



The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania

Collection 2057

**Nellie Rathbone Bright (1898-1977)**  
**Family Papers**

c. 1866-1977

2 boxes, 1 vol., 1 lin. feet

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**Restrictions:** None.

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### Abstract

Nellie Rathbone Bright, born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1898, was the only child of the Rev. Richard Bright and his wife, Nellie (Jones) Bright. Despite segregation barriers, the African-American Bright family attained educational levels surpassing those of the general population of their generation. Rev. Bright, assigned to the Episcopal diocese in Savannah, Georgia, in 1891, was appointed, two decades later, to a Philadelphia parish and moved his family to that city. A student of Philadelphia public schools, Nellie Rathbone Bright qualified as a grade school teacher with a special certificate for sewing in 1916. She then entered the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1923 with a B.A. in English. Single all her life, Bright spent her entire career as a teacher, and then principal, in the Philadelphia school system. Her efforts as an educator, spanning more than thirty years, focused not only on the schools but also on the housing and neighborhoods in which her students lived. In addition to her leadership abilities, Bright also possessed literary talents which she employed to support various causes throughout her career, ranging from contributing to black literary reviews to writing history for children.

The Nellie Rathbone Bright family papers consist mainly of a biographical listing of dates of major milestones in her life such as graduations and civic awards. Although the collection offers little correspondence, it does include a number of photographs, and a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings and church programs relating to her father, the Rev. Richard Bright, and his work as an Episcopal priest in Savannah, Georgia, and Philadelphia. Bright's biographical notes, the Rev. Bright's scrapbook, as well as the photos, provide a mosaic-like portrait of the background that shaped Bright's life as the daughter of a religious leader committed to educating young children. These articles offer glimpses of the richness and wealth of Nellie Rathbone Bright's contribution to education in Philadelphia.

### Background note

Nellie Rathbone Bright spent her early years in Savannah, Georgia, where she was born on March 28, 1898, the only child of the Rev. Richard Bright and Nellie Jones Bright. She was named for her mother and grandmother as well as for her godmother, Caroline Rathbone, a social activist who remained a friend of the Bright family throughout her

life. Rev. Bright, the first black Episcopal priest in the Savannah Episcopal diocese, was born in St. Thomas, then part of the Dutch West Indies, in 1866. He was educated at St. Augustine Collegiate Institute in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Episcopal Theological seminary in New York, where he graduated in 1891. Her mother, from Louisville, Kentucky, was educated in Europe as a teacher after she was denied entrance to schools in the United States. Together, the Rev. Bright and his wife Nellie established the first private kindergarten and primary school for blacks in Georgia in 1892. After serving the Savannah diocese for almost twenty years, the Rev. Bright moved his family from Savannah to accept an appointment in Philadelphia.

Shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, Nellie Bright earned her eighth grade graduation diploma in 1910 from Stanton Public School. She then obtained a diploma as a grade school teacher, with a special certificate in sewing, from William Penn High, Normal Teacher Training School, in 1916. Bright continued her education in 1919 when she entered the University of Pennsylvania, where she became a member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English in 1923. In addition to her studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Bright also pursued research at the Sorbonne and Oxford, as well as art studies at the Berkshire School of Art in Berkshire Hills, Massachusetts.

While working as a young teacher in the Philadelphia schools, Bright also participated in the black intellectual renaissance flourishing in many large cities at that time. She co-founded and contributed to the literary magazine *Black Opals* established in the late 1920s to encourage black writers. During this period she also furnished articles to other literary magazines intended to encourage black authors. In addition to literary articles, Bright wrote on black history and black education in early Philadelphia.

After more than a decade of teaching in the Philadelphia public schools, Bright accepted an appointment as a principal in 1935, an office she held at various schools in Philadelphia until 1952. From 1952 until 1959, at the direction of the Board of Education, she taught in-service courses on black history for other teachers. The classes were held at The Fellowship House, an advocacy group promoting racial tolerance and civil rights through non-violent means.

During her years as teacher and then principal, Bright served on over fifteen civic boards or organizations directed toward improving schools and neighborhoods by encouraging open housing, improvements in city health services, and facilitating cooperation among diverse members of society. Her efforts continued into her later years, when in 1970, at the age of seventy-two, Bright co-authored a children's book of social history, *American - Red, White, Black, Yellow*. During her lifetime she received numerous awards for her educational and civic leadership efforts, most notably a certificate from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, dated June 10, 1972.

Bright, fluent in French and Spanish, traveled extensively in the Caribbean and Europe, making her first trip at the age of four when accompanying her parents to her father's birth place, St. Thomas. A painter, as well as a writer, Bright depicted travel scenes in oil paintings. Bright remained single all her life, and died February 7, 1977.

