



Legacy Finding Aid for Manuscript and Photograph Collections

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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS FINDING AID

Title: MS 606 Dr. William J. Thompkins Collection, ca. 1917-1943

Processor: Mary Jamieson

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William J. Thompkins, M.D. (1884-1944) was born in Jefferson City, Missouri and graduated from Lincoln University. He attended the University of Colorado and earned his M.D. at Howard University. After interning at Washington, D.C.'s Freedmen's Hospital, Thompkins moved to Kansas City, Missouri in 1906 and began his career as a physician-surgeon. Appalled by the facilities for African American patients in the basement of the city's General Hospital, he helped found the city's General Hospital No. 2, which he directed from 1915 to 1922. He worked to improve health care and living conditions for African Americans. Thompkins' plans for reducing tuberculosis outbreaks by replacing Kansas City's slums with new, sanitary housing received national attention. In addition, Thompkins practiced surgery in Oklahoma hospitals.

Thompkins worked with the National Colored Democratic Association (NCDA) to elect local and national politicians. He and fellow Democrat Felix Payne started the Kansas City *American* in 1928. At a time when many African Americans associated Democrats with the Jim Crow segregation of the South, Thompkins used his newspaper to balance the Black-owned Kansas City *Call's* Republican stance. He campaigned for Woodrow Wilson in the western states and led the NCDA's 1932 campaign for Franklin Roosevelt. In 1934 FDR nominated Thompkins as the District of Columbia's Recorder of Deeds, a position traditionally held by African Americans beginning with Frederick Douglass. Thompkins received unanimous Senate approval.

In the ten years that he held the post, Thompkins transformed the office of Recorder of Deeds into an efficient, profitable concern and convinced the federal government to construct a new building for the agency. He staffed his office with WPA workers and continued to round up votes for FDR in his bids for re-election by touting the benefits of New Deal programs for African Americans. In addition to his political activities, Thompkins was a Mason, served as Chairman of the Health Commission for the Elks and often took his family to the National Medical Association's annual summer conventions. For several years he served as a curator of Lincoln University in Jefferson City.

Thompkins's wife, the former Jessie Floyd Embry, was an English teacher from Louisville, Kentucky. The couple had two daughters, Helen Yolande and Marion Elizabeth. Helen married a physician and moved to Georgia. When Dr. Thompkins was appointed Recorder of Deeds, Mrs. Thompkins and Marion remained in Kansas City until 1940 to care for an elderly family member. Upon arrival in Washington, William Thompkins lived with a family at 1321 R Street, NW. When his wife and

daughter came to the District in 1938, they moved into the home of General Benjamin O. Davis at 1721 S Street, NW while Davis was stationed in Europe. Mrs. Thompkins supervised Mrs. Davis's planned redecoration of the house. When the Davis family returned to Washington in 1942, Dr. Thompkins purchased a nearby home at 1913 S St. In 1943 Thompkins became ill and was treated by Dr. Charles Drew. He died in June 1944. According to his younger daughter, Marion Thompkins Ross, Dr. Thompkins had hoped to serve as an ambassador to Haiti so that he might have the opportunity to improve that country's health services. Mrs. Ross also recalls that her mother attended President Truman's inaugural ball in 1945 and was driven home by journalist Drew Pearson's personal chauffeur. Mrs. Ross, a retired teacher, donated her father's collection to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. in 2000.

Dr. Thompkins asked his secretary at the Recorder of Deeds office, Mrs. Betty Briggs, to keep a scrapbook of newspaper articles and other items pertaining to his activities. The William J. Thompkins Collection includes five paintings and one lithograph that are housed separately from the personal papers. The paintings were the winning entries in a mural contest for the new Recorder of Deeds Building completed in 1941. A complete copy of the District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1936, Hearings of the Senate Appropriations Committee, is in the HSW Research Library. A photocopy of the pages that include Thompkins' testimony about funding needs for the Recorder of Deeds is housed with Thompkins' ephemera. One of Thompkins' scrapbooks contained loose, folded newspapers that had deteriorated with age. These were photocopied and the copies placed in folders in as close to original order as possible. Ephemera from that scrapbook were separated from the photocopied material for preservation purposes.

The Thompkins collection is arranged in three series:

SERIES I, WILLIAM J. THOMPCKINS CORRESPONDENCE, 1917-1941, is comprised of an album of sixty-eight letters written to Thompkins in 1934 about his booklet on the New Deal and three unrelated letters. These three letters, which Thompkins displayed in frames, are in fragile condition and researchers are asked to use photocopies provided. One of these is a letter from President Roosevelt to Thompkins. Correspondents in the album include First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, Chicago *Defender* publisher Robert S. Abbott, and numerous other politicians, publishers and prominent attorneys.

