

Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the
Library of Congress

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Revised and expanded by Nan Thompson
Ernst



Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

2009

Contact information: <http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/mss/address.html>

Finding aid encoded by Library of
Congress Manuscript Division, 2009

Finding aid URL: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms009151>

Collection Summary

Title: Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers

Span Dates: 1932-1975

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1940-1966)

ID No.: MSS55798

Creator: Tolson, Melvin Beaunorus

Extent: 4,000 items; 13 containers; 5 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Author; educator, and poet; mayor of Langston, Oklahoma, and poet laureate of Liberia.

Correspondence, drafts of writings, speeches, research notes, and printed matter relating primarily to Tolson's literary career and reflecting the Harlem Renaissance and other aspects of African-American art, literature, and culture.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Personal Names

Bond, Horace Mann, 1904-1972--Correspondence.

Farnsworth, Robert M. Papers of Robert M. Farnsworth.

Flowers, William K. (William Knox), 1916---Correspondence.

Hill, Herbert, 1924---Correspondence.

Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967--Correspondence.

Lansdowne, Albert Y.--Correspondence.

Randall, Dudley, 1914---Correspondence.

Shapiro, Karl Jay, 1913-2000--Correspondence.

Steinburg, Jacob--Correspondence.

Tate, Allen, 1899-1979--Correspondence.

Tolson, Melvin Beaunorus.

Tolson, Melvin Beaunorus. Harlem gallery.

Wilson, Ida Frances, 1920---Correspondence.

Subjects

African American art.

American literature--African American authors.

Harlem Renaissance.

Liberian poetry (English)

Occupations

Authors.

Educators.

Poets.

Administrative Information

Provenance:

The papers of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, author; educator, and poet; mayor of Langston, Oklahoma, and poet laureate of Liberia, were the gift of his wife, Ruth S. Tolson, 1975-1981. A small portion of the papers was transferred from the Copyright Division of the Library of Congress in 1969. An addition was received by the Library in 1995 from Tolson's biographer, Robert M. Farnsworth.

Processing History:

The papers of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson were arranged and described in 1976 and 1984. The collection was expanded and revised in 1997. The finding aid was revised in 2009.

Additional Guides:

A description of the Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, October 1976, pp. 356-360.

Transfers:

Items have been transferred from the Manuscript Division to other custodial divisions of the Library. Some photographs have been transferred to the Prints and Photographs Division. Audio recordings have been transferred to the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division. All transfers are identified in these divisions as part of the Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers.

Copyright Status:

Copyright in the unpublished writings of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson in these papers and in other collections of papers in the custody of the Library of Congress has been dedicated to the public. Copyright in the unpublished writings of Robert M. Farnsworth is dedicated to the public.

Access and Restrictions:

The papers of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Preferred Citation:

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1898, Feb 6	Born, Moberly, Mo.
1918	Graduated, Lincoln High School, Kansas City, Mo.
1919	Enrolled in Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.
1920-1923	Student, Lincoln University, Oxford, Pa.; received A.B. with honors
1922	Married Ruth Southall
1923-1947	English instructor and debate coach, Wiley College, Marshall, Tex.
1925	Founder, Log Cabin Theater, Wiley College, Marshall, Tex.
1938	Rockefeller fellowship
1940	M.A., Columbia University, New York, N.Y.; thesis on the Harlem Renaissance

