



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

Guide to the

Errold D. Collymore papers

1928 - 1999 [bulk 1929 - 1971]

Sc MG 888

Processed by Edwina Ashie-Nikoi.

Summary

Creator: Collymore, Errold, 1892-1972

Title: Errold D. Collymore papers

Date: 1928 - 1999 [bulk 1929 - 1971]

Size: 4.8 linear feet (13 archival boxes)

Source: Gift of James Collymore.

Abstract: Born in Barbados, Errold Collymore immigrated to the United States in 1912 and graduated from Howard University's dental school eleven years later. His subsequent struggle to rent an office in White Plains, New York, compelled him into a life of civil rights activism which saw him organize a local NAACP chapter and become chairman of Westchester County's United Colored Republican Clubs. He was also involved with the YMCA and served on a number of committees concerned with housing equality and standards for Westchester County's black residents. Focusing on equality in the religious realm as well, Collymore and his family integrated the American Unitarian Association's White Plains Community Church when they joined its congregation in 1927. Correspondence, reports, speeches, minutes, notes, clippings, and other material document Collymore's activities at the vanguard of civil rights in Westchester County, New York. There are files for all of the major organizations with which Collymore was associated and held office, including the NAACP (White Plains Branch) and the nation-wide anti-lynching campaign; the Colored Republicans Committee with information on Black Republican activities and politics in Westchester County; the YMCA-White Plains; and American Unitarian Association (which he and his family integrated in 1927 when they joined the White Plains congregation). Correspondence and miscellaneous documents provide a glimpse into his personal and professional lives.

Preferred citation: [Item], Errold D. Collymore papers, Sc MG 888, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Edwina Ashie-Nikoi.

Separated Materials:

Transferred to Photographs and Prints Division: one folder of photographs of Errold and Magdalene Collymore, their family, and friends

Transferred to Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division: one audio tape of Errold Collymore talking to Junior Youth Group at the White Plains Community Church, 1964

Transferred to Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division: twenty-five pamphlets, newsletters, and magazines

Creator History

Errold Duncan St. George Collymore was born in the Caribbean nation of Barbados in 1892, one of five children born to Walter O. A. M. Collymore Sr. and Louisa St. Clair Peer Collymore. Collymore immigrated to Panama, joining the many thousands of laborers from the Caribbean working on the Panama Canal. By 1912, he had made enough money to migrate to the United States. To fast track his United States citizenship, Collymore served in World War I, where his knowledge of Morse code and skills as a radio operator proved useful. Collymore graduated from Howard University's dental school in 1923. His subsequent struggle to rent an office in White Plains, New York, compelled him into a life of activism. To force the issue of housing inequality, he purchased a house in an all-white neighborhood. In response, a seven-foot cross was burned on his lawn; 500 people protested the purchase at a neighborhood meeting; local newspapers made it quite clear that Collymore was not welcome; and he was offered a large sum to re-sell and move out of the community. He refused. Described as a "virtual civic hurricane" by one news report and "the fighting dentist" by another, Collymore determinedly pursued a civil rights agenda in his chosen community. His activism was propelled by the perspective that while he "did not have any academic degrees in social work... [he] knew where the needs were" (letter to A. W. Taiano, April 1, 1971; filed in "Personal Correspondence"). In 1935, five years after he moved into White Plains, he organized a local chapter of the NAACP and served as its president for several terms. Collymore was also involved in the formation of the United Colored Republican Clubs, established with the aim of electing blacks to public office or getting them into city and county jobs. Collymore also served as chairman of this committee. With time, Collymore would add to his many hard-won victories the desegregation of White Plains's police force, movie theaters, public swimming pools, and schools, as well as the attainment of equal pay for black garbage men and the hiring of the first black nurses at what is now the Westchester Medical Center. Focused on equality in the religious realm as well, Collymore and his family integrated the White Plains Community Church when they joined its congregation in 1927. Collymore married Johnnie Nazarene Ewing in 1932. They had two children, Cynthia Rene (born 1934) and Errold Duncan, Jr. (born 1938). A year after Ewing's death in 1943, Collymore married Magdalene Lewis with whom he had another son, James Lewis, in 1953. Magdalene Lewis Collymore was an amateur actress and member of the Paul Robeson Players of Tarrytown who appeared in a number of plays in local Westchester playhouses. She played the lead, Nora, in a rendition of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and appeared in a series of dramas on WNYC dedicated to the "heroic role of the Negro in American history," which depicted such historical figures as Ira Aldridge, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Toussaint Louverture, Harriet Tubman, and Nat Turner. Later, she took up dancing, studying Middle Eastern and hula dance, and performed with the Newman Folk Dance Performing Group of Lehman College. Having learned clock repair from a friend, Philip Merriman Jenkins, a master clock repairer, she served as a local chapter president for the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. She was also involved with Crafts By Our Elders, Inc., a non-profit that highlighted and promoted arts and crafts created by Westchester County seniors. In early 1971, Errold Collymore suffered a heart attack which necessitated a one-month hospital stay to recover. Acceding to the advice of his physician, he retired from his dental practice. He died the following year of stomach cancer; he was 79 years old. In 2007, Magdalene Lewis Collymore passed