SERIES II, WILLIAM J. THOMPCKINS SCRAPBOOKS AND EPHEMERA, ca. 1935-1943, consists of scrapbooks of news clippings and political ephemera, and personal memorabilia. Scrapbook #1 contains articles about Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1936 presidential campaign against Republican candidate Alfred M. Landon, articles about Thompkins and/or the office of Recorder of Deeds, African American politicians, and equal opportunity issues. Scrapbook #2, preserved in photocopy form, covers FDR's 1940 campaign against Wendell Willkie. Scrapbook #3 reflects the nationwide news coverage given to the new Recorder of Deeds Building in the District of Columbia. Loose clippings have been photocopied and placed in folders with ephemera.

SERIES III, WILLIAM J. THOMPSONS PHOTOGRAPHS, ca.1900s-1940s, contains individual and group photos of Thompsons, his medical colleagues, political allies, and other friends and supporters. Many are undated and unidentified, but Thompsons appears in most of the group shots. Photos showing Thompsons at a military field hospital may have been taken at Camp Taylor, Kentucky. There is also a mounted set of portraits of famous men of African descent.

Scope and Content: The William J. Thompsons Collection, ca. 1917-1943 consists of newspaper clippings, political ephemera, photographs, and personal mementos from Thompsons' careers as physician and Recorder of Deeds and his service to the Democratic Party. The bulk of the collection focuses on the 1936 and 1940 presidential campaigns. Some correspondence and photographs pertain to his medical career while most of the scrapbooks and other material reflect his support of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and his work as Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia.

Clippings in the scrapbooks include articles from African American and mainstream newspapers such as the *Afro-American*, *Kansas City American*, *Kansas City News-Press*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Washington Star*. Thompsons' correspondence, clippings, and personal mementos reveal his activities as a member of FDR's "Black cabinet" and his involvement in local and national politics. In addition to providing a view of FDR's campaigns against Landon and Willkie, Thompsons' papers show his acquaintance with presidents, members of Congress, newspaper publishers, and other important contemporaries such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Clark Foreman, William Hastie, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Emmett J. Scott.

Size: 1.2 cubic ft. (five containers)

Donor: Marion Thompsons Ross, 2000.090

Restrictions: None

Related Materials:

Paintings and lithograph (see staff for assistance) Accession No. 2001.019

District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1936, Hearings of the Senate Appropriations Committee, 74th Congress, H.R. 3973. Research Library, HSW. (see staff for assistance)

Container List

SERIES I: WILLIAM J. THOMPCKINS CORRESPONDENCE, 1917-1941

Container 1

Folder 1: Photocopies of special correspondence, 1917-1941. Fragile originals removed from frames and stored for preservation.

Jan. 18, 1917. Letter addressed to President of the United States from R.E.L. Marrs.

Jun. 26, 1940. Letter to Thompkins from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Mar. 31, 1941. Letter to Thompkins from former senator Harry B. Hawes.

Folder 2: Correspondence album, 1934, string-bound volume. Arranged by position of correspondent, beginning with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and executive branch officials followed by cabinet members, legislators, prominent businessmen, and newspaper editors.

SERIES II: WILLIAM J. THOMPCKINS SCRAPBOOKS AND EPHEMERA, ca. 1935-1943

Folder 3: Scrapbook #1, 1935-1937. Bound volume, 203 pages. Not in chronological order, most sources identified and dates indicated. Articles about FDR's 1936 campaign, support of African American voters for New Deal programs; also political cartoons, articles about anti-lynching bill. Ephemera remaining in scrapbook include campaign pamphlets and official Democratic platform. See folder 4 for items removed from Scrapbook #1.

Folder 4: Removals from Scrapbook #1, 1935-1936 and undated. Includes neutrality speech by FDR at Chautauqua, NY, 1936; program from the unveiling ceremony of portraits of former D.C. recorders of deeds, 1936.

Container 2

Folder 5: Photocopied contents of Scrapbook #2, 1940, pages 1-25 (pages in Scrapbook #2 numbered by processor). Not in chronological order. Includes articles from Philadelphia *Tribune* and *Afro-American*, covers 1940 presidential race, articles supporting FDR and Willkie, FDR victory.

Folder 6: Photocopied contents of Scrapbook #2, 1940, pages 26-50. Articles from Kansas City *Journal*, Kansas City *Star*, others, covering third term controversy, promotion of Col. Benjamin O. Davis to Brigadier General and William Hastie's appointment as Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, Missouri election returns.

