



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

Guide to the

**Pettis Perry papers**

1942-1967

Processed by Christine McKay.

## Summary

**Creator:** Perry, Pettis

**Title:** Pettis Perry papers

**Date:** 1942-1967

**Source:** Purchased from Rose Perry, 1987 SCM87-52.

**Abstract:** The bulk of the Pettis Perry Papers documents Perry's involvement in the Communist Party, especially his tenure in New York, from 1948 to 1955, as Secretary of the Negro Commission, Chairman of the Farm Commission, and Alternate Member of the Executive Committee, and his membership on the Southern California District Board upon his return to California in 1957. The papers comprise Perry's writings, assorted speeches, reports, memoranda, and letters from correspondents including Claude Lightfoot, Eugene Dennis, and Eslanda Robeson discussing various pertinent subjects such as party meetings, anti-colonial movements and the African-American community. Letters to his family during his incarceration in federal prison discussed current events such as the Emmett Till trial, colonialism, and the civil rights movement. Also included in the collection is biographical information as well as Perry's opening closing statements and motions from his trial.

**Preferred citation:** Pettis Perry papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

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

## Creator History

Pettis Perry, Communist Party official and Smith Act defendant, was born January 4, 1897 in Marion, Alabama, the son of tenant farmers.

Following his mother's death when he was four months old, he was raised by an aunt and uncle on their farm. His formal schooling totalled fifteen months. At age seventeen, Perry left home for a series of jobs

at a plantation, lumber company, and pipe foundry. The discrimination and violence he witnessed in Alabama had a deep impact on him and he later said, "I was convinced that there must be some place in the United States where Negroes were treated as men and women--as Americans with the full rights as other citizens. I went everywhere--north, south, west and east--constantly searching."

During World War I, Perry was a civilian employee of the United States Army in Tennessee and Georgia and a construction worker in Norfolk, Virginia. In 1919 and 1920, he worked in the Midwest as an iron moulder, construction worker, hod carrier, and meat packer.

In December 1920, he arrived in San Bernadino, California where he was employed in a cement plant for two years. From 1922 to 1930, he worked primarily as a migratory worker in California and Arizona, in the agricultural fields during the spring and in cotton seed oil mills during the fall and winter. During this period, Perry was also a laborer and railroad gang worker throughout the West and a salmon canner in Alaska. From 1930 to 1934, he worked solely in the cotton seed oil mills in California. At this time he began a period of intensive "reading and study" in an effort to better understand current political issues.

In February 1932, while employed at the Pacific Cotton Oil Company, Perry met members of the International Labor Defense (ILD) and became familiar with the Scottsboro Case through the *Daily Worker* and the *Liberator*. In September 1932, he joined the Communist Party, "convinced by now in everything I had heard and seen, and from everything I had learned, that the best fighters in these struggles--in Imperial Valley, in the fight for the Scottsboro boys, in the unemployed councils, in the fight for freedom--were the Communists". Perry served as Executive Secretary of the ILD for Southern California and Arizona and was the Communist Party's candidate for Lieutenant Governor of California in 1934. By 1936, he had left the ILD to work as a section organizer for the Communist Party. He ran for office again twice, for the State Board of Equalization in 1938 and for California Secretary of State in 1942.

Perry moved to New York in 1948 to become Secretary of the Party's Negro Commission, where he had a voice in ideological questions and recommended policies and programs concerning discrimination, increased job opportunities, equal pay, the right to vote, and membership in unions. In 1950 he became Chairman of the Farm Commission which attempted to improve the conditions of small farmers and sharecroppers and to forge alliances with industrial workers. Perry was also elected an alternate member of the National Committee in 1950. With the 1949 trial and subsequent imprisonment of eleven of the Party's front-rank leaders, including Eugene Dennis, Benjamin J. Davis, Harry Winston, and Gus Hall, for conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the government by force or violence under the Smith Act, Perry assumed a greater leadership role in Party affairs and was himself indicted with sixteen others for conspiracy on June 20, 1951. Perry represented himself during a nine-month trial in which he argued that his activities and writings were an effort "through democratic means--by organization, legislation, and education in the marketplace of public opinion--to secure the Constitutional rights of the Negro people." He was convicted in February 1953 and sentenced to three years in prison.

Following the appeals process, he entered the federal prison at Danbury, CT in January 1955. He was released in May 1957, having spent much of his sentence in the prison hospital suffering from high blood pressure.

