



Guide to the Viola Hill papers, 1909-1948

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Summary

Collection Title:

Viola Hill papers, 1909-1948

Creator:

Hill, Viola

Source:

Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture; John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture

Abstract:

Viola Hill (1895-1969) was an African American soprano and businesswoman of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her papers date from 1909-1948, and comprise many folders of professional and personal correspondence; recital programs, sheet music, and scores; clippings and other print materials; music notebooks; tour schedules, contacts, and publicity, including some photographs of Hill; and financial and educational materials. The papers document Hill's career and entrepreneurship as a professionally-trained vocalist; the status and professional activities of African Americans in music across the United States in the early 20th century, including comments about racial discrimination; and the societies, clubs, and educational institutions which supported African American musicians. Acquired as part of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture and the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture.

Extent:

2.0 Linear Feet (4 boxes; 1 oversize folder)

Language:

English .

Collection ID:

RL.12049

Collection ID [Archivists Toolkit Database::ACCESSION]:

28661

Permalink:

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m13b2d>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Viola Hill papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

Collection consists of the papers of Viola Hill, an African American soprano from Philadelphia (1895-1969), dating from 1909 to 1948. About half of the papers consist of Hill's professional and some personal correspondence, chiefly incoming; other papers include many recital programs and publicity, music scores, clippings, business cards, music notebooks, travel and tour schedules, lists of contacts, expense notes, and bills and receipts. There are a few photographic images of Hill as a young woman.

The materials document Viola Hill's voice career, and especially her entrepreneurship in managing her voice training and organizing tours and concerts across the U.S. Other papers document her role as secretary of the Philadelphia branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NAMN), and her business and musical collaborations with important mentors: NAMN president, musician, composer, and singer Carl Diton, Black violinist and composer Clarence Cameron White, and her professional voice teacher in Philadelphia, Percy Dunn Aldrich.

The materials in this collection also inform the history of African American men and women professional musicians and entertainers in the 20th century, particularly in piano, classical and operatic music, and in the spiritual tradition. Among the sheet music and scores are examples of African American-composed music. There are several references in letters and publicity to Black singer Marion Anderson.

There is little material on Viola Hill's personal life, though the correspondence contains letters from close friends and relatives, including a J. G. Morton from N.C. who addresses her as "cousin." Of interest are many letters from male and female fellow musicians and vocalists, including friends from her music school classmates.

Biographical/Historical

Viola Hill (1895-1969), who also signs some items in the collection as Viola R. H. Hill, Viola Ruth Harrison Hill, and after 1935, Viola Hill Green, was an African American soprano, music teacher, and business entrepreneur of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Born in Virginia on February 2, 1895, by 1900 Hill was living in Philadelphia with her family.

She received a Certificate of Proficiency in Music from the University of Pennsylvania. Based on reviews and performance compensation, her career advanced rapidly after her schooling, reaching its peak in the mid-1920s, when she was organizing and carrying out multi-city tours chiefly in the East and Midwest. She was active in the National Association of Negro Musicians, serving as president of the Philadelphia branch.

Marriage records indicate that Viola Hill married Jerald "Jerry" Green in Philadelphia in 1931, and she then lived with her husband in their house on Wyalusing Avenue in Philadelphia. However, she is still listed as living with her brother Charles Hill (incorrectly recorded as her husband) on Catherine Street in the 1940 U.S. Federal Census. In 1945, according to online graduation records, Viola Hill Green received a Bachelor's in Music (voice), and in 1947, a Master's in Music, from the Philadelphia Musical Academy. Her husband passed away in 1948, and she continued to live in their home on Wyalusing Avenue. The 1950 U.S. Federal Census shows her living in her home on Wyalusing Avenue, as well as lodging in New York City with her cousin John G. Morton. Viola Hill Green passed away in Philadelphia on December 29, 1969.

Sources (all accessed via Ancestry.com, January 28, 2025): Pennsylvania, U.S., Death Certificates, 1906-1971; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S., Marriage Index, 1885-1951; 1940 United States Federal Census; U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current; U.S., Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014.

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Arrangement

Arranged in the following series: Correspondence; Music Papers; Business Papers; Writings and Notes.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Use Restrictions

The copyright interests in this collection have not been transferred to Duke University. For more information, consult the copyright section of the Regulations and Procedures of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Acquisition Information

The Viola Hill papers were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library as a purchase in 1995, and as purchases from Between the Covers Rare Books in 2008 and from Caroliniana Rare Books in 2024.

Processing Information

Processed and described by library staff, circa 1995.