1944	Published <i>Rendezvous With America</i> . New York: Dodd, Mead
1945	Omega Psi Phi award for creative literature
1947	Appointed poet laureate, Republic of Liberia
1947-1965	Professor, creative literature, Langston University, Langston, Okla.
1948	Founder, Dust Bowl Theater, Langston, Okla.
1951	Bess Hokim Award, <i>Poetry</i> magazine, for "E. & O.E."
1953	Published <i>Libretto for the Republic of Liberia</i> . New York: Twayne
1954-1962	Mayor, Langston, Okla.
1954	Fellow in poetry and modern drama, Bread Loaf Writer's Conference of Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vt.
1965	Published <i>Harlem Gallery: Book 1, The Curator</i> . New York: Twayne
1965-1966	Avalon Chair in Humanities, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Ala.
1966	Annual Poetry Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters (National Institute of Arts and Letters)
1966, Aug. 28	Died, Dallas, Tex.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson (1898-1966) span the years 1932 to 1975, with the bulk of the material dated 1940-1966. The collection consists primarily of literary manuscripts and drafts, along with correspondence and notes which relate to literary matters. There are very few papers which deal with Tolson's career as a college professor, drama and debate coach, mayor of Langston, Oklahoma, or Tolson family history. The papers are organized into the following series: [General Correspondence](#), [Subject File](#), [Writings File](#), and [Addition](#).

The collection provides source material on Tolson's works and on the literary, artistic, and social legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. Since Tolson was born in 1898 and came of age as a poet along with the rise of black consciousness throughout the world, his papers represent a synthesis of the African-American experience of self definition and ethnic cultural expression in early to mid-twentieth century America. Tolson's papers often focus on race relations, African-American art and artists, and related social issues.

The [General Correspondence](#) series includes letters of a personal and professional nature. There is no family correspondence and only a few drafts of letters written by Tolson. Selected correspondents are listed for each folder and include Horace Mann Bond, William K. Flowers, Herbert Hill, Langston Hughes, Albert Y. Lansdowne, Dudley Randall, Karl Jay Shapiro, Jacob Steinburg, Allen Tate, and Ida Frances Wilson.

The [Subject File](#) consists primarily of printed material concerning organizations, conferences, colleges, universities, and individuals having a professional relationship with Tolson. Included in this series are address books and Tolson's miscellaneous notes of a biographical nature. Some

entries appear in both the [Subject File](#) and the [General Correspondence](#), for example, "Liberia" and "Langston Hughes."

The [Writings File](#) concerns Tolson's literary works in drama, fiction, poetry, and, to a lesser extent, in speeches and essays. The bulk of the series, and almost half of the entire collection, consists of poetry and related material. Multiple versions of the poetry trace the creative process of Tolson's art. One long work in particular, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, exists in eight complete drafts plus numerous fragmentary drafts and notes which document the poem's stylistic and structural development. There are also numerous drafts of Tolson's major poetic work, *Harlem Gallery*, but the sequence is not as readily apparent as that of the *Libretto*. An unpublished book-length manuscript of poems completed in the mid-1930s, called "A Gallery of Harlem Portraits," preceded *Harlem Gallery*, published thirty years later in 1965. "A Gallery of Harlem Portraits," edited by Robert M. Farnsworth, was published in 1979. Material relating to this and other Farnsworth publications is in the [Addition](#) to the papers, as is a copy of Tolson's Columbia University master's thesis, "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers," 1940.

The [Writings File](#) also includes several unpublished plays and novels, both in finished and preliminary form. His longest novel, "All Aboard!" portrays the heroism of a Pullman porter. Tolson's plays, speech notes, and essays explore the subtleties of race relations.

The [Addition](#) includes material received by the Library after 1976, the largest part in 1995 from Robert M. Farnsworth, professor of English at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Miscellaneous material added to the collection in 1984 is organized as general correspondence, subject file, and writings file to conform with the arrangement established for the Tolson Papers. Family papers are included in the subject file.

Farnsworth compiled and edited two books of Tolson's writings, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* (Columbia, Mo., 1979) and *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune* (Columbia, Mo., 1982), and wrote a biography, *Melvin B. Tolson, 1898-1966: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia, Mo., 1984). In the course of his research, Farnsworth corresponded with Tolson's family, academic and literary colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and former students. He acquired a typewritten copy a Tolson play, "Black No More," which had been lost, and copies of early poems and stories printed in school publications. He copied documents from his correspondents and from libraries, thus amassing a research file which adds documentation on the poet's life and supplements existing material in the collection.