## Scope & content

The Nellie Rathbone Bright family papers consist of two principal components supplemented by a smaller, but important, assemblage of photographs as well as notes on family history. One of the main components offers a biographical listing of dates of major milestones in Bright's life, such as graduations and civic awards, prepared by her in 1973 for entry into a publication, *A Biographical Dictionary of Living Black American Writers*, published by R.R. Bowker. The other comprises a scrapbook documenting the work of her father, the Rev. Richard Bright, first as an Episcopal priest in Savannah, Georgia, and later, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The photographic collection includes images of the Brights, their ancestors, and close family friends. Index cards containing a short genealogical survey of the Bright family, and which also cite instances of racial violence directed against her mother's family, make up a smaller, but notable component of the collection. In addition, the collection contains a few pieces of personal correspondence, six lithographic prints, and miscellaneous ephemera.

Nellie Bright's biographical listing and her father's scrapbook offer insight into the Bright family experience. Her father's scrapbook, with newspaper articles referencing his work, articles addressing issues important to blacks at that time, church programs detailing a congregation's activities, or simply news of the family's travels, all serve as a landscape against which to view Nellie Bright's own later list of accomplishments.

The scrapbook articles, while adding context and relevancy to both Bright's and her father's life, also require careful reading, for while they follow a fairly consistent chronology, they often lack dates and names of publication. In addition, information pertaining to the Rev. Bright's early years as a student will appear in later articles offering a brief review of his career.

For example, background on the Bright family's friendship with Caroline Rathbone, a white woman, who later became his daughter's godmother, appears in an article detailing Rathbone's funeral, held in Evansville, Indiana. A black man's officiating at a white woman's funeral produced the column headline, "Colored Man to Take Part in Funeral at St. Paul's Church" announced in *The Evansville Courier*, December 23, 1901. The article mentions that Rev. Bright was once Rathbone's Sunday School student in New York and notes that as a student Rev. Bright was "connected" to Miller's Hotel in New York where the Rathbones often stayed. The reference to Miller's Hotel sheds light on an article about the hotel on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary having "first opened to the public October 27, 1870." Beneath the article, Rev. Bright wrote that "my friend Miss Caroline Rathbone" resided there. The scrapbook, however, offers few references to Nellie's mother. There is a brief (undated) wedding announcement early in the book, and later a death notice dated December 17, 1914, which appears on the same page as several articles concerning the death of Mrs. Bright's father, Q.B. Jones, in 1894.

Even though lacking detailed biographical data, the articles on the whole provide a representative portrait of the Rev. Bright in his capacity as Episcopal priest. Many articles reference his reputation as an excellent speaker and often provide a summary of his chosen sermon topics. One clipping reported a sermon preached July 4, 1898, at the

time of the Spanish-American War. In this sermon, Rev. Bright contrasted what he termed “true” and “false” patriotism. According to the Rev. Bright, “[P]atriotism is the love of country, and like metals and everything else is both true and false.” According to Rev. Bright, the true patriot supports the Republic and all within it regardless of skin color, and “is not sectional but extends from Maine to Florida, wherever the Stars and Stripes float.” On the other hand, he offered the false patriot “who loves his country for what he can get out of it in a pecuniary way,” citing, among other examples, “certain members of Congress who have shown their lukewarm patriotism by crying out for war, but when war was declared, they were not to be seen among those who went to the front.” The Rev. Bright encouraged his congregation to lend their support if necessary: “There was no time when the colored people had shirked their duty to their country.”

Other articles indicate Rev. Bright was also a respected writer of religious pamphlets, and the Episcopal newspaper, *Church Advocate* in an edition dated August 12, 1893, published a column in which he argues for the church’s continuing investment in education. Additionally, the scrapbook contains a Certificate from Library of Congress dated March 2, 1900, registering “St. Stephen’s Catechism” prepared by Rev. Richard Bright in 1892.

Although Bright’s own papers offer few clippings documenting her work, those available complement the biographical listing of her life as an educator. An article announcing her first appointment as principal in 1935 offers insight into other possibilities open to her. The article (no date or name of publication) contains a subheading, “Appointment To Hill School Comes As A Surprise,” and notes that Bright had expressed a desire “to withdraw from the field and retire to a foreign country.” Bright, possessing talents which included foreign language and writing skills, demonstrated capabilities reaching beyond education. Forgoing other possibilities, however, Bright not only accepted this appointment as principal, but continued to serve as principal in two other schools until resigning in 1952.

Even after retiring in 1952, Bright continued in her role as an educator by offering courses on black history at the Fellowship House in Philadelphia. In 1970, at the age of 72, she co-authored with fellow Penn alum Arthur Huff Fauset, *American - Red, White, Black, Yellow*, a book for children and young adults recounting a history of minorities in the United States. A flyer advertising this book is included in her papers.

The fullness of Bright’s years serving the schools and society may also be gleaned from the list of awards recognizing her efforts to improve the learning and living environment of her students. The collection holds several civic service awards, but an article from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 9, 1950, offers a glimpse of the philosophy driving Bright’s work. The article refers to her recent Fellowship Commission award and quotes Bright: “I believe all people can work together, especially to help themselves...[w]hile striving for a common goal, racial and religious differences are forgotten.” Another clipping, *Courier* notes that Bright will be recognized “in the forthcoming housing feature in the June issue of *Color* magazine.” Other awards recognizing her leadership abilities include her 1957 appointment to the Mayor’s Scholarship Committee, the 1970 National Sojourner Truth Meritorious Service award (mentioned in her notes) and a certificate in 1972 inducting her as a member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery.

