (NCCF).

The **NEW YORK CHAPTER, 1970, n.d., (9 folders)** series contains **Cheryl Foster's** (6 folders) notebooks and writings documenting her work as School and Housing Coordinator for the Harlem branch, and printed matter from the New York New Jersey and Connecticut chapters, including a copy of the *People's Community News*. Of particular interest are **Foster's** notebooks which contain schedules of her daily and hourly activities, field work notes, minutes of meetings, and her reports to the National Central Committee ministers of housing and education. There is also information on the branch's work with the students and parents of George Washington High School, and the national student strike of May 1970, including copies of the newsletter put out by the National Strike Information Center.

Several of **Ms Foster's** personal documents have been restricted at the request of the donor, until 2028.

**Provenance**  
SCM78-18.

Related Collections: Black Panther Party. FBI File.

Processed by Paula Williams; Finding aid prepared by Berlena Robinson, 1997

Container List

Box            Folder

1		NATIONAL OFFICE
	1	Black Panther Party Committee/History, [1970], n.d.
	2	Constitution/Structure, n.d.
	3	Ten Point Platform, [1966]
	4	Rules and Regulations for Members, n.d.
	5	List of Chapters and Branches, [1970]
	6	Articles by Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, 1969, n.d.
		NEW YORK CHAPTER
	7	Constitution/Application, n.d.
	8	Harlem School Strike, 1966
	9	Printed Material, [1966]
	10	George Washington High School Controversy, 1970 Cheryl Foster, School and Housing Coordinator
	11	Memoranda, 1970
	12	Notebooks, March 1970
	13	Writings, n.d.
	14	Notes - Police Incident and Accident Victim, 1970
	15	"Panther 21 Trial News," 1970,
	16	Restricted
	17	Restricted
	18	Restricted
		Newsletters
	19	New York and New Jersey Chapters, 1970
	20	New Haven, Connecticut Chapter, 1970
	21	National School Strike, May 1970
	22	National Strike Information Center Newsletter, 1970



**SEPARATION RECORD**

The following items were removed from:

**Name of Collection/Papers** Black Panther Party. Harlem Branch Collection

**Accession Number** SCM78-18

**Donor:** Anonymous

**Gift** X **Purchase** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date received:** 1978

**Date transferred:** 1978

The item(s) listed below 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.

**Schomburg Library:**

Kim Il Sung. New World Liberation Front, 1970

Lockwood, Lee. Conversation with Eldridge Cleaver, 1970

Iceberg Slim. Trick Baby, 1969

Iceberg Slim. Pimp, 1969

**Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:**

One framed photograph of black man holding Black Panther newspaper.