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**John Henry McCray Papers**

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# John Henry McCray Papers, 1929-1989

**Creator:** John Henry McCray (1910-1987)

**Volume:** 12.5 linear feet

**Location:** R1347 - R1364

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## Background

This collection of twelve and one half linear feet of manuscripts documents the life and work of journalist and politician John H. McCray (1910-1987), who, in a letter to a friend, 25 March 1960, appraised his own role as a regional black leader -- "I have no importance other than serving as the medium in a small way through which most of us S.C. Negroes can pass into some degree of civic and political freedom." That medium would be defined by his sixteen-year tenure as editor of one of the chief black newspapers in the history of Southern journalism, the *Lighthouse and Informer*, as well as by his role in founding and leading the Progressive Democrats, for twenty years a force in South Carolina and national politics which McCray himself would claim as "the best organized and most dedicated group of Democrats working in behalf of the Negro party members in the nation." These two entities were to be inextricably linked through his career during the 1940s and 1950s, as the former provided a voice for the latter.

## Education and Training

Born in Youngstown, Fla., McCray moved with his family to South Carolina at the age of six and grew up in the Lincolntonville area of Charleston County. His early interest in writing, speaking and public issues manifested itself during his years at Charleston's Avery Institute, where for three years he was the first honor student in his class, served as editor of the school newspaper, and repeatedly won prizes for his oratorical skills. He graduated from Avery as valedictorian in 1931 (with the highest four-year average of any student since 1872) and went on to receive a B.S. degree in Chemistry from Talladega College (Alabama) in 1935.

When McCray went to work as debit manager for the Charleston office of the North Carolina Mutual Life Company, selling insurance and collecting premiums (1935-1938), he functioned simultaneously as city editor of the *Charleston Messenger*, learning the printing and publishing business in the facilities of the Jenkins Orphanage Printshop.

## ***The Lighthouse: "So our people can have a voice"***

In 1938 he became editor and publisher of *The Lighthouse and Informer*, which in 1941 moved its offices from Charleston to Columbia and provided McCray with the communications base from which to launch his program for black political participation, racial equity, and social justice. "I love The Lighthouse," McCray said in a speech at Mullins, 2 December 1945. "Gave up a nice job to run it. We don't publish it to make money. We publish it so our people can have a voice and some means of getting along together." Cited by the New York Press Club in 1950 as the "best edited Southern Negro weekly," the paper was later referred to by one of his regional colleagues as "truly the one burning torch in the benighted state of South Carolina" (*Carolina Times* [Durham] 18 August 1951). And in 1953 Greenville lawyer and politician John Bolt

Culbertson wrote Walter P. Reuther that he considered the *Lighthouse and Informer* "the cohesive force which makes the South Carolina NAACP the model for other southern state chapters of this organization."

McCray gave up editing and publishing the *Lighthouse and Informer* in July 1954 (file copies of the newspaper were sold that year as scrap paper to a salvage firm in West Columbia), for employment with the Baltimore *Afro-American* (1954-1960), for which he conducted "roving reportorial assignments," supervised some 150 agents, and sold and mailed subscriptions and advertising space. A comprehensive scrapbook of clippings from the *Afro-American* for 1955 survives as a specimen one-year compilation of McCray's writing, editorial, and reportorial skills. From 1960 to 1962 he was Carolina Editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Between 1962 and 1964, while waiting for a government position to materialize ("I was assured employment by July of 1962 by a Federal Agency," he wrote W.G. Edwards, 17 August 1963), he served as an editorial assistant for the *Chicago Defender* and an associate editor of the *Atlanta World*, which meant that he functioned largely as an itinerant Southern editorial writer and columnist. McCray made several abortive attempts in the early 1960s to re-establish a newspaper in Columbia: in the collection are copies of the first issue, 23 November 1963, of *The Lighthouse*, as well as the original calligraphic rendering of its masthead. But in 1964, after these journalistic efforts failed and after having tried unsuccessfully through political patronage channels and local contacts to find suitable employment in Columbia -- "I grew up in South Carolina, am rooted to it and to leave it, especially under the prevailing circumstances, would be personally grievous and tantamount to refuting the theory of opportunity and possibilities I have written about and advocated many years" (letter to W.G. Edwards, 17 May 1963) -- he accepted an offer from Talladega College to become director of public relations. He retired as director of recruitment and admissions in 1981 and died in 1987.