Farnsworth's research file is organized in two groups as Farnsworth documents and Tolson documents. The Farnsworth documents include correspondence and notes about Tolson. The Tolson documents include original material by Tolson or from his family. Some of the documents are photoreproductions. The Tolson documents are organized in accordance with the first three series of the collection as correspondence, subject file, and writings file. Material relating to the Tolson family is in the correspondence and subject file.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in four series:

- [General Correspondence, 1935-1972](#)
- [Subject File, 1932-1970](#)
- [Writings File, 1938-1968](#)
- [Addition, 1880-1984](#)

Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1-2	<u>General Correspondence, 1935-1972</u> Personal and professional correspondence consisting of letters received, with attachments, and some drafts of letters sent. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically thereunder. Business correspondence filed at the end of the series is arranged chronologically.
BOX 2-3	<u>Subject File, 1932-1970</u> Primarily printed matter and miscellany, with some general correspondence, related to universities, workshops, organizations, individuals, and Liberia. Arranged alphabetically by subject or type of material and chronologically therein.
BOX 4-10	<u>Writings File, 1938-1968</u> Drafts, typescripts, and galleys of published and unpublished plays, fiction, poetry, speeches, and essays with research notes. Arranged alphabetically by genre and thereunder by title of the work.
BOX 10-13	<u>Addition, 1880-1984</u> Correspondence, writings, notes, photographs, family papers, printed matter, and newspaper clippings. Arranged in two groups as a miscellany and a Robert M. Farnsworth research file. Tolson documents are organized to correspond with the three preceding series. Robert M. Farnsworth's documents are arranged alphabetically by subject or document type.

Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1-2	General Correspondence, 1935-1972 Personal and professional correspondence consisting of letters received, with attachments, and some drafts of letters sent. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically thereunder. Business correspondence filed at the end of the series is arranged chronologically.
BOX 1	"A" miscellaneous, 1935-1965, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Obiora N. Agusiobo, American Society of African Culture, Lois Anderson, Margaret Anderson, Thomas Jefferson Anderson
BOX 1	Bond, Horace Mann, 1946-1955
BOX 1	"B" miscellaneous, 1949-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Gwendolyn Fuller Balfour, Martin L. Bass, Catherine Bell, Valmo Bellinger, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jack Bickhan, John Biggers, Arna Bontemps, <i>Book Week</i> , Robert Bowen, William S. Braithwaite, Gwendolyn Brooks, Broadus N. Butler
BOX 1	"C" miscellaneous, 1938-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Lois Towles Caesar, V. F. Calverton, Peter K. Carley, M. L. Cash, Lucille A. Chambers, John Ciardi, B. Daniel Clater, H. F. Coleman, Jack Conroy, Fannie Cook, John Coppock, Margaret Cunningham, Waring Cuney
BOX 1	Decker Press, 1949-1950
BOX 1	"D" miscellaneous, 1941-1965, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Agnes Davis, John Warren Day, Ruth K. Dease, John Desmond, Dick Dien, George Dillon, Dodd Mead & Co., Roscoe Dunjee
BOX 1	"E" miscellaneous, 1948-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> S. Randolph Edmonds, Millicent Spaulding Eifler, Ralph Ellison, David Leon Everett II
BOX 1	Flowers, William K., Jr., 1961-1966
BOX 1	"F" miscellaneous, 1941-1965, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> James Farmer, Fisher Laboratories, Laurence Fiste, Nellie Jeanne Foust, Ingram Fox, Hoyt W. Fuller
BOX 1	"G" miscellaneous, 1945-1967, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Winfred T. Gilmore, Samuel J. Goldfarb, John H. Griffin
BOX 1	Hill, Herbert (and writings), 1962-1966
BOX 1	Hughes, Langston, 1944-1966 <i>See also Container 2, same heading</i>
BOX 1	"H" miscellaneous, 1940-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> W. C. Handy, Nathaniel Hare, Harold Jackman Collection of Atlanta University, William Harrison, R. Henri Heights, Frank E. M. Hercules, Abram Hill, Henry H. Hill
BOX 1	"J" miscellaneous, 1949-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Adelle Jackson, Blyden Jackson, Miles M. Jackson, Jr., Eva Jesseye, Carl L. Jones
BOX 1	"K" miscellaneous, 1949, 1963-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> William Melvin Kelley, Dwight Vincent Kyle
BOX 1	Lansdowne, Albert Y., 1960-1966
BOX 1	Liberia, Republic of, 1947-1966 <i>See also Container 3, same heading</i>
BOX 1	Library of Congress, 1965, 1972

