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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,  
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

**John Preston Davis papers**

1845-1972 [bulk 1891-1972]

Sc Micro R-5858

Processed by Debra Carter.

## Summary

**Creator:** Davis, John P. (John Preston), 1905-1973

**Title:** John Preston Davis papers

**Date:** 1845-1972 [bulk 1891-1972]

**Source:** Presented by Marguerite DeMond Davis, Spring 1976. SCM77-74.

**Abstract:** Writings and research files, along with personal papers, and correspondence documenting Davis' multifaceted career, 1923-1972. Includes material on the AMERICAN NEGRO REFERENCE BOOK, 1966, edited by Davis; papers relating to Frederick Douglass, including letters to Douglass from his sons, Lewis and Frederick; historical novel about a frontier family in Louisville, Kentucky; compilation of biographies of black athletes called "Jump High;" short stories and poetry; and manuscript about Liberia entitled "Bitter Canaan," by Charles S. Johnson. Correspondents include Mary M. Bethune, Ralph J. Bunche, and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

### Conditions Governing Access:

Researchers are restricted to microfilm copy.

**Alternative Form Available:** Collection available on microfilm; Micrographic Preservation Service ; call number Sc Micro R-5858

**Preferred citation:** John Preston Davis papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

**Processing note:** Processed by Debra Carter; Machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

## Creator History

John Preston Davis was born on January 19, 1905 and died on September 11, 1973. Davis, a man of enormous talent and varied interests, was a colorful journalist, a fiery orator and an inexhaustible and outspoken advocate of civil rights.

Davis' father, William Henry Davis, was a graduate of the Howard University School of Pharmacy. He was a federal government employee and Official Stenographer for the National Negro Business League. During World War I, he served as secretary to Dr. Emmett Scott, Special Assistant to the Secretary of War. In the 1920's W. H. Davis served as Secretary to the Presidential Commission investigating economic conditions in the Virgin Islands. He retired from government service in 1942.

John P. Davis was born in Washington, D. C. and attended Dunbar High School in that city. In 1922 he enrolled in Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. He graduated in 1926, earning an A.B. and double honors in English and psychology. At Bates Davis was president of Delta Sigma Rho, honorary debating fraternity, and editor of the student publication "The Bobcat." From 1926 to 1927 Davis had a fellowship at Harvard, where he received his Masters Degree in journalism. He left Harvard to join the staff of Fisk University where he served as Director of Publicity from 1927 to 1928. He later returned to Harvard and earned an LL.B degree from the Harvard Law School in 1933.

In 1932 John P. Davis married Marguerite DeMond. Their union produced two daughters, Miriam and Marguerite, and two sons, Michael and John.

In 1933 Davis became Executive Secretary of the Joint Committee on National Recovery, a position he held until 1936. Among the Committee's most outstanding accomplishments were the prevention of race-related wage differentials and the integration of Negro families into the program of the Homestead Subsistence Division. While Secretary of the Committee, Davis functioned as legislative lobbyist for twenty-six national groups including the Young Woman Christian Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Davis was one of the original founders of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1936. He remained Executive Secretary and guiding spirit for the organization from its inception until 1942. He left the NNC to become Chief of the Washington Bureau of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a position he held from 1943 to 1945.

The Democratic National Committee appointed Davis as Assistant Director of Publicity in 1944. In this capacity, Davis covered the 1944, 1948 and 1952 presidential campaigns. In 1945 Davis also became editor and publisher of Our World Publishing Company where he worked for eleven years.

In 1956, as marketing consultant for the Jacob Ruppert Company, Davis' project was to increase the demand for Knickerbocker beer in the black and Puerto Rican markets. The next year Davis became a consultant for the Jewish Theological Seminary. His assignment there was to prepare a prospectus for the World Academy of Ethics.

John P. Davis worked as a fund raiser from 1958 to 1962. From 1958 to 1961 Davis worked for Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in New York City and from 1961 to 1962 he worked for Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

In 1963 Davis became editor of special publications for the Phelps-Stokes Fund in New York City. Among his accomplishments at the Fund was editing the first edition of the *American Negro Reference Book*. Davis remained at the Phelps-Stokes Fund until the late 1960's when he became ill.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The John Preston Davis Papers (1845-1972) document his college years and the accomplishments of his multi-faceted career. The papers consist of Personal Papers, Correspondence, Writings and a Research File.

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

African American athletes  
African American authors  
African American families  
African American journalists  
Civil rights workers  
Families -- Kentucky -- Louisville  
Historical fiction -- History -- Liberia  
Historical fiction -- History -- Louisville (Ky.)

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Poems

### **Names**

Davis, John P. (John Preston), 1905-1973  
Bethune, Mary McLeod, 1875-1955  
Bunche, Ralph J. (Ralph Johnson), 1904-1971  
Douglass, Frederick, 1818-1895  
Douglass, Frederick, 1842-  
Douglass, Lewis, 1840-  
Douglass, Lewis, 1840-1908  
Eisenhower, Dwight D. (Dwight David), 1890-1969  
Johnson, Charles Spurgeon, 1893-1956  
Douglas family

## Container List

b. 1 f. 1 Personal Papers 1923 Mar 31-1966, Apr 23

John P. Davis' Personal Papers (1923-1966) includes Bates College programs, publications and newspaper clippings along with a resume of Davis' accomplishments. Most of the Bates material relates to Davis' illustrious years on the school's debating team. A roster of the Bates College 40th reunion and a certificate from the Board of Editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* may also be found along with several clippings on Davis' activities as Executive Secretary of the National Negro Congress. The material is chronologically arranged.

