The Register of Frances E. Williams Papers, 1965-1995

Collection number: MSS 086

Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research
Los Angeles, California

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Frances E. Williams Papers,
Date (inclusive): 1965-1995
Collection number: MSS 086
Creator: Frances. E. Williams
Extent: 13 boxes 4 1/3 linear feet
Repository: Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research
Los Angeles, CA 90044

Abstract: The collection contains Frances E. Williams' personal papers from 1965 to 1995 relating to her professional career as an actress, personal/cultural interests, community involvements, and to a larger extent her political activism. The bulk of the material covers the years between 1975 and 1986 when Williams was active in the anti-apartheid and communist solidarity movements taking place in the greater Los Angeles area. The collection also includes materials pertaining to the Frances E. Williams Corner Theater, her most personal project in which she converted her garage in South Los Angeles into a theater where young actors, writers, and artists from the neighborhood would come together to practice their crafts.

Language: English.

Access

The collection is available for research only at the Library’s facility in Los Angeles. The Library is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Researchers are encouraged to call or email the Library indicating the nature of their research query prior to making a visit.

Publication Rights

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Frances E. Williams Papers, 1965-1995

Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Frances E. Williams Papers, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California.

Provenance
The collection was donated to the Library by the estate of Frances E. Williams following her death in 1995.

Biography
Frances Elizabeth Williams (b. June 17, 1905; d. January 2, 1995)

Frances E. Williams was a notable African-American actress and activist in Los Angeles from the early 1940s until her death in 1995. As an actress, she was a pivotal force in the arts community, serving as a role model to many young, aspiring actors wanting to make it in the film industry during a time when racial discrimination was widely accepted and practiced. As an activist, she was an outspoken advocate for social justice and equality at the local level, and her political activism spanned outside her local community to around the world. She was most notably involved in the South African anti-apartheid movement and communist solidarity activities. She was an extraordinary individual who fiercely fought for the rights of all people, passionately believing that every individual regardless of race, age, gender, and political affiliation is created equal.

Born on September 17, 1905 in East Orange, New Jersey, Frances E. Williams shortly afterwards moved with her family to Cleveland, Ohio where she spent most of her childhood. At the age of 16, she began her acting career on stage at the famous Karamu Theater, one of the oldest African-American theaters. There she formed lifelong friendships with other renowned figures like Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and Ethel Waters. In 1934 at the encouragement of Paul Robeson, Williams went to study theater arts in Russia at the height of the socialist revolution. It was during this time that she came into close contact with socialist philosophies and formed ties with those of communist convictions. It was also in Russia that she received the formal training and education in acting that she would not have otherwise received in a still highly segregated America. She returned to New York two years later with the intention to pursue her acting career in theater. Theater being her first love, Williams initially had no desire to work in films or television when she moved to California in 1941. She also felt a deep sense of disdain for the stereotypical, demeaning roles that were given to blacks in Hollywood during that time. However, the desire to improve the conditions of her fellow African-Americans in the arts outweighed the personal sense of frustration. She entered Hollywood believing that she could only make an impact from the inside, which she did by helping to start the Actors' Equity Association and working as the assistant director of the landmark film "Salt of the Earth" amidst the racism and discrimination she received. Unabashedly herself in speaking her mind and making her views known, Frances Williams came to be known as a feisty and vibrant actor who delighted her audiences. She indeed paved the way for many of today's African-American artists and entertainers in Hollywood.

However, Frances Williams was clearly more than a socially-conscious actress. She was an activist and humanitarian in her own right, who deeply felt a social and moral responsibility towards her community and the world at large. In her local community, she was involved in various organizations as a member of the Arts Advisory Board and the California Arts Council and as the co-founder of the Los Angeles African-American Arts Council. As a political activist, she was one of the first black women to run for the California State Assembly in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket. She also represented the World Peace Council at the first Angola Independence Celebration in 1975, helped to organize Women for Racial and Economic Equality (WREE) in Chicago, co-founded the Art Against Apartheid Movement in Los Angeles, and was actively involved in number of other political efforts.

Another of Williams' great contribution was the Frances E. Williams Corner Theater, her most personal project of all. She converted her garage into a theater where young, aspiring writers and actors from the neighborhood could come to express their artistic talents and creativity. She offered a gathering place and opportunities, which would not otherwise be available to the youth living in economically and socially depressed South Los Angeles. Having lived a truly full and meaningful life devoted to the fight for justice, equality, and rights of all people, she died on January 2, 1995 at the age of 89.

