



Guide to the Joan Little collection, 1973-1975 and undated

This collection guide was produced in **February, 2018**.

This PDF version was created on **April 3, 2026**.

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Summary

Collection Title:

Joan Little collection, 1973-1975

Source:

Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture

Abstract:

This collection documents the case of Joan Little, an African-American woman from Eastern North Carolina who was tried for the capital offense of first-degree murder when she killed a jailer who had sexually assaulted her. She was acquitted of this charge, and her story became a flash point for women's rights, prisoner's rights, and the issue of racism in the criminal justice system. The collection contains of materials used by Southern Poverty Law Center counsel and documentary filmmaker Morris Dees, including exhibits for the defense and official court documents. Also included is original poetry written by Little while incarcerated, print media clippings, and an original screenplay, "Free Joann Little."

Extent:

.6 Linear Feet (1 box)

Language:

Materials in English

Collection ID:

RL.11599

Permalink:

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1j06h>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Joan Little collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

This collection documents the trial and controversy surrounding the case of Joan Little. It consists of poetry written by Joan Little while incarcerated,

including "I Am Somebody", correspondence from Southern Poverty Law Center counsel Morris Dees to Little's Durham, NC defense attorney Jerry Paul, letters of support and publicity for the Joan Little Defense Fund, trial materials prepared by the defense, official court records from the Beaufort County Superior Court, print media clippings, a North Carolina State publication on prison standards, and an unpublished screenplay, "Free Joann Little" by the screenwriter Joel Olansky.

Biographical/Historical

Joan Little (b. 1953) is an African-American woman from the small town of Washington in Eastern North Carolina. In 1974, she was charged with breaking and entering and larceny. She was found guilty and sentenced to the Beaufort County jail. In August of 1974, she was raped by a jailer and subsequently killed him. She was tried and found not guilty of first-degree murder. She was returned to jail to serve the rest of her original sentence. She subsequently escaped, was captured, and returned to jail. She was finally released in 1979. Her case became a touchstone for the issues of women's rights to defend themselves against rape, prisoner's rights, as well as racism and classism in the criminal justice system.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

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URL: <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/>

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 Joan Little collection was received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library as a purchase in 2005.

Processing Information

Processed by Megan Lewis, February, 2018.

Accessions described in this collection guide: 2005-0086

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Names and Subjects

- African American prisoners -- North Carolina -- History -- 20th century
- African-American women -- North Carolina -- History -- 20th century
- North Carolina -- Race relations
- North Carolina -- Trials, litigation, etc.
- Prisons and race relations -- North Carolina
- Trials (Murder) -- North Carolina -- History -- 20th century
- Women prisoners -- North Carolina -- History -- 20th century
- Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture
- Little, Joan
- Dees, Morris
- Paul, Jerry

General Note

Please note that although the authorized form of her name is Joan Little (pronounced Jo Anne), it also frequently appears as either Joann Little or JoAnne Little. She signed her poems Joanne Little. The spellings of the name on items in the collection have been transcribed as they appear.

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Collection Inventory

Collection, 1973-1975, undated

Letters of support and Joann Little Defense Fund, 1974-1975 Box 1 > Folder 1

Writings by Joanne Little, 1974 Box 1 > Folder 2

Physical Description: Originals and photocopies

Scope and Contents

Mostly original poetry written on State Department of Corrections letterhead; includes the poem "I Am Somebody"

List of witnesses for the defense, [1975] Box 1 > Folder 3

Physical Description: Photocopies

Exhibits for the defense, [1975] Box 1 > Folder 4

Physical Description: Photocopies

Morris Dees correspondence, 1975 Box 1 > Folder 5

Witness interviews, 1974-1975 Box 1 > Folder 6

Physical Description: Photocopies

Scope and Contents

Includes notes by Morris Dees

Autopsy report, 1974 Box 1 > Folder 7

Beaufort County Superior Court trial documents, 1974-1975 Box 1 > Folder 8

Print media clippings, 1974-1975 Box 1 > Folder 9

Scope and Contents

Photocopies from both local and national publications

North Carolina State publication: Minimum Standards for the Operation of Local Confinement Facilities, 1973 Box 1 > Folder 10

General

Morris Dees' copy

Free Joann Little by Joel Oliansky, undated

Box 1 > Folder 11

Scope and Contents

Unpublished screenplay submitted to the Lynn Pleshette Literary Agency
(169 p.)

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