### Correspondence

The Correspondence (1925-1967) is diverse in content and has been arranged in two chronological files of incoming and outgoing letters. Incoming correspondence (1925-1967) is largely business related and includes letters from Mary M. Bethune, Ralph Bunche and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Outgoing letters (1925-1966) were written mostly to friends and business associates. Two anonymous letters have been filed at the end of the outgoing correspondence.

b. 1 f. 2 Incoming 1925, May 22-1967, May 3

b. 1 f. 3 Outgoing 1925, Nov 16-1966, Jan

### Writings

The Writings (1891-1972, n.d.) are divided into those by John P. Davis and those of other authors. Among Davis' writings are several folders of unpublished material from a compilation of biographies of black athletes called "Jump High." The writings of John P. Davis also include several folders of notes and drafts for an unpublished historical novel which unfolds the story of a frontier family in Louisville, Kentucky. Other writings by Davis range from biographical articles and a proposal to RCA concerning recruitment of black employees to short stories and poetry. The writings are arranged alphabetically by title within each genre. Several of Davis' short stories were published in *Opportunity Magazine*. His published works include "The Waters of Megara," "The Overcoat," and "Ruth Trent Cries." The writings of other authors have been arranged alphabetically by the authors' last name. There is a lengthy manuscript entitled "Bitter Canaan" written by Charles S. Johnson. Most of the writings are undated.

#### John P. Davis

b. 1 f. 4 Jump High

b. 1 f. 5 Jump High

#### Historical Novel

b. 1 f. 6 Drafts

b. 1 f. 7 Notes

b. 1 f. 8 Notes

b. 1 f. 9 Notes

b. 1 f. 10 Notes

b. 1 f. 11 Notebooks

b. 2 f. 1 Notebooks

b. 2 f. 2 Printed Material 1956, Apr 23-1963, Feb 17

b. 2 f. 3 Articles 1929, Jul-1967, Oct

#### Short Stories

b. 2 f. 4 A-S 1927, Mar 30, N.D.

b. 2 f. 5 T-W N.D.

b. 2 f. 6 Poetry 1965, Jan 11, N.D.

b. 2 f. 7 Proposal C. 1963

b. 2 f. 8 Notes And Fragments

#### Other Authors

Writings (cont.)

Other Authors (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 9 BI-Bo
- b. 2 f. 10 Bremer, Arthur H. 1972
- b. 2 f. 11 Douglass, Joseph H.
- b. 2 f. 12 Johnson, Charles S., Bitter Canaan
- b. 3 f. 1 Pp. 1-132
- b. 3 f. 2 Pp. 133-237
- b. 3 f. 3 Pp. 238-337
- b. 3 f. 4 M-U
- b. 3 f. 5 Unidentified Authors And Incomplete Writings

Research File

The Research File (1845-1966) is a collection of printed material in several subject areas directly related to Davis' career and personal interests. The subjects are: the *American Negro Reference Book*, Frederick Douglass, Lincoln Center, Phelps-Stokes Fund, and Slavery.

- b. 3 f. 6 American Negro Reference Book C.1965

The *American Negro Reference Book* folder (c.1965) includes a survey on the cost and market for a black encyclopedia and writings on the origin of black people in America.

Douglass, Frederick

The *Frederick Douglass* folders (1845-1939) consist of a series of handwritten and typed copies of incoming and outgoing Douglass letters dating from 1845 to 1897, arranged in chronological order. There are a few original holograph letters to Douglass from his sons, Lewis and Frederick; they have been filed with the incoming correspondence. There are also copies of Douglass' writings, letters pertaining to Douglass, clippings and miscellaneous printed matter. A partial transcript of John Brown's trial is also included in this file.

Correspondence

Incoming

- b. 3 f. 7 1845-1879
- b. 3 f. 8 1881-1888
- b. 3 f. 9 1889
- b. 3 f. 10 1890-1893
- b. 3 f. 11 1894-1897
- b. 4 f. 1 Outgoing 1858-1895
- b. 4 f. 2 Writings 1859-1863, N.D.
- b. 4 f. 3 Printed Material 1893, N.D.
- b. 4 f. 4 Clippings 1863, Aug 16-1939, Apr 7
- b. 4 f. 5 Lincoln Center 1959-1961, Mar 27, N.D

The *Lincoln Center* file (1959-1961) consists of a 1959 progress report, a 1960 annual report and a report on international participation in the building of Lincoln Center.

- b. 4 f. 6 Phelps-Stokes Fund 1963-1966

The *Phelps-Stokes Fund* material (1963-1966) contains an inventory of art objects and a 1966 annual report.

- b. 4 f. 7 Slavery 1938-1967

The *Slavery* file (1938-1967) is composed of printed articles and a few newspaper clippings.