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ERROL D. COLLYMORE

PAPERS

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ERROLD D. COLLYMORE PAPERS, 1928-1999
Sc MG 888

Bulk Dates:	1929 - 1971
Extent:	Shelving Unit: 13 boxes Linear feet: 4.8
Source and Date:	Gift of James Collymore, 2013
Processor's Name:	Edwina Ashie-Nikoi
Date Finding Aid Completed:	May 21, 2014
Abstract:	Correspondence and other files that document Collymore's career as a pioneer of the civil rights movement in White Plains.
Organization note:	Collection is organized into six series: Personal, Correspondence, Community Activism, Clippings, Magdalene Collymore Papers and Philip M Jenkins Papers
Access:	Unrestricted access
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Citation:	[Item], Errold Collymore Papers, Sc MG 888, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library
Index Terms	
Names:	Collymore, Errold Duncan Collymore, Magdalene Lewis Jenkins, Philip Merriman Meyer, Max Tate, DuDonna White, Walter Wilkins, Roy
Subject:	American Unitarian Association Bennett College Civil Rights Federal Works Agency Howard University National Association for the Advancement of Colored People National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses United Colored Republican Clubs White Plains Community Unitarian Church White Plains Urban League White Plains YMCA

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**ERROLD D. COLLYMORE (1892-1972). PAPERS, 1928 - 1999, (bulk dates, 1929 - 1971)
13 boxes (4.8 linear feet).**

Biographical Sketch

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 gaining of United States citizenship, Collymore served in World War I, where his knowledge of Morse code and skills as radio operator gained in Panama were of use.

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, and 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' 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. Attending to 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.

Collymore married Johnnie Nazarene Ewing in 1932. They had two children, Cynthia Rene (born 1934) and Erold 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 repairing 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, Erold 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

Erold Collymore was at the vanguard of civil rights activism in New York and his papers document the crucial contributions of "ordinary" black citizens to the early civil rights struggles in the state three full decades before the national movement gained momentum. There are files for and correspondence with the organizations, committees and associations with which he was involved which attest to his influence within the black community and the respect that city leaders had for him, and what he was able to accomplish. The Papers are divided into six series: PERSONAL, CORRESPONDENCE, COMMUNITY ACTIVISM, CLIPPINGS, MAGDALENE L. COLLYMORE and PHILIP M. JENKINS.

The **PERSONAL** series (.6 lin. ft.) 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 (Howard University dental school students, Jewish Men's Club, NAACP League of Women Voters, for example) and on a variety of topics, including civil rights, blacks in medicine, 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.

The **CORRESPONDENCE** series (.8 lin. ft.) is divided into the **Personal**, **Professional**, **Family**, **Barbados**, **Silver Bay** and **General** files.

The **Personal** correspondence is mostly from friends although there are some from acquaintances made through his activism, 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 Errold 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' 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.

The **COMMUNITY ACTIVISM** series (2 lin. ft.) documents the various strategies, organizational and personal, that Collymore employed in the civil rights struggle.

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 give 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, this series' rich documentation of correspondence, record of anti-lynching activities, memoranda, and printed matter offers 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 are 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. The 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 correspondence with the national American Unitarian Association particularly relating to an intergroup relations commission chaired by Alfred McClung Lee. Also documented is 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** series, and the correspondence, reports and printed matter in the **Other Organizations** series further illuminate the plight of Westchester County's black community in the early decades of the twentieth century. Represented in the Other Organizations 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.

The **CLIPPINGS series** (.4 lin. ft.) 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. Chronologically, the 1940s and 1950s dominate 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*, *New York Times*, *Amsterdam News*, and White Plains' journals the *Reporter Dispatch*, *Daily Reporter*, *Journal News* and *Evening Dispatch*.

The **MAGDALENE L. COLLYMORE Papers** (.8 lin. ft.) 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*.

Organized in the last series are papers of a friend of Magdalene Lewis Collymore's, Philip Merriman Jenkins (it is likely that, as a member of the White Plains Urban League, he had been an acquaintance of Erold 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.

The **PHILIP M. JENKINS Papers** (.2 lin. ft.) contains, among other things, some correspondence, a brief sketch of Jenkins' 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 being self-described as a "sort of an autobiography of a country boy growing up." Jenkins' 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.