Scope and Content
The collection contains personal and organizational correspondence, calendars, photos, conference reports, legal documents, handwritten notes, and various flyers, mailings, and invitations detailing Frances E. Williams' interests and activities. It also includes a 30-minute video dialog of Frances Williams at the William Grant Still Gallery in 1982. The materials document Frances Williams' cultural interests, professional career, community involvements, and political activism in the anti-apartheid and communist solidarity efforts. Having been the chairperson of National Anti-Imperialist Movement in Solidarity with African Liberations (NAIMSAL), Los Angeles Chapter, co-founder of Art Against Apartheid, and an active member of the World Council, Williams' political materials are the highlight of the collection. This includes materials documenting her personal support of Paul Robeson, Bill Taylor, and William Patterson, all well-known African-American political activists of the time. The materials relating to her community activities detail Williams' particular
interest in the arts and cultural scene of Los Angeles, desegregation of the schools, and various public works projects aimed at improving the neighborhood. Also of special interest is the section on the Frances E. Williams Corner Theater, a theater that she started at her garage in an effort to bring together young artists around the neighborhood. The collection includes over twenty play scripts submitted to Frances for her review.

**Arrangement**


**Separated Material**

Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*
Los Angeles Public Library Films Catalog, 1974

**Title:** Charlotta A. Bass Papers,
**Date (inclusive):** 1874-1968
**Physical Description:** 8 document boxes, 3 cubic feet

**Title:** · Bill Taylor Papers,
**Date (inclusive):** [1960s-1970s], unprocessed
**Physical Description:** [3 cubic feet]

**Title:** Frances E. Williams 1905-1995 Film Clips,
**Date:** n.d.,
**Physical Description:** 11-minutes,
**Location:** Video Collection, tape # 96


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**Series 1. Personal, 1965-1995**

**Physical Description:** 44 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

This series contains Williams' personal materials including her passport, weekly calendars and address books, and extensive personal correspondence with friends. It also includes a proposed outline of an biography on Frances Williams which was published in 1999 under the title, *Meet it, Greet it, and Defeat it: The biography of Frances E. Williams*. The section on Arts and Culture includes assorted flyers, mailings, and invitations from various organizations and local art galleries such as the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park. The materials on Surinam detail Williams' initial visit in 1981 and the theater tour she led in 1982. There is also an extensive amount of handwritten notes (some illegible) placed in the original order it was collected. The photos are mostly of her friends, many of whom include other famous African-American figures like Paul Robeson, Beah Richards, Sydney Poitier, Marilyn McCoo, and Billy Davis. The 30-minute video is a talk Frances Williams gave at the William Grant Still Gallery in 1982 as part of the "History of Blacks in Film" series. It is a personal and candid talk on Williams' fight against discrimination as a black actress in Hollywood.

Box-folder 1/1
- Passport, 1975-1980

Box-folder 1/2
- Memorial service, Jan. 1995

Box-folder 1/3
- Autobiography proposal, 1993

Box-folder 1/4
- Address books, n.d.

Box-folder 1/5
- Handwritten names and addresses, n.d.

Box-folder 1/6
- Yearly calendar, 1981

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Frances E. Williams Papers, 1965-1995
| Box-folder 1/7 | Weekly calendar, 1977 |
| Box-folder 1/8 | Weekly calendar, 1978 |
| Box-folder 1/9 | Weekly calendar, 1979 |
| Box-folder 2/1-2/6 | Correspondence |
| Box-folder 2/1-2/6 | Personal, 1974-1976 |
| Box-folder 2/2-2/6 | Personal, 1977-1979 |
| Box-folder 2/3 | Personal, 1980-1984 |
| Box-folder 2/5 | Personal, n.d. |
| Box-folder 2/7-2/9 | Finances |
| Box-folder 2/7 | Bank statements, 1980-1981 |
| Box-folder 2/9 | Unemployment Insurance Appeals Hearing, 1980 |
| Box-folder 2/10 | Business cards, n.d. |
| Box-folder 2/11 | Children's drawings, n.d. |
| Box-folder 2/12-3/6 | Arts and culture |
| Box-folder 2/12 | Conferences and events programs, 1990-1991 |
| Box-folder 3/1-3/3 | Museums, galleries |
| Box-folder 3/4 | Poems, essays, and songs, n.d. |
| Box-folder 4/1-4/6 | Travel |
| Box-folder 4/2-4/6 | Surinam |
| Box-folder 4/2 | Travel documents, Nov. 1981 |
| Box-folder 4/3 | Theater tour, June-July 1982 |
| Box-folder 4/4 | Articles about Surinam, n.d. |
| Box-folder 4/5 | Brochures, pamphlets, n.d. |
| Box-folder 4/6 | "Rebirth in Words: Poetry and Prose from Surinam", 1981 |
| Box-folder 4/8 | Assorted documents, n.d. |
| Box-folder 4/9 | Handwritten notes, n.d. |
| Box-folder 5/1 | Blank cards n.d. |
| Box-folder 5/2 | Video, Frances E. Williams in Dialog, 1982 |
| Box-folder 5/3-5/6 | Photos, [1940?1995?] |
| Box-folder 5/3 | Personal, friends |
| Box-folder 5/4 | Events |
| Box-folder 5/5 | Headshots |
| Box-folder 5/6 | Various |