Reprocessed and reparative description created by Paula Jeannet, October 2022.

Accession 2024-0132 added by Leah Tams, January 2025. Materials formally described as Viola Hill Sheet Music collection were transferred into this collection in January 2025.

Accession(s) represented in this collection guide: 1995-0013, 2008-0238, 2024-0132.

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Names and Subjects

- African American musicians -- Societies, etc.
- African American singers
- African American universities and colleges -- Alumni and alumnae
- African American women -- Social conditions -- 20th century
- African American women artists

- African American women entertainers
- African American women singers -- Correspondence
- African Americans -- Music -- History and criticism
- African Americans -- Pennsylvania -- History
- African Americans -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia -- Societies, etc.
- African Americans -- United States -- Music
- Music -- 20th century -- Study and teaching -- United States
- Music by African American composers -- 20th century
- Race discrimination -- United States
- Women singers -- United States
- Women-owned business enterprises -- United States
- Philadelphia (Pa.) -- History
- Black-and-white photographs
- Programs (documents)
- Scores
- National Association of Negro Musicians (U.S.)
- Diton, Carl R. (Carl Rossini), 1886-1962
- White, Clarence Cameron, 1880-1960
- Hill, Viola
- Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture
- John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture

Collection Inventory

Correspondence, 1909-after 1938

Scope and Contents

The correspondence in this series, mostly incoming letters, document Viola Hill's career as a professionally-trained classical vocalist. A handful of outgoing drafts of letters written by Viola Hill are present. The materials reveal her negotiations with organizers for recitals, concerts, fundraisers, and festivals at which she appeared. Early venues represented in the letters include African American and white churches; schools, orphanages, and other societies; and charity functions in both Black and white communities. As she gained in reputation, she also performed in large music halls and theaters in the East, South, and Midwest, and her requests for higher compensation were met.

Many letters are from her mentors, including Carl Diton, composer, musician, and singer, and president of the Association of National Negro Musicians, who played a role in recommending her for engagements. Other correspondents include Black violinist and composer Clarence Cameron White, and her professional voice coach Percy Dunn Aldridge. There are also letters throughout the years from many of her former music school mates and fellow musicians,

describing their own career paths and experiences as Black musicians. Some letters mention Marion Anderson and her reputation as a performer.

Some materials refer to Viola Hill's education: a handful of materials were sent by an alumni association at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. There are also letters regarding Hill's failed attempt to enroll in the Curtis Music Institute, and some comments on race discrimination in the profession.

A few pieces of correspondence from family members are also present. Condolences on the death of her father in April 1920 appear in a few pieces. Some letters regularly received are from a J. G. Morton of Washington, North Carolina, who addresses her as "cousin."

Correspondence files, 1909-1927	Box 1
Physical Description: 10 folders	
Correspondence files, 1927-1928	Box 2
Physical Description: 3 folders	
Envelopes (empty), 1921-after 1938	Box 2
University of Pennsylvania alumni correspondence and pamphlets, 1925-1927	Box 3

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Music papers, 1914-1948

Scope and Contents

Viola Hill's music files relate to her career as a soprano. They comprise sheet music and scores, some composed by African Americans (R. Nathaniel Dett; S. Coleridge-Taylor; others); music school materials; programs and publicity for her many concerts and other engagements, including critical reviews, from an early performance in 1914 at age 15 to one of her last known in 1940; and a folder containing many programs for performances by other musicians, chiefly in Philadelphia. There are also a few items related to teaching piano and music.

Hill inscribes her name on certain items in several forms: Viola Hill, Viola R. H. Hill, Viola Ruth Harrison Hill; and, after 1935, Viola Hill Green.

Clippings, 1923-1927	Box 2
Concert and show programs, other performers, 1920-1948	Box 2

"Father hear Thou my cry" (manuscript score for piano and voice), circa 1910s Oversize-folder 1

Scope and Contents

One large manuscript paper score, for voice and piano. The first line begins, "Father hear Thou my cry, and have Thou mercy upon me." The source of this score is currently unknown. The oversize paper sheet is missing some corners and was repaired in places with archival tape.

"Life and Death," by S. Coleridge-Taylor (printed score for voice and piano), 1914 Oversize-folder 1

Music lessons notebook and music school tablet, 1921, 1924 Box 2

"My life: The great Prima Donna gives some real advice to young singers," by Mary Gardner (professional vocalist) , circa 1920 Box 2

National Association of Negro Musicians materials, 1922-1930s Box 2

Programs for Viola Hill concerts, tickets, fliers, 1914-1940 Box 2

"The Rendering of Moses", by R. Nathaniel Dett (music score for chorus), 1937 Box 2

Scope and Contents

One volume of a choral score by Canadian Black composer R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943), published by J. Fischer and Bro., New York.