Provenance

Gift of James Collymore
SCM 13-36

Processed by Edwina Ashie-Nikoi
2014

Container List

Box Folder

PERSONAL

- | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | Biographical Material, n.d |
| | 2 | Awards and Honors |
| | 3 | Howard University Memorabilia |
| | | Speeches |
| | 4 | 1937-1964 |
| | 5 | 1960's, n.d. |
| 2 | 1 | Family and Personal Documents |
| | 2 | Bills, Receipts, etc. |
| | 3 | Property Tax Documents, 1932-1940 |
| | 4 | Insurance Documents, 1930-1939; 1947 |
| | 5 | Miscellaneous Documents |

CORRESPONDENCE

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | | Personal |
| | 1 | 1928-1971 |
| | 2 | 1929-1964 |
| | 3 | 1937-1958 |
| | 4 | Professional, 1938-1970 |
| | | Family |
| | 5 | 1937-1961 |
| | 6 | Errold Collymore & Magdalene Lewis |
| 4 | | Cynthia Collymore |
| | 1 | 1952-1957 |
| | 2 | 1952-1965 |
| | 3 | Duncan Collymore, 1947; 1956-1965 |
| | 4 | Letters to James L. Collymore, 1971-1972 |
| | 5 | Barbados, 1963-1970; 1939-1940 |
| | 6 | Silver Bay Association, 1942-1947; 1952-194 |
| | 7 | General, n.d. |

COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | | Correspondence -- Community Involvement and |
| | | Mentorship |
| | 1 | 1935-1940; 1950-1956; 1965 |
| | 2 | 1937-1939 |
| | 3 | 1936-1971 |
| | | N.A.A.C.P |
| | 4 | 1930-1936 (July) |
| | 5 | 1936 (July - December) |

Container List

Box Folder

6	1	1936-1937
	2	1936-1937; 1948
	3	1937
	4	1938-1939, 1947, 1952-1957
	5	Run for White Plains - Board of Education, 1948
7	1	1936, 1939, 1950-1956
	2	n.d
		United Colored Republican Clubs
	3-4	1936-1938
	5	1937-1940
8	1	1937-1955
	2	Urban League, 1933, 1946-1954
		White Plains Community Church
	3	1938-1946; 1952-1957
	4	1951-1958; 1988, 1989, 1997
		Y.M.C.A
	5	1927
	6	1928
	7	1929 (January - June)
9	1	1929 (July - December)
	2	1930
	3	1936-1938, 1946-1947
	4	Camp Carlton, 1929
	5	Printed Material, 1917, n.d.
		Other Organizations
	6	1928-1965
	7	Report of the Mayor's Committee on Housing, 1940
	8	Human Relations: A Report to the White Plains Schools, 1948

CLIPPINGS

10	1-4	1929-1942; 1952-1956; 1997
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MAGDALENE L COLLYMORE

11	1	Biographical Material, n.d.
	2	Correspondence, 1942-1998
	3	Diary and Miscellaneous Documents, 1931-1933, 1952, 1970 and n.d.
	4	Art Exhibits, 1990-1999

Container List

Box Folder

- | | | |
|----|----|--|
| 11 | 5 | Programs, 1936-1998 |
| | 6 | Sketches, n.d. |
| | 7 | Clippings, 1944-1990 |
| 12 | 1 | Playbooks
Radio Scripts, 1941-1942 |
| | 2 | Frederick Douglass (May, 1941) |
| | 3 | Robert Smalls (May, 1941) |
| | 4 | Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (June, 1941) |
| | 5 | Nat Turner (May, 1941) |
| | 6 | Ira Aldridge (June, 1941) |
| | 7 | Crispus Attucks (June, 1941) |
| | 8 | Paul L Dunbar (June, 1941) |
| | 9 | Toussaint L'ouverture (July, 1941) |
| | 10 | Harriet Tubman (May, 1941) |
| | 11 | "A Start in Life" by Paul Green (March, 1942) |
| | 12 | "Freedom's a Hard Bought Thing" by Stephen
Vincent Benet (February, 1942) |
| | 13 | Harriet Beecher Stowe, n.d. |
| | 14 | Annual Concert of Westchester Negro Choral
Union (May, 1941) |
| | 15 | Ballad for Americans, n.d. |
| | 16 | Theatrical Documents, 1947-1953 |

PHILIP M JENKINS

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 13 | 1 | 1949-1971
Miscellaneous Documents |
| | 2 | "The Huckleberry" by Philip M. Jenkins |
| | 3 | "Bean Hole Beans" by Philip M. Jenkins |

MANUSCRIPTS, ARCHIVES AND RARE BOOKS DIVISION

SEPARATION RECORD

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers: Errold D. Collymore Papers

Accession Number: SCM 13 - 36

Donor: James Collymore

Gift X

Date received: July 2013

Date transferred: May 2014

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 Photographs and Print Division:

One folder of photographs of Erold and Magdalene Collymore,
some family and friends

Schomburg Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division:

One recording tape: Erold Collymore talk to Junior Youth Group
at the White Plains Community Church, 1964

Jean Blackwell Hutston Research and Reference Division:

25 pamphlets, newsletters and magazines

Separated by: Edwina Ashie-Nikoi **Date:** May 8, 2014