

# William Pickens Papers (Additions)

## Scope and Content

The Additions to the Pickens Papers encompass the years from 1909 to 1950. Pickens had a long and active career, and for most of his life he was on the fringe or near the center of most black political activities, fighting for the cause of black advancement and the improvement of race relations in the United States. These Additions span the period in his professional life when he was affiliated with both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and the U.S. Treasury Department. The bulk of the material relates to his activities with them. Also included are his writings, mainly his Associated Negro Press editorials, as well as newspaper columns, manuscripts for articles, typescripts of speeches, and correspondence requesting his services as a speaker. In addition, these papers document his interest in organizations concerned with national and international political issues and humanitarian causes, such as the Scottsboro Case, American Civil Liberties Union, League for Industrial Democracy, Council for Pan American Democracy, Anti-Imperialist World Congress, and Ethiopian World Federation.

The William Pickens Papers (Additions) are divided into seven series. Series I, **Personal Papers, 1929–1950, n.d.**, focuses on the Pickens family and personal business correspondence (banking, house rentals and maintenance, and income taxes). Business correspondence includes letters from the influential Harlem realtor and businessman John E. Nail, brother-in-law of James Weldon Johnson. There is a small amount of correspondence between Pickens and his wife and other family members; highlighted in this series is correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt concerning his daughter Harriet's accomplishments as one of the first black naval officers in World War II. Additionally, biographical and autobiographical sketches of Pickens's life are included as well as information relating to the sales of, and critical reactions to, his writings.

**General Correspondence, 1925–1949, n.d.**, the second and largest of the series in this collection, is comprised of incoming and outgoing correspondence between Pickens and his friends, acquaintances, fellow scholars, and business associates. Included is correspondence with many organizations with which Pickens was involved, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), League for Industrial Democracy, Socialist Party of America, National Council of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association, American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, and the Council for Pan American Democracy. Pickens corresponded with a wide range of notable figures in government, education, and other fields. He also received, and did not stint in acting upon and answering, requests from strangers seeking his help concerning education or jobs. In addition, he maintained a correspondence with a number of African students.

The series contains revealing correspondence concerning Pickens's feelings about the treatment of blacks in the areas of public transportation and accommodations; he wrote many letters, particularly to railroad lines, complaining about his treatment at the hands of their employees and received a number of apologetic replies. A large amount of correspondence passed between Pickens and Claude A. Barnett and Percival L. Prattis, his associates at the Associated Negro Press. He also corresponded frequently with E. Kinkle Jones of the National

Urban League and with two New York clergymen, John Haynes Holmes of the Community Church and William L. Imes of St. James Presbyterian Church. In the field of politics he corresponded with Roger Baldwin (ACLU) and Socialist leader Norman Thomas.

While correspondence for 1930 through 1940 was voluminous and varied, after Pickens's confrontation with the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee and during his latter years as a government employee he curbed his correspondence with "controversial" organizations. The correspondence in this series is filed chronologically and therein alphabetically by person or institution and, in a few instances, topically. Thus, letters from individual correspondents may be found in more than one location within the series.

Series III, **General Subject Files, 1926–1945**, is divided into three subseries. The first subseries contains correspondence and other material primarily relating to Pickens's early travels abroad to attend conferences, his trip to Cuba with Mary McLeod Bethune in 1930, his service on draft and appeal boards in World War II, and the damaging effect on his career of charges brought against him by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Correspondents of note in this subseries are Helen Keller, Dorothy Parker, and Thyra Edwards. Subject files are arranged chronologically according to topic or organization.

"Speaking Engagements, 1928–1942," are covered in the second subseries. Pickens was an extremely popular speaker and was in constant demand to fulfill engagements for organizations throughout the country from 1926 until 1950, when he retired from the Treasury Department. Full documentation for the speaking engagements after he joined the department is scant. Within the Treasury Department series, however, there is a file entitled "U.S. Treasury Department Travel Receipts, 1946–1947," from which it can be ascertained that Pickens traversed the United States twice, during the latter portion of 1946 and 1947, making speeches for sales of U.S. Savings Bonds.

While many of Pickens's speaking engagements related to his work with the N.A.A.C.P. and the Treasury Department, he was also popular on his own with such organizations as the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., churches, colleges, charities, and political groups. There was a considerable drop in demand for his services after his confrontation with the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1942–43. The correspondence in this subseries is filed chronologically (commencing when correspondence was first generated by the organization to secure Pickens's services) and arranged by organization.

The third subseries, "Forums, 1931–1945," has been treated as a separate category from Speaking Engagements because of the nature of the sponsoring organizations for the Forums. Included in this subseries are the Federal Forums Project, which was government sponsored and funded, and two private, nonprofit forum bureaus, the Adult Education Council of Chicago and the Open Forum Speakers' Bureau, which acted as agents for organizations requiring speakers. The Federal Forums Project material has been arranged according to administrative files concerning the entire forum format throughout the country, and then by individual cities and states in which Pickens was directly involved. Forums are filed by state, in chronological order.

The material found in Series IV, **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1905–1945, n.d.**, documents Pickens's long and distinguished career with the organization. The N.A.A.C.P. records have been organized into two subseries: the Administrative Files, and the Department of Branches Files. Included in the Administrative Files are correspondence, files of the Board of Directors, memoranda, reports, and conference-related materials. A good picture of the overall goals and day-to-day workings of the N.A.A.C.P. are provided

by this material. Of particular interest are letters documenting the contentious relationship between Walter White and Pickens, and Pickens's stormy severance from the N.A.A.C.P. Both issues also are documented in the correspondence and the Board of Directors' minutes.

The second subseries, the Department of Branches Files, contains plans, itineraries, and reports for field work in the branches. Pickens's extremely active role as field secretary, in visiting and making speeches all across the United States, is reflected in the itineraries. The number of branches increased significantly under Pickens's directorship. Correspondents of particular importance are James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Mary White Ovington, Arthur B. Spingarn, Joel E. Spingarn, Roy Wilkins, Thurgood Marshall, and W. E. B. Du Bois. The N.A.A.C.P. correspondence is arranged chronologically, then alphabetically within each year. The remainder of this series is arranged chronologically.

Series V, **United States Treasury Department, 1941–1950, n.d.**, is divided into official and general correspondence, reports, and meetings. At some points the official and general correspondence overlap because much of the general correspondence is with Pickens's fellow workers in the Treasury Department. The reports and meetings categories are scant but clear-cut in nature, providing an adequate picture of his activities.

In arranging the sixth series, **Writings, 1911–1949, n.d.**, the identification or labeling of the material as "Manuscript" or "Editorial" established by Pickens has been maintained. Manuscripts form the bulk of the writings, although it is not clear in what form or if the manuscripts were published. The writings have been arranged alphabetically by title with the inclusive dates given. This series is divided into four subseries: "Manuscripts"; "Editorials"; "Speeches"; and "Columns."

Series VII, **Printed Material, 1923–1944, n.d.**, is divided into "Newspaper Clippings" and "Scrapbooks." The first subseries includes articles and clippings about Pickens as well as miscellaneous clippings on a variety of subjects that were collected by him. The clippings about Pickens are of articles mainly dealing with his numerous speaking engagements, arranged in chronological order with the inclusive dates given; articles collected by him are arranged similarly.

The second is two scrapbooks that contain items collected by Pickens. Some of the material is about him, but the bulk involves issues of the day of interest to him and pertinent to blacks. A small amount of manuscript material concerning his encounter with the House Un-American Activities Committee is also included in vol. 2 of the scrapbooks.