### **"Legends of a Negro Editor"**

Through the years McCray had also been commissioned to handle special assignments for such periodicals as the *New York Times*, the *New York Post*, *Time*, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, the *Louisville Defender*, the *Michigan Chronicle*, *Seventeen*, *People's Voice*, the *Carolina Times*, the *Boston Guardian*, and the *Nashville Tennessean*. Between 1980 and 1987 he contributed a column to the *Charleston Chronicle* entitled "The Way It Was," in which he commented upon the major political and social events of his time and place and upon his role in them. In 1982 the *Chronicle* ran his "Legends of a Negro Editor" for seven installments as part of this series on South Carolina politics past and present. On 21 February 1982 he wrote -- "There is something about working on a newspaper that haunts you forever. It's more than the smell of printer's ink, the sight of it on your hands and clothing. It's more than writing a story, an editorial piece and helping them get into print. Whatever it is, say old-timers in the profession, it gets into your blood. If you happen to be non-white and get into the business, you are definitely on a shoe string in resources, plagued by meeting payrolls, the rent, utilities and the various and sundry other expenses connected with the business hard-nosed business people say are so worrisome that only a 'plum stomped down fool' would do what you are trying to do. Invariably, you are committed to fighting for an ethnic group that doesn't patronize you enough to pay even the rent. You have to find some way of trading enough with white concerns that will work with you, while you consistently blast away at some other whites. Sort of crazy business."

In addition to his principal journalistic responsibilities as a writer and publisher, McCray also functioned as a photographer, taking many of the news and feature pictures which appeared in the *Lighthouse and Informer* and elsewhere. The collection contains some 1400 prints and 1100 negatives, made largely during the 1940s and 1950s. They include portraits of black South Carolinians individually and in groups, as well as depictions of miscellaneous events and occasions.

As one of the leading figures in the small cadre of prominent twentieth-century black journalists in the South, and as editor of what Culberston in his letter to Reuther of 10 September 1953 described as "the largest weekly newspaper and the only Negro newspaper in South Carolina," McCray was in a unique position to address the twin issues of racial discrimination and black political disfranchisement. Thus, using the *Lighthouse and Informer* as his mouthpiece, McCray was instrumental in founding the South Carolina Progressive Democratic Party and served as its first state chairman.

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### **Scope and Content**

Approximately four linear feet of manuscripts and miscellaneous printed items document the history of the Progressive Democratic Party, or "PDP," as it came to be known, which was formally established at a state convention held in Columbia on 24 May 1944 -- with "the full support and endorsement of all Negro organizations in the state, our ministers and leaders and the liberal white people" as "the ONE organization our people have waited for" (letter to "Fellow Citizens," 17 May 1944). The PDP was founded shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court's 1944 Texas decision (which established the rights of blacks to vote in state primaries) and in response to the reaction of white South Carolina Democrats who instigated the calling of a special legislative session to erase from the state statutes all laws pertaining to primaries (thus turning the party into a club in order to maintain white supremacy) "to work collectively for admission into the Democratic Party of South Carolina of all citizens so inclined without deference to race or color" (letter to Dr. W.W. Jones, 21 July 1948). McCray wrote Adam Clayton Powell, 8 June 1944, that its organization was "also a follow through on the repeated advice of the white Democrats: 'Go and found your own party.'"

In a letter to President John F. Kennedy, 3 May 1961, McCray explained that the use of the word "Progressive" in the title of the organization was "both a sentimentality and a convenience: It was proposed originally by a Columbia white woman Democrat who was a charter member . . . The word . . . fits our group better than the word 'Negro', which we were trying to avoid using generally at the time in an effort to eliminate racial prejudices." The PDP's initial agenda thus had been largely but not exclusively racial. In 1944 the party had adopted a ten-point platform which supported wholehearted prosecution of the war effort, elimination of regionally discriminatory freight rates, federal aid for education, opposition to the poll tax, enactment of an anti-lynching law, federal prohibition of racial discrimination in hiring practices, a more equitable regional distribution of federal development funds, and the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to a fourth term as president of the United States.

By 1948, after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision gave "what we had organized to get four years before as Negroes -- full membership rights within the party," the PDP had disbanded and

reorganized as "Progressive Democrats," a political action group whose purpose was to function as "members of the State Democratic party . . . a sort of committee or section concerned primarily with Negro status, goals and problems in the S.C. Democratic Party" (letter of McCray, 25 June 1964). McCray would later recall, in a speech of 5 November 1982 -- "The 'Party', or last 'P' was dropped from the organization just before the David Brown VS Baskin second primary lawsuit . . . at the suggestions of Judge J. Waites Waring, . . . NY NAACP lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Harold R. Boulware, and Mr. Hinton, State NAACP president. The rationale behind this revision was to take away from white party leaders their argument that they had the right to discriminate racially as did PDP."