away, also succumbing to stomach cancer.

Scope and Content Note

This collection includes correspondence, reports, speeches, minutes, notes, clippings, and other material documenting Collymore's activities at the vanguard of civil rights in Westchester County, New York. There are files for all of the major organizations with which Collymore was associated and held office, including the NAACP (White Plains Branch) and the nation-wide anti-lynching campaign; the Colored Republicans Committee with information on Black Republican activities and politics in Westchester County; the YMCA-White Plains; and American Unitarian Association (which he and his family integrated in 1927 when they joined the White Plains congregation). Correspondence and miscellaneous documents provide a glimpse into his personal and professional lives.

Arrangement: Six series: I. Personal; II. Correspondence; III. Community Activism; IV. Clippings; V. Magdalene L. Collymore; VI. Philip M. Jenkins

Key Terms

Subjects

African American dentists
African American theater
African American theater -- New York (State) -- New York
African Americans -- Intellectual life
African Americans -- Political activity
African Americans in dentistry
African Americans in the performing arts
Amateur theater
Black author
Caribbean Americans
Civil rights
Emigration and immigration
Families, Black
Heads of state -- Caribbean Area
World War, 1939-1945 -- Participation, African American

Geographic Names

Barbados -- Social life and customs

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Manuscripts
Radio scripts
Theater programs

Names

Collymore, Cynthia
Collymore, Errold Duncan
Collymore, Errold Duncan Jr.
Collymore, Errold, 1892-1972
Collymore, James
Collymore, Johnnie Nazarene Ewing

Collymore, Magdalene Lewis
Delany, Hubert T.
Fairley, James Alexander
Jenkins, Philip Merriman, 1898-1988
King, Woodie, Jr., 1937-
Meyer, Max, 1946-
Tate, DuDonna E. (DuDonna Elizabeth), 1916-2004
White, Walter (Photographer)
Wilkins, Roy, 1901-1981
American Unitarian Association
Bennett College (Greensboro, N.C.)
Community Unitarian Church (White Plains, N.Y.)
Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America
Howard University
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses
United Colored Republican Clubs (White Plains, N.Y.)
United States. Federal Works Agency
White Plains Urban League
White Plains YMCA

Container List

Personal

This series contains biographical material; documentation of Collymore's awards and honors; Howard University memorabilia; and various documents such as the family's World War II ration cards, Cynthia and Duncan Collymore's elementary school report cards, and financial documents relating to household expenses and the dental practice that provide a glimpse of the family's private life. Also documented in this series are several speeches. Collymore spoke to a range of audiences (including Howard University dental school students, Jewish Men's Club, and NAACP League of Women Voters) on a variety of topics, such as civil rights, blacks in medicine, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy and its potential impact on the civil rights struggle. In general, Collymore's speeches articulated his political sensibilities and vision for society.