**Series 2. Acting and theater career, 1977-1994**

**Physical Description:** 55 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

This series contains materials directly relating to Williams' acting career in Hollywood during the late 1970s and 1980s, including her most well-known role in the sitcom Frank's Place. It also includes materials documenting Williams' membership in several professional organizations, the Actors' Equity Association being one of which she helped to establish and served on as a board member for 20 years. The section on the Frances E. Williams Corner Theater documents her extraordinary vision and efforts to form a community of actors and writers to come together and nurture their talents. It includes flyers, programs, and newspaper clippings of plays performed at the Corner Theater. The series includes over twenty play scripts (some of which were performed at the Corner Theater) submitted to Williams for her review. Williams' comments on the play scripts are also included.
Box-folder 5/7  Headshot photos n.d.
Box-folder 5/8  Resume, n.d.
Box-folder 5/9  Award nominations, 1982, 1985, 1989
Box-folder 5/10-5/14  Memberships
Box-folder 5/11  Screen Actors Guild, 1987-1989
Box-folder 5/13  American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, 1988-1989
Box-folder 5/14  Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 1988, n.d.
Box-folder 5/15-5/18  Television appearances
Box-folder 5/15  Call sheets, 1982, 1990
Box-folder 5/16  Cast & crew lists, 1982, 1990
Box-folder 5/17-5/18  Frank's Place
  Photo of cast, n.d.
  General, 1988
Box-folder 5/19-5/22  Frances E. Williams' Group
Box-folder 5/19  Mailing list, n.d.
Box-folder 5/20  Minutes, Aug. 1981
Box-folder 5/22  Resumes n.d.
Box-folder 6/1-6/9  Frances E. Williams Corner Theater
Box-folder 6/2  Mailing list n.d.
Box-folder 6/3  Invoices, 1994
Box-folder 6/4  Quarterly reports, 1993-1994
Box-folder 6/5  SEED scholarship, 1990
Box-folder 6/6  Announcements, 1984, n.d.
Box-folder 6/8  Flyers, programs, n.d.
Box-folder 6/10  Interview with Luisah Teish, 1985
Box-folder 6/11-9/1  Play scripts
  Comments of review, n.d.
Box-folder 6/11  Miscellaneous, n.d.
Box-folder 6/13  Angelou, Maya. And I Still Rise, 1977
Box-folder 6/15  Brooks, Joan Halimah. The Reunion, 1984
Box-folder 6/16  Burgess, Granville. Dusky Sally, 1985
Box-folder 6/17  Campbell, Clifford. 21 Jump Street: Cory and Dean Get Married, 1988
Box-folder 6/18  Christian, Anna. The Big Table, n.d.
Box-folder 7/1  Davis, Gail and Clyde Santana. The Phantom of the 87th St. Playground, 1980
Box-folder 7/2  Finney, Sara V., Kathleen McGhee, and Joan Halimah Brooks. Olivia: A Trilogy, 1986
Box-folder 7/3  Freeman, Vincent Patrick. Leona, 1982
Box-folder 7/4  Galloway, Stephen. A Little Night Magic, 1982
Box-folder 7/5  Greenwood, Frank. Please Call Me Langston, [1985]
Box-folder 7/6  Gibson, William. Handy Dandy: A Comedy But, 1984
Box-folder 7/7  Harrison-Devore, Frances. Ring around the Rosie, 1981
Box-folder 7/8  Hodges, J.J. Never Enough, n.d.
Box-folder 7/9  Los Angeles Playwrights. Coming Home to the NAACP and Black Theatre, [1989]
Box-folder 8/1  McGhee-Anderson, Kathleen. Oak and Ivy, 1985
Box-folder 8/2  Moreland, J.B. To Woodrow Wilson: A Stage Play, n.d.
Box-folder 8/3  Prince, Paul. The Mark of a Man, n.d.

Frances E. Williams Papers, MSS 086
1965-1995

- Box-folder 8/6: Sain, L.C. *What Is to Be Done?* 1985
- Box-folder 8/7: S.n. *Over Fried Chicken*, n.d.
- Box-folder 9/1: Partial play scripts, n.d.
- Box-folder 9/2: Speeches, n.d.