Following his release, Perry returned to California and served on the Party's Southern California District Board. He began working on an autobiography and a history of the Congo (now Zaire), but by the early 1960s suffered increasingly poor health. In April 1965, he travelled to Scandinavia and the Soviet Union for sightseeing and medical treatment. He died of heart disease in a Moscow hospital on July 24, 1965. Perry, who was known to his friends as "Pete," was married twice, in 1941 to Amy Foster, from whom he

was later divorced, and in 1949 to Rose Manosa, who assisted him with his writings and was active in the Families of Smith Act Victims Committee. From his second marriage, he had two sons, Pettis Dennis and Frederick Douglass, and one stepson, Richard.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Pettis Perry Papers have been arranged in three series: Personal Papers; Communist Party; and the Smith Act Trial.

**Arrangement:** I. Personal Papers; II. Communist Party; III. Smith Act Trial

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

African American communists  
African Americans -- Civil rights  
African Americans -- Political activity  
African Americans -- Social conditions  
Anti-imperialist movements  
Black author  
Civil rights -- United States  
Communism -- United States  
Communist Trial, New York, N.Y., 1952-1953  
Governmental investigations -- United States

### **Geographic Names**

United States -- Politics and government -- 1933-1953  
United States -- Race relations

### **Names**

Perry, Pettis  
Communist International. Negro Commission  
Communist Party of the United States of America  
Families of the Smith Act Victims Committee

## Container List

### b. 1 Personal Papers 1950-1967

The *PERSONAL PAPERS series, 1950-1967, (.5 linear ft.)* includes a folder of biographical information which contains Perry's passport; statements concerning his death, including those from the Soviet Communist Party, William L. Patterson, and Gus Hall; obituaries; notes and draft for a eulogy; a typescript and printed copy of Richard O. Boyer's 1951 profile, "*Pettis Perry, the Story of a Working Class Leader*;" and correspondence from Rose Perry to Chicago librarian Margaret Burroughs regarding Perry's death and the disposition of his library. Additional biographical information may be found in a folder containing an outline for Perry's planned autobiography in this series, as well as in his statements to the jury in the *SMITH ACT TRIAL* series.

There are four folders of letters written by Perry to his wife and children from January 1955 to April 1957, during his term in federal prison. They discuss his health, family matters, and current events such as the Emmett Till trial, colonialism, the civil rights movement, political campaigns, and the Brooklyn Dodgers. A folder of general correspondence includes post cards from Perry's last trip to Europe; a letter to his aunt discussing his indictment; letters to *Freedomways* editor Esther Jackson and W.E.B. DuBois regarding his work on a book about Africa; and requests for research materials.

The series also contains material for a course taught by Perry at the Jefferson School of Social Science, 1952-1953; the detailed outline for his planned autobiography; and notes, an incomplete preliminary article, and reference materials for an unfinished book about the Congo (now Zaire.)

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical Information 1950-1967
  - Correspondence From Prison
- b. 1 f. 2 January-December
- b. 1 f. 3 January-May
- b. 1 f. 4 June-December
- b. 1 f. 5 January-April
- b. 1 f. 6 General Correspondence 1951-1965
- b. 1 f. 7 Jefferson School Of Social Science 1952-1953
- b. 1 f. 8 Notes For Autobiography n.d.
- b. 1 f. 9 Notes And Articles For Congo Book n.d.
  - Research Material
- b. 1 f. 10 Africa
- b. 1 f. 11 Miscellaneous

## Communist Party 1942-1965

The *COMMUNIST PARTY series, 1942-1965, (1 linear ft.)* comprises the bulk of the Perry Papers. It documents his tenure in New York, from 1948 to 1955, as Secretary of the Negro Commission, Chairman of the Farm Commission, and Alternate Member of the Executive Committee, and his membership on the Southern California District Board upon his return to California in 1957. A folder of general correspondence includes letters from Claude Lightfoot, Eugene Dennis, Eslanda Robeson, and others discussing such subjects as relations with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and African-American community, anti-colonial movements, and party meetings. The National Executive Committee folder consists of assorted speeches, reports, and memoranda sent to Perry by William Z. Foster and others concerning tactics, organization, and ideology. It includes a transcript of discussions by party leaders concerning labor unions in preparation for the national convention of 1954.