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical material undated
- b. 1 f. 2 Awards and honors
- b. 1 f. 3 Howard University memorabilia
- b. 1 f. 4-5 Speeches 1937 - 1964
- b. 2 f. 1 Family and personal documents
- b. 2 f. 2 Bills and receipts
- b. 2 f. 3 Property tax documents 1932 - 1940
- b. 2 f. 4 Insurance documents 1930 - 1947
- b. 2 f. 5 Miscellaneous

Correspondence

This series is arranged into six subseries: Personal; Professional; Family; Barbados; Silver Bay; and general files.

The personal correspondence is mostly from friends, although there are some from activist acquaintances, such as sociologist Kenneth B. Clark. These letters sometimes provide a view into the African-American situation in other cities and states. Also included here are letters relating to Collymore's home purchase and his 1947 retirement claims to the Isthmian Canal Commission as a former employee on the Panama Canal Zone.

Letters in the professional folder generally relate to Collymore's dental practice, professional memberships, and difficulties experienced as a black professional trying to serve poorer members of his community.

The family letters comprise correspondence to and from various family members, including Collymore's parents and siblings. Letters between Errol and Magdalene and those to and from the Collymore children are filed separately within the sub-series. Of particular note in the latter group of letters are a five page letter to Cynthia from her father in which he discusses their lineage (and, in the process, gives her a lesson on slavery and the West African past); letters from Duncan's tenure at Michigan State University, which include news of the campus NAACP's student chapter and its activities; and a letter to James's third grade teacher objecting to his playing Tar Baby in a school play.

Letters from friend St. Clair Harlow comprise the bulk of the Barbados files, which offer some view of life and attitudes there; the remaining letters are from family members, some requesting money.

The Silver Bay and general letters relate to the Collymores' vacations at Silver Bay, the YMCA Conference and Training Center founded in 1902, and household and business matters.

Personal

- b. 3 f. 1 1928 - 1971
- b. 3 f. 2 1929 - 1964
- b. 3 f. 3 1937 - 1958
- b. 3 f. 4 Professional 1938 - 1970

Correspondence (cont.)

Family

- b. 3 f. 5 1937 - 1961
- b. 3 f. 6 Collymore, Errold and Magdalene Lewis
- b. 4 f. 1-2 Collymore, Cynthia 1952 - 1965
- b. 4 f. 3 Collymore, Duncan 1947 - 1965
- b. 4 f. 4 Letters to James L. Collymore 1971 - 1972
- b. 4 f. 5 Barbados 1939 - 1970
- b. 4 f. 6 Silver Bay Association 1942 - 1952
- b. 4 f. 7 General undated

Community activism

This series documents the various strategies, organizational and personal, that Collymore employed in the civil rights struggle. It is arranged into seven subseries: Correspondence; NAACP; United Colored Republican Clubs; Urban League; White Plains Community Church; YMCA; and other organizations.

Apart from demonstrating the breadth of Collymore's social awareness, the range of his activism, and the high esteem in which he was held, evidenced through the number of invitations to give talks, or notes of appreciation for talks given, the community involvement and mentorship correspondence also provide a sense of Collymore's commitment to the advancement of upcoming generations. For Collymore the personal was political and his activism interjected into the personal lives of many within Westchester County's black community, tenaciously encouraging various individuals to greater educational and professional heights. Significant facets of this aspect of his activism represented in this sub-series are his efforts to integrate the White Plains police force and his mentorship of several students, including DuDonna Tate who studied at Bennett College.

The NAACP sub-series primarily covers Collymore's activities while President of the White Plains NAACP, which he founded. When he became Chairman of the United Colored Republican Clubs, Collymore resigned the NAACP position as he found "...it was too much to do that and also serve as Chairman of the political organization" (letter to Mrs. Grace Johnson, April 25, 1938; filed in "Personal Correspondence").