Between 1948 and 1962 McCray continued to work through the Progressive Democrats to organize black people in the struggle for equal rights and, in pushing for "the emergence of the Negro as a major political factor" (PMS article, 5 June 1950), to press towards the goal of black voter registration. In 1953 Culbertson would claim that under McCray's leadership more than one hundred thousand Negroes had registered for voting in South Carolina (Culberston to Reuther, 10 September). A decade later McCray issued a lengthy news analysis in which he stated that since 1960 the Progressive Democrats had kept extensive records on "registration progress" and declared that Negro voter registration in South Carolina appeared to be "60-70 percent, perhaps even higher, than some recently publicized figures indicate" ("Re: Negro Voter-Registration," 3 August 1963).

Information and material on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also permeates the collection, as McCray served as state director of its Voter Registration Action and was credited with organizing approximately forty local branches in South Carolina between 1940 and 1950, resulting in the NAACP's largest state membership in the South (PMS article, 5 June 1950). Thurgood Marshall is cited as praising McCray for "the wonderful work" that he had been doing "free of charge for the NAACP" (Culberston to Reuther, 21 September 1953). And McCray himself would later say that the impact "most worth recalling is PDP and NAACP were made up generally of one and same people . . . There [was] no in-fighting between the two organizations; no jealousies, nobody with hands held out for dollars from the enemy. In that sense, this era served as a model to be remembered, one whose vast impacts over a large section of the nation are beneficial to both the Negro, and the country" (speech, 5 November 1982). This also indicates that one of McCray's chronic concerns was with what he called "intra-racial disorder" and the critical matter of cooperation among the state's black leaders. "If we, Negroes, cannot work together for democratic rights," he wrote G.S. Porcher, of Georgetown, in 1960, "then we can hardly expect those of other races to do so in our behalf; nor can we expect our probable followships to adopt our programs . . . too many Negroes are still fighting against one another instead of closing ranks and throwing their full strength against their common enemies."

The collection also testifies to McCray's role in directing the campaign of Osceola McKaine against Olin D. Johnston for the U.S. Senate in 1944; in organizing South Carolina election campaigns for the Democratic national candidates between 1944 and 1960; and in leading the contesting delegations to Democratic national conventions in 1944, 1948, and 1960. Other units of special interest or significance relate to a 1945 project to document the number of Negro police officers in Southern cities; the 1946 meeting of the Southern Negro Youth Conference held in Columbia; his involvement in a 1950 Greenwood libel case and his subsequent brief

imprisonment in Newberry County ("I am proud of that . . . indictment, and shall always be . . . I had nothing about which to be ashamed" -- McCray to S.L. Latimer, 17 April 1959); a 1959 appearance before Congressional sub-committees in Washington to deliver his "Statement on Civil Rights"; the "April 26 Affair," concerning black exclusion from a state Democratic Party fund-raising dinner in 1961; and his active support in 1962 of the nomination of Thurgood Marshall to a seat on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals.

Miscellaneous files in the collection focus upon such subjects and organizations as Atlantic Beach; Boy Scouts of America; First American Corporation; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity; Palmetto Education Association; Palmetto Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association; and the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Information can also be found on the African Methodist Episcopal Church (he was a member of the Chappelle Memorial Church, Columbia) and on Allen University, as well as on such other schools, colleges and universities as Avery, Benedict, Claflin, Morris, and South Carolina State -- including early history of the integration of the University of South Carolina.

Among the major correspondents are Lester L. Bates, Levi G. Byrd, Arthur J. Clement, Jr., James M. Hinton, Osceola McKaine, I. DeQuincey Newman, Thurgood Marshall, and John H. Wrighten. The collection also contains valuable research material on Willie Earle, George Elmore, and Strom Thurmond.

"Perhaps the greatest thing which has come to Columbia, in its history, for colored people in this section," the Rev. J.C. Colclough, pastor of the city's Sidney Park C.M.E. Church, wrote McCray on 5 April 1943, "is an Editor like yourself, with a newspaper which in its general ethics appeals to the better element of the better class of the white folk, as well as making a clean challenge to every race man and woman to right-a-bout-face forward to progress and to victory." In later years the name and the man would be described as "the most feared in South Carolina during our battle . . . He was close enough in the circle to serve, yet far enough away to criticise where necessary and then point the way" (unidentified fragment of an NAACP testimonial). And the claim would ultimately be made for John McCray that he had "done more for Negroes in South Carolina than any man since Reconstruction" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, undated.).

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**Administrative Notes**

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