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University of Memphis Libraries
Preservation and Special Collections Department

126 Ned R. McWhorter Library
Memphis, TN 38152 - 3250
Phone: (901) 678 - 2210
E-mail: lib_sc@memphis.edu

George Washington Lee collection

Title: George Washington Lee collection
Collection No: MSS.22
Extent: 0.25 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1934, 1958-1976

Abstract: The collection comprises some correspondence, obituaries, an insurance magazine, and materials related to George Washington Lee's book "Beale Street: Where the Blues Began".

Processed by: Gerald Chaudron, April 2015.
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: George Washington Lee collection, Preservation and Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: April 2015

Biographical information

George Washington Lee was born in Heathman, near Indianola, Mississippi, on January 4, 1894, the son of sharecroppers. Lee's father, Rev. George Lee, died when he was three years old, and he and his older brother Abner moved with their mother, Hattie, to Indianola. Lee graduated from Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College and then moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and worked for the Gayoso Hotel before graduating as a Second Lieutenant from the Officer's Training Camp at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Lee served in the 92nd Infantry Division in France, and was known thereafter as "Lt. Lee".

Returning to Memphis after the war, Lee was persuaded by local African American leaders to abandon his plan of becoming a career military officer and instead join in local struggles for African American progress. Lee believed in achieving equality through African American capitalism, and he began work in the insurance profession, first with the Mississippi Life Insurance Company, where by 1920 he was promoted to a vice president of the company. After this company sold its controlling interest elsewhere, Lee worked for the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. Lee was a senior vice president at a Memphis office of this firm when he died in 1976.

Lee's interest in politics, specifically with the Republican Party, began in the 1920s and he worked for Hoover in 1928 and was a delegate to every Republican National Convention from 1940 until 1964, when Republican forces in Tennessee conspired to elect an all-white delegation. Lee supported more progressive Republican candidates for national office, and he gave the seconding nomination speech for Robert A. Taft at the 1952 Republican National Convention.

Lee was long affiliated with the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, and he began serving as Grand Commissioner of Education on a national level in 1951. Lee also operated the Lincoln League, a Memphis Republican Party organization founded by his mentor, Robert R. Church, Jr. He spearheaded various community drives, served on a commission that erected a Memphis statue and named a park in honor of W. C. Handy, and in 1956 saw a post office building in Memphis named the George W. Lee Station, the first living African American with that distinction.

Lee first found wide acclaim as an author for his book *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* in 1934, when this work became the first book by an African American author to be advertised in the Book-of-the-Month-Club News. In 1937, he published a novel, *River George*, and he later published a collection of stories as *Beale Street Sundown* in 1942. He also published short works and wrote newspaper articles and letters to the editor throughout his life. Lee died on August 1, 1976, in an automobile accident.

Scope and contents

The collection comprises some correspondence, obituaries, an insurance magazine, the typescript of the first four chapters and the publisher's proof of Lee's book *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*. The correspondence concerns a biography and his papers but one 1965 letter, addressed to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall complains about an exhibit to be mounted by J. Sevejda, department historian, which Lee believes places emphasis on the injustice done to African Americans rather than their contributions to the country, which he contrasts to the picture painted of Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

Provenance

The material in the first four folders of the collection was donated by David M. Tucker of the History Department of Memphis State University in 1976. The provenance of the other material is unknown.

Related material

George Washington Lee papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

George Washington Lee Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tennessee.

Subject terms

Lee, George W. (George Washington), 1894-1976.

Inventory

Box 1

Folder

- 1 Correspondence, 1965-1967.
- 2 Clippings, 1976. Obituaries.
- 3 *The Vision*, publication of Atlanta life Insurance Company, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1975
October. Includes references to Lee.
- 4 Lee, George W., *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*, New York: Robert O. Ballou, 1934. Publishers proof, annotated.
- 5 Lee, George W., *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*, Chapters 1-4, typed manuscript with edits.

- 6 Miscellany, 1958-1964 and undated. Includes article written by Lee about W.C. Handy and speech to Lincoln League, 1963.