Photographs in the collection include one of Bright upon her graduation from Stanton School and two undated photographs taken as an adult. Other photos of Bright show her as a principal with students on the occasion of their earning a television set for the school (1952), and with Bill Coale, whom she notes as a friend and co-chair of the Germantown & Chestnut Hill Housing Council, founded in 1945. There are also two photos of her father in his Episcopal vestments, early photos of her parents, one of her mother's sister, as well as photos of her father's parents and grandparents. There are also several photos of family friends, including one of Caroline Rathbone.

The group of photos also includes a large, undated, overview of St. Thomas Island, as well as a smaller island overview also undated but identified as "The Circus, St. Kitts," both of which serve to highlight the importance of the Caribbean region to the Brights. The Rev. Bright, born on St. Thomas, often returned with his family and local clippings in his scrapbook recount their visits—with one referring to a visit in 1936 when he was seventy years old. Other photos include officials of the island and an undated picture postcard of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt with Gov. Paul M. Pearson on a visit to the Island. St. Thomas Island and its legends also appear as the subject of one of two oil paintings by Nellie Bright. A scene depicting Blackbeard's castle recalls stories of pre-colonial days when pirates sought shelter at St. Thomas. This painting, as well as a scene from Canada, appear in several photographs showing them in the homes of friends.

In addition, the collection contains a few personal notes to Bright from friends, a 45 rpm recording signed by the composer, Alton A. Adams, Sr., and a colored pencil sketch of Bright by E. Agafonoff, dated 1931. There are also two black and white pencil sketches of two different males, both dated 1927. The scrapbook also contains memorabilia such as steamship tickets and brochures announcing Rev. Bright's travel lectures. Other ephemera include various church pamphlets and a copy of *The Courtship of Miles Standish: Elizabeth* by Henry W. Longfellow. Included also are six lithographs of political figures by Wm. H. Brown for E.B. & E.C. Kellogg Co and a front page color illustration of the sailing ship "Savannah" from *The Literary Digest*, dated December 21, 1929.

## Separation report

None.

## Bibliography

Lyon, Jr., Marvin P. "Blacks at Penn, Then and Now."

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Hutchins, Amey A. and The University of Pennsylvania Archives. *The Campus History Series: University of Pennsylvania*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004.

*The Evening Bulletin*, Obituaries, Temple University Urban Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## Subjects

Teachers, Black – Pennsylvania - Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Women in education– Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Women school principals – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Adams, Alton A, 1889-1987

Agafonoff, E, b. 1879

Bright, Nellie Rathbone, 1898-1977

Bright, Richard, b. 1866

Episcopal Church – Georgia – Savannah -19<sup>th</sup> century

Episcopal Church – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20<sup>th</sup> century

Episcopal Church – Education – 19<sup>th</sup> century – 20<sup>th</sup> century

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

The collection is open for research

### **Acquisition information**

Bequest of the estate of Nellie Rathbone Bright, 1977.  
Accession 77:55.

### **Alternative format**

None.

### **Preferred Citation**

[Indicate cited item here], Nellie Rathbone Bright Family Papers (Collection 2057), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

### **Processing note**

Original envelopes and frames for photographs were placed in separate folders; a preservation photocopies of the envelopes have been placed with these items where appropriate. One of these envelopes lists enclosures for fourteen photos; however, numbers 1, 7, 9, 12-14 were never a part of this collection.

## Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Genealogical Materials	1925-1977	1	1
Certificate Membership PA Society for the Abolition of Slavery	1972	1	2
School Diplomas & Civic Awards	1910-1961	1	3
Miscellaneous Correspondence	1940-1965	1	4
Miscellaneous	n.d.	1	5
Rev. & Mrs. Bright Memorabilia	1885-1937	1	6
Memorabilia	1886	1	7
Memorabilia	1929	1	8
Pencil Sketch I of a Male	1927	1	9
Pencil Sketch II of a Male	1927	1	10
Original Envelopes	c 1950-1970	1	11
Scrapbook	1891-c.1950	Vol. 1	
Loose Items Removed from Scrapbook	1891-c. 1950	2	1
Three Handmade Handkerchiefs	c 1890	2	2
Forty-five rpm record	c.1956	2	3
Photographs Bright	1910-c.1935	2	4
Photographs Bright's Oil Paintings	1963-1964	2	5
Photographs Family & Close Friends	c.1890-c.1940	2	6
Photographs Family & Close Friends	c.1955-c. 1960	2	7
Photographs School Personnel & Civic Awards	1950-1952	2	8
Photographs Miscellaneous	c.1930-1940	2	9
Photograph Island St. Kitts: "The Circus"	n.d.	2	10
Photographs' Cardboard Frames	c.1930-1960	2	11
Photographs & Color Pencil Drawing	1891-1931	1	ff
Lithographs	n.d.	2	ff