General Correspondence, 1935-1972

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1	"L" miscellaneous, 1950-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Oliver La Grone, Bertram A. Lewis, George Dewey Lipscomb
BOX 1	McPherson, Stephen E., 1965
BOX 1	"M" miscellaneous, 1952-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Nathalie B. Manning, M. H. Martin, Dan and Dorothy McCall, Henry Lee Moon, Karl H. Moore, Carl Murphy
BOX 1	"N-O" miscellaneous, 1948-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Lois Geer Ogilvie, John H. Otwell
BOX 1	"P-Q" miscellaneous, 1938-1965, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Dick Paige, Maxwell Perkins, Rosey E. Pool, Daniel C. Pope, Mary Wills Porter, P. L. Prattis
BOX 1	Randall, Dudley (and poems), 1965-1966
BOX 1	"R" miscellaneous, 1948-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Charles A. Ray, Maryanne Raphael, L. D. Reddick, Jacob L. Reddix, Harvey J. Reynolds, Herman D. Richards, Hazel L. Robinson, Tom Robischon, Rockefeller Foundation, Charles G. Ross
BOX 1	Shapiro, Karl Jay (and poems), 1951-1965 <u><i>See also Container 3, same heading</i></u>
BOX 1	Steinburg, Jacob, 1952-1966
BOX 1	"S" miscellaneous, 1945-1965, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Vinson J. Sanders, George Schuyler, Charlie P. Sheffield, Mitchell B. Southall, Newton P. Stalknecht, Jack Steinberg, Mary E. Swank
BOX 1	"T-V" miscellaneous, 1947-1966, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Allen Tate, Charles Thomas, Mae Caesar Turner, Twayne Publishers, Jack Victor
BOX 1	Wilson, Ida Frances, 1960-1971
BOX 1	"W" miscellaneous, 1937-1971, undated <i>Correspondents include</i> Marvin Wachman, Olive Lindsay Wakefield, Edward Weeks, Walter White, Cora Whitted, Jr., J. R. Witt, Samuel Woods, Jr., Richard Wright
BOX 2	Business correspondence concerning publication, requests, speaking engagements, etc., 1941-1969 (5 folders)
BOX 2-3	Subject File, 1932-1970 Primarily printed matter and miscellany, with some general correspondence, related to universities, workshops, organizations, individuals, and Liberia. Arranged alphabetically by subject or type of material and chronologically therein.
BOX 2	Address books, undated
BOX 2	Addresses, notes, etc., undated
BOX 2	Articles about Tolson, circa 1967
BOX 2	Basler, Roy P.
BOX 2	Flasch, Joy
BOX 2	Biographical material, obituaries, circa 1954-1966
BOX 2	Clippings about Tolson, 1954-1970
BOX 2	Fisk University Writers Conference, Nashville, Tenn., 1966
BOX 2	Frost, Robert, 1954-1964
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Subject File, 1932-1970

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
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BOX 3	National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1966
BOX 3	Oklahoma Poetry Workshop, 1965
BOX 3	Playbills of performances directed by Tolson, 1938-1965
BOX 3	Programs, etc., 1945-1966
BOX 3	Shapiro, Karl Jay, 1964-1965 <u><i>See also Container 1, same heading</i></u>
BOX 3	Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Ala., 1965-1966
BOX 4-10	Writings File, 1938-1968 Drafts, typescripts, and galleys of published and unpublished plays, fiction, poetry, speeches, and essays with research notes. Arranged alphabetically by genre and thereunder by title of the work.
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BOX 4	"Black No More," notes, undated
BOX 4	"The Fence War," typescript, undated
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BOX 4	"Three One-Act Plays" typescript, copyright submission, circa 1969
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BOX 4	Similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech, undated (2 folders) (1 folder)
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BOX 6	"Africa China," typescript and reprint, 1950
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BOX 6	"The Barrel," working drafts, undated
BOX 6	"The Chitterling King," working draft, undated
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BOX 6	Final draft, circa 1965
BOX 6	Working drafts, undated
BOX 6	"A Gallery of Harlem Portraits," typescript, undated (2 folders)

