



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3086

People's Voice

Research and editorial files

1865-1963 (bulk 1940-1947)

1 box (10 folders), 1 flat file, 0.2 lin. feet

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Abstract

People's Voice was a leftist African American newspaper in New York, N.Y., founded by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. It was published from 1942 to 1948. The collection includes correspondence, press releases, booklets, clippings, flyers, programs, printed materials, and photographs.

Background note

People's Voice was a New York City-based, leftist African American newspaper founded in 1942 by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (1908-1972), a charismatic minister and politician. This paper was designed for a progressive African American audience, and it educated and enlightened readers on everything from local gatherings and events to U.S. civil rights issues to the political and economic struggles of the peoples of Africa. Reporters and writers for the papers included influential African Americans such as Powell himself, Powell's sister-in-law and actress Fredi Washington, and journalist Marvel Cooke.

During the 1930s, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. actively participated in New York City's civil rights struggles. He organized mass gatherings to protest restaurants, stores, and transportation and utility companies that refused to hire or promote African American employees. Some of the organizations he protested included Harlem General Hospital, Consolidated Edison, New York Bell Telephone, and the 1939 New York World's Fair.

As his popularity and militancy grew, Powell wished to reach a larger audience with his words. In the wake of the United States' entry into World War II, Powell started *People's Voice*. He wanted to separate his paper from sensationalist tabloids such as the *Amsterdam News* and present relevant and educational information for the democratically minded African American reader. But it became evident to his employees, and perhaps even to readers, that Powell used *People's Voice* as his own platform. "It was quite obvious he was using the paper for his own purposes," noted one of his former employees. "But nobody minded it. That's what the paper was for."¹

In addition to Powell's writings, *People's Voice* covered a variety of subjects. Entertainment editor Fredi Washington presented local events and introduced readers to

¹ Will Haygood, "The Rise of Adam Clayton Powell Jr." *APF Reporter* 11 no. 2 <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF1102/Haygood/Haygood.html>.

new entertainers, such as actor Jerry Scott and singer Josh White. Other *People's Voice* reporters gathered materials from such groups as the Council on African Affairs (CAA) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). CAA was founded in New York City in the 1930s. Its primary purpose was to enlighten the American public about segregation and apartheid in South Africa. UNIA-ACL was formed by Black nationalist Marcus Garvey in the mid-1910s as a self-help and unifying agent for people of African descent.

After Powell left *People's Voice* for Congress in 1944, the paper was led by Denton J. Brooks Jr., formerly of Chicago's *Defender*, and Max Yergan, who once headed the Council on African Affairs. Shortly before its demise, new publishers of *People's Voice* sought and gained support from Benjamin J. Davis Jr., a communist party leader, and the paper was accused of being subversive.² In 1947, the paper faced financial and personnel problems. *People's Voice* ended publication in 1948.

Scope & content

This collection spans from 1865 to 1963, with the bulk of the materials dating from 1940 to 1947. There are ten folders and one flat file. The folders are arranged alphabetically and the materials in each folder are filed chronologically. This collection is composed more of raw materials gathered for writing the paper rather than the finished products of *People's Voice* or its employees. There is scant correspondence from within the organization and the news releases are almost entirely from outside sources. Although limited in size, the collection is quite rich and covers a variety of topics, including African American music and theater performances; cultural, political, and labor developments in Africa during and after World War II; civil rights in the U.S.; the Fair Employment Practices Committee; portrayals of African Americans in popular literature; staff issues within *People's Voice*; and criticism of the *Amsterdam News*.

One folder contains a variety of correspondence to and between *People's Voice* employees, the majority of which concerns internal affairs or personnel matters. There is a September 1947 letter from *People's Voice* General Manager Denton Brooks concerning Fredi Washington's leave of absence from and proposed return to the paper. There are a few resignation letters from staff members. A couple of letters indicate collective bargaining problems associated with *People's Voice*, and there is a response from the paper to a demand for arbitration from the New York Newspaper Guild.

There is also a letter and report from June 1946 addressed to *People's Voice* reporter Marvel Cooke. The contents concern the progress made by a special committee to increase minority representation in the Veterans Administration. This committee was composed of various federal and private employees, such as Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), James Baker of the American Veterans Committee, and John W. Studebaker, commissioner of the U.S. Office of Education. It "urged that Negro, Mexican American, and Japanese American contract workers be added to the staff of the [Veterans] Administration in sufficient

² Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.* (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1971), 59.

numbers to adequately handle special problems affecting minority groups.” Other interesting items in this folder include pages from the December 16, 1865, *Harper's Weekly*, sent to Marvel Cooke by W.E.B. DuBois.

Items in another folder relate to the Council on African Affairs (CAA), which was founded in New York City in the 1930s. Its primary purpose was to enlighten the American public about segregation and racism in South Africa. In doing so, CAA hoped to influence American foreign policy in these matters. The materials in this folder date from the mid-1940s, when the group was chaired by civil rights activist Paul Robeson. There are several issues of CAA's newsletter, *New Africa*, which was “dedicated to new relations with Africa—for victory over fascism, and in the interest of the African people.” Many of *New Africa's* articles focused on South African events, but the newsletter included stories from other African countries. Other items in this folder include two copies of a CAA pamphlet called *What of Africa's place in tomorrow's world*, a CAA news release, and a copy of an article, ca. 1946, entitled “Nigerians Fight For a Living Wage,” in which author Dr. W.A. Hunton, CAA's educational director, discussed Britain's newly elected Labour government and the problems it faced in dealing with economic and political turmoil in Nigeria.