The series also contains Perry's writings regarding the Communist Party-USA's position on the "Negro Question" and the issue of self-determination, debated at length throughout the 1940s and 1950s. These discussions may be found in the folders of both the Negro Commission and the Southern California District Board. In addition, there are memoranda, reports, and speeches concerning a variety of topics such as the role of African Americans in World War II, elections campaigns from 1944 to 1958, colonialism, labor unions, and ideological questions.

Subject files have been created reflecting a variety of printed material and other writings retained by Perry concerning such topics as the Walter-McCarran Act, Mexican workers, regional Communist Parties, school desegregation, Jewish organizations, and trade unions. A folder for Cuba includes excerpts of writings by Blas Roca Calderio and Fabio Grobart on socialism and discrimination and a speech by Fidel Castro. A miscellaneous international folder includes articles by Eslanda Robeson on world events for publication in *Freedom* and a booklet of speeches and reports from the 1952 World Peace Council in Berlin. The Southern Christian Leadership folder contains a draft report by John Henry discussing the Party's relationship with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

- b. 2 f. 1 National Executive Committee 1950-1960
- b. 2 f. 2 General Correspondence 1954-1959
  - Negro Commission 1947-1960
- b. 2 f. 3 Memoranda 1958
- b. 2 f. 4 Printed Material 1947-1960
- b. 2 f. 5 Research Reports
  - Farm Commission 1943-1958
- b. 2 f. 6 Correspondence 1950-1956
- b. 2 f. 7 Notes 1951-1955
- b. 2 f. 8 Memorandum & Articles 1949-1958
- b. 2 f. 9 Reference And Printed Material 1943-1956
  - Southern California District Board 1957-1960
- b. 2 f. 10 Memoranda On Draft Resolution On The Negro Question 1958-1960
- b. 2 f. 11 Miscellaneous 1957-1958
  - Writings
    - b. 3 f. 1 World War II 1942
    - b. 3 f. 2 Labor n.d., 1953
    - b. 3 f. 3 Anti-Colonialism 1951-1963
    - b. 3 f. 4 "Conclusion" n.d.
  - Elections
    - b. 3 f. 5 1944
    - b. 3 f. 6 1952
    - b. 3 f. 7 1954

Communist Party (cont.)

Writings (cont.)

Elections (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 8 1958
- b. 3 f. 9 National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People 1952-1959
- b. 3 f. 10 Negro Representation 1953-1965
- b. 3 f. 11 Puerto Rico n.d.
- b. 3 f. 12 Fragments n.d.
- b. 3 f. 13 Notes 1952-1965
- b. 4 f. 1 Speeches 1951-1957

Subjects

- b. 4 f. 2 Cuba
- b. 4 f. 3 Jewish Organizations
- b. 4 f. 4 Walter-Mccarren Act
- b. 4 f. 5 Mexican Workers
- b. 4 f. 6 Miscellaneous International
- b. 4 f. 7 Regional Communist Parties
- b. 4 f. 8 School Desegregation
- b. 4 f. 9 Southern Christian Leadership Conference
- b. 4 f. 10 Trade Unions

Smith Act Trial 1952-1953

The *SMITH ACT TRIAL series, 1952-1953, (.5 linear ft.)* contains manuscripts and reprints of Perry's opening and closing statements to the jury and motions in the nine-month conspiracy trial of seventeen Communist leaders at which he represented himself. The statements provide substantial biographical information and outline Perry's political philosophy and goals.

Also of significance are newsletters and correspondence from the Families of the Smith Act Victims, an organization founded in August 1951 to give financial and moral support to relatives of those indicted or imprisoned under the Act. Money was raised to send their children to summer camp, print pamphlets decrying the treatment of Smith Act families, subsidize family visits to prisoners, and join amnesty movements. There is also a folder for the National Trade Union Committee for the Repeal of the Smith Act containing lists, memoranda, and resolutions. Additional material regarding the "New York Seventeen" case (*United States v. Flynn, et al.*) and the Families of Smith Act Victims committee may be found in the microfilmed records of the Civil Rights Congress.

- b. 4 f. 11 Opening Statement 1952
- b. 4 f. 12 Motions 1953
- b. 4 f. 13 Summation 1953
- b. 4 f. 14 Statement Before Sentence 1953
- b. 4 f. 15 Printed Material 1952-1953
- b. 4 f. 16 Miscellaneous Statements By Others n.d.
- b. 4 f. 17 Families Of The Smith Act Victims 1952-1958
- b. 4 f. 18 Trade Union Committee For The Repeal Of The Smith Act 1952