Folder 7: Photocopied contents of Scrapbook #2, 1940, pages 51-84. Includes clippings from Oklahoma City *Black Dispatch*, Pittsburgh *Times-Dispatch*, St. Louis *Argus*, Washington *Tribune*. Topics include New Deal housing projects, Willkie endorsement by Joe Louis, National Colored Democratic Association poll. See folder 8 for items removed from Scrapbook #2.

Folder 8: Removals from Scrapbook #2, 1940 and undated. Democratic campaign literature, including transcript of Thompkins' speech, "The New Deal and The Negro," to the United Colored Democratic Association of Illinois.

Container 3

Folder 9: Scrapbook #3, 1939-1941. Bound volume, 24 pages (pages numbered on fronts only, total 49 pages). Clippings from New York *Amsterdam News*, Ohio *Defender*, Okmulgee (OK) *Observer*, Washington *Post*, others, cover seventy-fifth anniversary of Thirteenth Amendment, Elks activities, new Recorder of Deeds building. See container 4, folder 10 for items removed from Scrapbook #3.

Container 4

Folder 10: Removals from Scrapbook #3, 1939-1941 and undated. Items from 1940 include photocopy of feature article in Chicago *Defender* on Lincoln University, programs from Recorder of Deeds Building groundbreaking ceremony, and 13th Amendment Diamond Jubilee celebration. Two articles stored with oversize materials in container 5, folder 20.

Folder 11: Loose memorabilia and clippings, 1941-1943 and undated. Items include ticket to DePriest Fifteen annual barbecue, 1941; invitation and program for luncheon in honor of Edwin Barclay, President of Liberia, 1943; guest ID badge from Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard, undated.

Folder 12: District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1936. Photocopy of Hearings, pages 167-177. Complete text in Research Library, HSW. (see staff for assistance)

SERIES III: PHOTOGRAPHS, ca. EARLY 1900s-1940s

Folder 13: Early photographs, unidentified, undated. (2)

Folder 14: Group photographs, military field hospital, unidentified, undated. Thompkins appears in two photos. Louisville, Kentucky photographer. (3)

Folder 15: Autographed photographs of actor Charles S. Gilpin. Three photos on a single print: Gilpin in street clothes, in leading role in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* [1920], as William Custie in *Abraham Lincoln*, undated; matted photograph of Phillip Jordan, valet to David R. Francis,

ambassador to Russia [ca. 1917], inscribed to Mr. and Mrs. Thompkins, re: visit to Russian czar, voyage to U.S. with President Wilson. (2)

Folder 16: Group photograph, marked “Old Gen. Hospital” on back, undated, probably Kansas City, Missouri. Similar group shots of same hospital in oversize container. Group photograph, unidentified, undated. Thompkins appears in both photos. (2)

Folder 17: Individual portrait series of Thompkins, undated. (Woodward Studio, Kansas City), [193?]. (5)

Folder 18: Autographed individual photographs. Charles E. Bentley, 1929 (Wallinger, Chicago); 2nd Assistant Postmaster General Ambrose O’Connell, undated; Congressman M.A. Romjue, undated. (3)

Folder 19: Group photograph of President Franklin Roosevelt with Elks Club members, including Thompkins, first from right, J. Finley Wilson, second from right, Charles Hamilton Houston, third from right, undated, (copyright Jones Photo Service, Washington, D.C.); photograph of Thompkins speaking to Louise Beavers, undated. (2) See container 5, folders 21-23 for oversize photographs.

Container 5

Oversize materials, 1921-1940 and undated

Folder 20: Announcement of Thompkins speech in Richmond, [1940], from Scrapbook #2.

Folder 21: Full-page, two-color piece on discrimination in U.S. military, *Washington Afro-American*, 1940; Chicago *Defender* feature article on Lincoln University of Missouri, both from Scrapbook #3.

Folder 22: Group photograph labeled “House Staff and Internes, Old General Hospital, Kansas City, Mo. October 6, 1921.” (1)

Folder 23: Mounted group photographs. Group photo labeled “Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Ass., May 1921, Okmulgee, Okla.” (Lompton, photographer), Thompkins appears in front row; group photograph, possibly Old General Hospital, undated, (The Fad, C. Bruce Santee, photographer), Thompkins present. (2)

Folder 24: Historical celebrity portrait series with facsimile autographs. Reproductions, copyright 1915, Douglas Specialties, Chicago. Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglas [sic], W.E.B. DuBois, Alexander Dumas, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Henry O.Tanner, S. Coleridge Taylor. (8)