Another folder contains an interesting array of items concerning the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). The Fair Employment Act, or Executive Order 8802, was signed by President Roosevelt on June 25, 1941. Its purpose was to “reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” Materials in this folder include a booklet from the FEPC called *FEPC: How It Operates* and a copy of a related anti-discrimination bill, H.R. 1732, brought before the Judiciary Committee in 1943. The majority of items, however, deal with the effort to save the FEPC, for after President Roosevelt's death in 1945, FEPC's future was unsure. A group called the National Council for a Permanent FEPC published a booklet to rally support entitled *Answer the Critics of the FEPC*. With this booklet is an NAACP “legislative action letter” from June 1945 calling for immediate action to save FEPC appropriations. There are also memos, speeches, and reports from various anti-discrimination groups, all of which supported a permanent FEPC.

A final highlight in this collection is a folder of Fredi Washington's (1903-1994) papers. Washington was the entertainment reporter for *People's Voice*, a film actress, and the sister of Isabel Washington, the first wife of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. This folder contains correspondence, clippings, news releases, and photographs. Most of the materials in this folder are related to entertainment events in the 1940s. Washington had many contacts among entertainers, and she often received letters and clippings introducing entertainment acts and rising stars. For example, there are materials on Jerry Scott, a 15-year old African American boy who first appeared in the 1945 musical movie *Thrill of a Romance*. There is also a flyer for a performance by Josh White at the Academy of Music in New York City in 1946. White was billed as a “Minstrel of work songs, blues, and ballads,” and gained fame for his recording of the blues-folk song, “One Meatball.” Other items include photos and a related article written by *Trinidad Guardian* reporter David Hepburn about singer Todd Duncan's performance on the island of Curaçao in

the West Indies. There are also letters and a report concerning Cid Ricketts Sumner (1890-1970), a writer and novelist. Her short story, *Quality*, was the subject of an NAACP propaganda analysis, which is included in this folder.

Other notable materials in this collection include several news releases, including one from the Garvey Club, Inc. of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL), and publications such as an April 1895 issue of *Le Rire*, a French humor magazine; a February 1945 issue of *The African Standard*, a newspaper published by the West African Youth League (Sierra Leone Section); and an issue of *The Red Bulletin*, a weekly newspaper of the U.S. Army's 34th Infantry Division, from 21 September 1945.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

At the New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture:
Fred Washington Papers, 1922-1941, 1981, n.d. (Sc MG 184)

At the New York University Elmer Holmes Bobst Library:
The People's Voice. (Film/Per Non-circulating 1942:Feb.14-1948:Apr.24)

At Vassar University, Poughkeepsie, NY:
Fred Washington Papers, 1929-1979 (Microfilm 800, 2 reels)

At the Chicago Public Library, Harsh Research Collection:
Fred Washington Papers (Microfilm, 022)

Bibliography

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<http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF1102/Haygood/Haygood.html> (15 November 2006).

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Carlson Publishers, 1993.

"The Historical Relationships of African Americans with South Africa." *African
American Historical Linkages with South Africa, ca. 1890-1965*. http://www.howard.edu/library/Reference/bob_edgar_site/maintext.html (14 November 2006).

Powell, Adam Clayton Jr. *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.*
New York: Dial Press, 1971.

_____. *Marching Blacks: An Interpretive History of the Rise of the Black Common Man*.
New York: Dial Press, 1945.

Senna, Carl. *The Black Press and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York: Franklin Watts,
1993.

Wilson, Ruth M. "Against the Tide: Three Who Made It!" *Yale-New Haven Teachers
Institute*. <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1985/5/85.05.04.x.html>
(16 November 2006).

Wolseley, Roland E. *The Black Press*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1971.

Subjects

Africa – Colonization – History – 20th century.
Africa – Politics and government – 1945-1960.
African American journalists.
African American newspapers –New York (State) – New York.
African American novelists.
African American political activists.
African Americans in mass media.
African Americans – Political activity – Newspapers.
Civil rights – United States.
Labor disputes – New York (State) – New York – History – 20th century.

Council on African Affairs.
People's Voice (New York, N.Y.: 1942-1948).
United States. Fair Employment Practices Committee.

Washington, Fredi, 1903-

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Purchased from Maxwell Whiteman, 1974.

Accession number M74-120.

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Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
<i>Amsterdam News</i>	1944	3 items	1	1
Correspondence	1865, 1945-1947, n.d., bulk 1946, 1947	26 items	1	2
Council on African Affairs	1944-1945, n.d.	26 items	1	3
Fair Employment Practices Commission	1941-1946, n.d.	11 items	1	4
<i>Journal of Negro Education</i>	1945	3 items	1	5
Miscellaneous	1919, n.d.	5 items	1	6
News releases and features	1940, 1945, n.d.	5 items	1	7
Photographs and prints	ca. 1932, n.d.	5 items	1	8
Printed materials	1943, 1945, 1963	6 items	1	9
Printed materials	1865, 1895, 1945	4 items	n/a	FF 1
Washington, Fredi	1945-1946, n.d.	22 items	1	10