Reflecting both the organization's and Collymore's concern for the dignity and equality of blacks, this sub-series includes: a February 1937 letter regarding the use of the word "nigger" on a local radio station; instructions to newspapers not to mention color or race when describing persons suspected of criminal activity, or even generally, "unless the fact of color or race is essential to proper presentation"; and responses to complaints of discrimination at department stores, in the hiring practices of local hospitals, and in attempts to purchase homes in all-white neighborhoods.

Overall, the rich documentation of correspondence, records of anti-lynching activities, memoranda, and printed matter in this series offer insights into the local civil rights battles that helped win larger national wars.

Rallying behind candidates (blacks or whites perceived sympathetic to African-American concerns), voter education, and assisting qualified black workers with finding employment were key efforts documented in the United Colored Republican Clubs, which also includes materials from other Republican groups such as the Westchester Negro Republican County Committee and the Westchester County Negro Republican Women's League. This sub-series is generally useful for a mapping out of the African-American political landscape in the early twentieth century, as these organizations operated during a time of shifting political loyalties within the African-American community.

In addition to correspondence and meeting minutes, the Urban League folder contains research on housing for blacks in Westchester County; an article by Collymore, "White Plains Forty Years Later" which ruminates on the condition of blacks in that community since his arrival there in 1926; and some documents relating to Max Meyer, who founded the Urban League of White Plains in 1918.

The White Plains Community Church sub-series pertains mostly to his activity as an officer in that congregation; however, there is also correspondence with the American Unitarian Association, with which the WPCC was associated, particularly relating to an intergroup relations commission chaired by Alfred McClung Lee. Also documented is a discussion, some years after his death, about incorporating Collymore's experiences into the church's Sunday school curriculum.

Together, the correspondence, notes (such as a 1929 list of "some fatherless boys"), clippings, and a few reports on the conditions of local blacks contained in the YMCA sub-series, and the correspondence, reports, and printed matter in the other organizations sub-series further illuminate the plight of Westchester County's black community in the early decades of the twentieth century. Represented in the other organizations sub-series are the Welfare League for Colored People, Westchester Citizens' Committee on the Family Court, White Plains Committee for a Housing Authority, and the Mayor's Committee on Minority Housing, among others. Other views of African-American life are given by a few materials from out-of-state organizations such as the Baltimore Urban League and the Street Manual Training School in Alabama.

Correspondence

Community activism (cont.)

Correspondence (cont.)

b. 5 f. 1 1935 - 1965

b. 5 f. 2 1937 - 1939

b. 5 f. 3 1936 - 1971

NAACP

b. 5 f. 4 1930 - 1936 July

b. 5 f. 5 1936 July - December

b. 6 f. 1 1936 - 1937

b. 6 f. 2 1936 - 1948

b. 6 f. 3 1937

b. 6 f. 4 1938 - 1957

b. 6 f. 5 Run for White Plains Board of Education 1948

b. 7 f. 1 1936 - 1956

b. 7 f. 2 undated

United Colored Republican Clubs

b. 7 f. 3-4 1936 - 1938

b. 7 f. 5 1937 - 1940

b. 8 f. 1 1937 - 1955

b. 8 f. 2 Urban League 1933 - 1954

White Plains Community Church

b. 8 f. 3 1938 - 1957

b. 8 f. 4 1951 - 1997

YMCA

b. 8 f. 5 1927

b. 8 f. 6 1928

b. 8 f. 7 1929 January - June

b. 9 f. 1 1929 July - December

b. 9 f. 2 1930

b. 9 f. 3 1936 - 1947

b. 9 f. 4 Camp Carlton 1929

b. 9 f. 5 Printed material 1917

Other organizations

b. 9 f. 6 1928 - 1965

b. 9 f. 7 Report of the Mayor's Committee on Housing 1940

b. 9 f. 8 Human Relations: A Report to the White Plains Schools 1948

b. 10 Clippings 1929 - 1997

This series contains both clippings of Collymore's activism and the activities of the organizations with which he was involved, as well as articles pertaining to civil rights matters nationally. There are a few articles that demonstrate Collymore's other interests. Most of the material is from the 1940s and 1950s, although there are a few clippings from the 1990s when Collymore was named among the most influential residents of Westchester County. Publications from which the clippings were culled include the *New York Herald*, *The New York Times*, *Amsterdam News*, and White Plains' journals the *Reporter Dispatch*, *Daily Reporter*, *Journal News*, and *Evening Dispatch*.