BOX 6	<i>Harlem Gallery</i>
BOX 6	Draft
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BOX 7	Final, circa 1964
BOX 7	Galley proofs, 1965
BOX 7	Notes, undated
BOX 7	Reviews, 1965-1968
BOX 7	Working drafts
BOX 7	1956-circa 1959
	(3 folders)
BOX 8	1959, undated
	(3 folders)
BOX 8	"The House of Heafod"
BOX 8	Final draft, undated
BOX 8	Working drafts, undated
BOX 8	"The Hydrogen Bomb," working drafts, undated
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BOX 10	NAACP in Oklahoma, circa 1946
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BOX 10	Stereotypes, undated
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BOX 10	"Black Sylla and White Charybdis," circa 1965
BOX 10	"Excerpts from a letter to Allen Tate," drafts, 1950
BOX 10	"The Foreground of Negro Poetry," undated
BOX 10	"If the Negro Migrated From the South," circa 1965
BOX 10	"Lines of a Poet and the Way of a Pilgrim" (Robert Frost), undated
BOX 10	"The Odyssey of a Manuscript," undated
BOX 10	"A Prose Poem Allegory," 1949
BOX 10	"These Seek A Country" (religion), undated
BOX 10	Untitled fragment on African-American culture, undated
BOX 10-13	Addition, 1880-1984
	Correspondence, writings, notes, photographs, family papers, printed matter, and newspaper clippings.
	Arranged in two groups as a miscellany and a Robert M. Farnsworth research file. Tolson documents are organized to correspond with the three preceding series. Robert M. Farnsworth's documents are arranged alphabetically by subject or document type.
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BOX 11	Miscellaneous, 1973-1984, undated (2 folders)
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BOX 11	Tolson, Arthur (son), 1978-1984, undated (2 folders)
BOX 11	Tolson, Ruth S. (wife), 1973-1981 (2 folders)
BOX 11	Tolson family, miscellaneous, 1976-1984
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BOX 11	Notes
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BOX 11	Literary criticism, 1972-1979
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BOX 11	Biographical material, 1966, 1981
BOX 11	Family history, 1880-1900, 1912, 1934, 1945-1981, undated
BOX 12	Langston, Okla., city council, 1942, 1957
BOX 12	Langston University, Langston, Okla., 1952-1958, 1966, 1973
BOX 12	Liberia, 1954
BOX 12	Lincoln University, Lincoln University, Pa., 1915-1929, 1943-1966, 1980
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BOX 13	Essays
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BOX 13	"Langston University Reception in Honor of His Excellency William V. S. Tubman, President of the Republic of Liberia," 1954
BOX 13	"Negro Mayor Condemns Ex-Fellow Townsman, Harry S. Truman," draft fragment and related material, circa 1952, undated
BOX 13	"The Negro Poet," 1958
BOX 13	"The Odyssey of a Manuscript," revised draft, undated
BOX 13	"She Can't Take It," <i>Flash</i> , 1939
BOX 13	"Some Problems of the Writer as Artist," outline, undated
BOX 13	Journalism
BOX 13	"Cabbage and Caviar," column, <i>Washington Tribune</i> , Washington, D.C., photocopies, 1937-1944 (3 folders)
BOX 13	"Langston Hughes' Goodbye Christ a Challenge and Warning," <i>Pittsburgh Courier</i> , 1933
BOX 13	Master's thesis, Columbia University, New York, N.Y., "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers," 1940
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Addition, 1880-1984

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
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