Physical Description: 14 folders

Scope and Content Note
This series document Williams' activism as a community organizer in various issues concerning the Los Angeles community, especially in the area of arts education and school desegregation. The series contains mailings, meeting notes, and proposals relating to the activities of the Arts Advisory Board, LA African American Arts Council, and the California Arts Council. It also documents Williams' involvement in public works efforts to improve the local neighborhood in areas of sanitation, road safety, and childcare.

- Box-folder 9/3-9/5: Arts Advisory Board
  - Box-folder 9/3: Correspondence, 1990
  - Box-folder 9/4: Meeting notes, 1990
  - Box-folder 9/5: Los Angeles Cultural Master Plan, 1990
- Box-folder 9/6: Los Angeles African American Arts Council, 1990
- Box-folder 9/7: California Arts Council, 1988, n.d.
- Box-folder 9/8-9/9: Education in Los Angeles
  - Box-folder 9/8: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. scholarship, 1990-1991
  - Box-folder 9/9: Flyers, brochures, n.d.
- Box-folder 9/10: Childcare legislation, 1980
- Box-folder 9/11: Los Angeles bicentennial celebration, 1979, 1981
- Box-folder 9/12: Committee to save Sunset Hall, 1990
- Box-folder 9/13-9/16: Public works
  - Box-folder 9/13: Neighborhood watch signs, n.d.
  - Box-folder 9/14: Ordinance on Public Works Improvement, n.d.


Physical Description: 7 folders

Scope and Content Note
This is a small collection of materials relating to Williams' involvement in various religious organizations and churches in the greater Los Angeles area. The most extensive material is from the Diocese of Los Angeles, which includes copies of the nomination forms for the 1981 election of church officials.

- Box-folder 9/17-9/19: The Church in the Diocese of Los Angeles
  - Box-folder 9/17: General, 1980-81
  - Box-folder 9/18: Nominations for elected officials, 1979, 1981
  - Box-folder 9/19: Newsletter, 1981

Physical Description: 7 folders

Scope and Content Note
As a personal friend and supporter of the famous actor and activist Paul Robeson, Williams was actively involved in establishing the Paul Robeson Community Center that was devoted to serving the ethnic community of South Los Angeles. The materials relate to organizing events and rallies in fighting against discrimination, oppression, and imperialism in conjunction with the Paul Robeson Community Center. The series also includes original or copies of nomination forms for the Paul Robeson Citation Award and selected entries of the Paul Robeson 21st Century World Citizen Essay Contest. The clippings relate to the work and events of the Paul Robeson Community Center.

Box-folder 10/4 Tribute to Paul Robeson, 1991
Box-folder 10/5 Paul Robeson Citation Award nominations, 1979, 1981, n.d.
Box-folder 10/6 Paul Robeson 21st Century World Citizen Contest, entries, 1991


Physical Description: 8 folders

Scope and Content Note
This series documents Williams' involvement in the Tribute to Bill Taylor Committee as its chairperson. The committee was committed to raising fund for Bill Taylor, an active union leader and a chairperson of the Communist Party USA. The series includes mailings, invitations, and programs of events held in tribute to Bill Taylor. It also includes names and addresses of supporters of Bill Taylor.

Box-folder 10/8 Correspondence, 1975
Box-folder 10/9 Sponsors and patrons, n.d.
Box-folder 10/10 Receipt book, 1975
Box-folder 11/10/13 Tribute to Bill Taylor, event
Box-folder 10/11 Committee name list, n.d.
Box-folder 10/12 Invitations, program, 1975, n.d.
Box-folder 10/13 Program notes, n.d.
Box-folder 10/14 William C. Taylor Memorial committee, 1980
Box-folder 10/15 Clippings, 1980


Physical Description: 3 folders

Scope and Content Note
This is a small collection of materials on Williams' involvement in the William L. Patterson Foundation as a personal friend of William and Louise Patterson and as a board member. The series consist mostly of correspondence relating to the activities of the foundation.

Box-folder 10/18 Louise Patterson, 1989, n.d.

Physical Description: 19 folders

Scope and Content Note
This series is divided according to the different political organizations that Williams was involved in, including her participation in the Women's Congress in 1980, correspondence in regards to upcoming activities sponsored by WREE and the World Peace Council, and support of the various labor unions active in the Los Angeles area. It also includes materials (clippings, flyers, mailings) relating to the Wilmington Ten Case, which was a well-known civil rights case of the time. The assorted flyers, mailings, and invitations primarily consist of announcements of political rallies, protests, and updates of events. The publication section includes informational pamphlets on various issues like nuclear arms, Zionism and racism, and the Black Panther movement.