"The Rose Maiden" by Frederic H. Cowen (printed music score), circa 1930s Box 2

Scope and Contents

One volume of a cantata by English composer Frederic Hymen Cowen (1852-1935), published by the Theodore Presser Company in Philadelphia.

Sheet music, 1900-1940 Box 4

Physical Description: 2 folders

Scope and Contents

Twelve items comprised of songs and choral music (SATB, SSA, & SA), opera arias, excerpts from musicals, and spirituals; most with piano accompaniment. Items are: "Face to face" by Herbert Johnson; "Father most

merciful (Panicus angelicus)" by César Franck; "Indian love call: [from] Rose-Marie," book and lyrics by Otto Harbach & Oscar Hammerstein, music by Rudolf Friml and Herbert Stothart; "Jerusalem" by Edwin Francis Hill (in Music and poetry ; v. 1, no. 3); "Jesus walked this lonesome valley" arranged by William L. Dawson; "A legend" by P. Tschaikowsky; "The Lord's prayer" by Edwin Hill; "Morning" by Oley Speaks, arranged by Lucien Chaffin; "My heart is in bloom: op. 63, no. 5" by Brahms; "Sundown" by R. Huntington Woodman; "There's a voice that I enshrine: Il Barbiere di Siviglia" by G. Rossini; "Think on me" by Alicia Ann Scott, arranged by Carol Perrenot.

Some of these pieces are by African American composers: Edward Francis Hill, Jr., Philadelphia; William L. Dawson, Atlanta and Chicago.

The serial publication in this group, Music and Poetry , March 1921, was dedicated to African American music and composition, published by Holt in Chicago, Illinois; this issue also has an article by Clarence Cameron White on music appreciation, as well as a variety of other features.

Standard graded course of studies for the piano forte in ten grades (music scores and some text) , circa 1920

Oversize-folder 1

Scope and Contents

Music score for grade 8 (out of 10), published by Theodore Presser in Philadelphia, probably the 1920 edition. It was originally published in 1892.

Teaching handbook for piano, and song catalog, 1924, 1925

Box 3

"You lay so still in the Sunshine" , by S. Coleridge-Taylor (printed sheet music score) , 1911

Box 4

Biographical / Historical

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) was an internationally-known bi-racial English composer and musician who spent most of his life in London.

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Business papers, 1912-1945, (1920s)

Scope and Contents

Series reflects Viola Hill's activities as a businesswoman as she built her career as a vocalist. Materials chiefly consist of financial and administrative papers regarding her recitals and performances, and blank stationery, business cards, and templates for soliciting singing engagements. Some of the publicity pieces

have photographic images of Viola Hill (head shots); one is a true photograph, circa 1910s.

A cluster of Hill's personal financial papers chiefly relates to stocks and other investments, the real estate she owned, payments for performances, and bills for taxes and utilities.

Related Material:

Other publicity such as recital programs and fliers can be found in the Music Files series. Many incoming and outgoing letters containing business negotiations are also found in the Correspondence series.

Address and contact lists, touring and concert schedules, circa 1923-1927	Box 3
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Touring schedules and contact lists, 1920s	Box 4
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Advertisements, travel schedules, business cards, promotional papers, 1920s-1930s	Box 3
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Bills, receipts, notices, 1912, 1923-1928, 1945	Box 3
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Scope and Contents

Chiefly utility bills and receipts; the latest date is for a receipt for two pieces of music from the Theodore Presser Co., based in Philadelphia, from which Viola Hill most often purchased her sheet music.

Book-keeping correspondence course - exercise books, 1920s	Box 3
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Physical Description: 2 items

Business cards, addresses on slips, monthly diary booklet, 1920s	Box 3
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Various fliers and advertisements, non-music related, 1920s	Box 3
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Stationery, business cards for Viola Hill, 1920s	Box 3
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Publicity materials for Viola Hill engagements, 1920s	Box 3
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Scope and Contents

Folder includes some pieces with Viola Hill publicity photographs (head shots); one is a true photograph, a gelatin silver print, circa 1910s. Programs and publicity for other performers is found in the Music Files series.

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Writings and notes, 1920s-1930s

Various handwritten notes and fragments, 1920s	Box 3
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"Knowledge," poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1911), handwritten by Viola Hill, circa 1920s	Box 4
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