Magdalene L. Collymore papers

This series consists mainly of some biographical and personal material, clippings documenting her social and community activities, correspondence, programs for dance performances and for plays in which she performed or assisted as a member of the Paul Robeson Players and the Amateur Fine Arts Dramatic Club, radio scripts, and theatrical documents such as scripts and stage diagrams.

The correspondence includes letters to her step-children and from her in-laws. There are also a few letters from servicemen friends of hers stationed in U.S. World War II training camps. Among these are letters from Vincent E. Saunders, a nephew of sociologist Charles S. Johnson, who was sent to Fort Monroe to train as a Master Gunner. In one letter he informs Lewis that he sold a few sketches drawn under the tutelage of Aaron Douglas; one of these was published as frontispiece for the volume *Growing Up in the Blackbelt*.

- b. 11 f. 1 Biographical material undated
- b. 11 f. 2 Correspondence 1942 - 1998
- b. 11 f. 3 Diary and miscellaneous documents 1931 - 1970
- b. 11 f. 4 Art exhibits 1990 - 1999
- b. 11 f. 5 Programs 1936 - 1998
- b. 11 f. 6 Sketches undated
- b. 11 f. 7 Clippings 1944 - 1990
- b. 12 f. 1 Playbooks
 - Radio scripts 1941 - 1942
- b. 12 f. 2 Frederick Douglass 1941 May
- b. 12 f. 3 Robert Smalls 1941 May
- b. 12 f. 4 Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield 1941 June
- b. 12 f. 5 Nat Turner 1941 May
- b. 12 f. 6 Ira Aldridge 1941 June
- b. 12 f. 7 Crispus Attucks 1941 June
- b. 12 f. 8 Paul L. Dunbar 1941 June
- b. 12 f. 9 Toussaint L'Ouverture 1941 July
- b. 12 f. 10 Harriet Tubman 1941 May
- b. 12 f. 11 Green, Paul. "A Start in Life" 1942 March
- b. 12 f. 12 Benet, Stephen Vincent. "Freedom's a Hard Bought Thing" 1942 February
- b. 12 f. 13 Harriet Beecher Stowe undated
- b. 12 f. 14 Annual Concert of Westchester Negro Choral Union 1941 May
- b. 12 f. 15 Ballad for Americans undated
- b. 12 f. 16 Theatrical documents 1947 - 1953

Philip M. Jenkins papers

Philip Merriman Jenkins was a friend of Magdalene Lewis Collymore's. It is likely that, as a member of the White Plains Urban League, he had been an acquaintance of Errol Collymore's as well. Jenkins worked in the White Plains office of the State Employment Service as a selective placement interviewer and, relatedly, trained African Americans for sales positions in Harlem stores through a State University of New York adult education course. In addition to being a member of the White Plains Urban League, in the late 1940s Jenkins served as Chairman of the White Plains Friends of Interracial Cooperation. Later he became a master clock repairer and appraiser.

This series contains, among other things, some correspondence; a brief sketch of Jenkins's father, George Armstrong Jenkins (the first African American to be appointed to public service in Westbury, Connecticut); a 1954 essay on the Negro Mutual Fund Market; a 1971 statement given by Jenkins against building on a vacant plot in the town of Greenburgh; and two manuscript drafts, "Bean Pole Bean" and "The Huckleberry", the latter self-described as a "sort of an autobiography of a country boy growing up". Jenkins's family lived in the northern Connecticut city of Bristol and the memoir documents his reminiscences as well as gives a sense of the race relations of that time. It also records herbal remedies his mother used to cure ailments suffered by her family and neighbors.

- b. 13 f. 1 1949 - 1971
- b. 13 f. 2 "The Huckleberry"
- b. 13 f. 3 "Bean Hole Beans"