Box-folder
10/19-10/20
Box-folder 10/19
Box-folder 10/20
Box-folder
10/21-10/24
Box-folder 10/21
Box-folder 10/22
Box-folder 10/23
Box-folder 10/24
Box-folder
10/25-10/28
Box-folder 10/25
Box-folder 10/26
Box-folder 10/27
Box-folder 10/28
Box-folder 10/29
Box-folder
10/30-10/33
Box-folder 10/30
Box-folder 10/31
Box-folder 10/32
Box-folder 10/33
Box-folder 11/1
Box-folder 11/2
Box-folder 11/3
Box-folder 11/4

The Women's Congress
Annual Conference, Oct. 3-5, 1980
Handwritten notes, n.d.

Women for Racial and Economic Equality (WREE)
Proposed bylaws, n.d.
Speech transcripts, n.d.
Bulletin, May-Aug. 1977

World Peace Council
Information sheets, n.d.
Mailings, flyers, 1976-1978

The Black Caucus, name list, n.d.

Labor unions

The Coalition of Black Trade Unionist, n.d.


Posters, n.d.
Series 9. **Anti-apartheid activism, 1975-1989**

**Physical Description:** 29 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

This series well documents Williams' involvement in the South African anti-apartheid movement, especially as it pertains to activities taking place in Los Angeles. The materials document great efforts made to prevent the building of the South African Consulate in Century City/Los Angeles through petitions, rallies, and meetings. As the chairperson of NAIMSAL, Los Angeles Office, Williams was in close correspondence with the American Committee on Africa and the Washington Office on Africa, uniting their efforts to fight against apartheid in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. Although Williams' attendance at the international conferences cannot be determined, the section on Conferences includes comprehensive reports from the listed conferences. Materials suggest that Williams was peripherally involved in efforts to fight for equality in sports and humanitarian aid for African children. The flyers, mailings, and publications primarily consist of announcements of events, rallies, and protests in support of the anti-apartheid movements taking place in area. The bulk of the newspaper clippings from the late 1970s are on Angola's fight for independence and the clippings from 1980s are mostly on anti-apartheid protests, South Africa, and Nelson Mandela.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box-folder</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/5</td>
<td>Mailings, 1976-1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/6</td>
<td>Handwritten notes, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/7</td>
<td>Membership list, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/9-11/12</td>
<td>South African Consulate, Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/9</td>
<td>Correspondence, petitions, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/10</td>
<td>Ad Hoc Committee on South African Consulate, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/12</td>
<td>Statement to Mayor Tom Bradley, June 16, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/15</td>
<td>Art against Apartheid Los Angeles, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/18-11/22</td>
<td>National Anti-Imperialist Movement in Solidarity with African Liberation (NAIMSAL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/18</td>
<td>Information sheets, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/19</td>
<td>Minutes, June 3, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/20</td>
<td>Financial statements, receipts, 1979-1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/22</td>
<td>Newsletters, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/1-12/4</td>
<td>Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/1</td>
<td>World Conference Against Apartheid, Racism, and Colonialism in Southern Africa, June 16-19, 1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/2</td>
<td>Conference of Solidarity with the Struggle of the African and Arab Peoples, Sept. 14-17, 1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/3</td>
<td>The International Conference in Support of the Liberation Movements in Southern Africa, April 10-12, 1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/4</td>
<td>Conference in Solidarity with the Liberation Struggles of the Peoples of Southern Africa, Oct. 9-11, 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>Feed the Children, South Africa, 1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/7</td>
<td>Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/8</td>
<td>Assorted notes, n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Series 10. Communist solidarity activism, 1974-1990

Scope and Content Note
This series documents Williams' involvement in various communist solidarity efforts. Williams received mailings from the CPUSA and collected informational brochures and reports generated by the Party. The series include seven full articles from Radio Moscow transcribed and mailed from Russia.

Box-folder 13/1-13/5
Communist Party, USA
Box-folder 13/2 Report to the 22nd Convention, CPUSA, n.d.
Box-folder 13/3 Report on the 1977 People's World Circulation Drive, n.d.
Box-folder 13/4 Miscellaneous, 1990, n.d.
Box-folder 13/5 Publications, 1979, 1985
Box-folder 13/7 Radio Moscow, articles, 1985


Scope and Content Note
This series consists of newspaper and magazine clippings that Williams collected over the years. The topics range from recipes to travel advertisements, to personality features of other actors and actresses.