



**Guide to the
Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers,
c.1940-1992**

Collection Number: 2010/036

Descriptive Summary

Title

Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers

Accession Number

2010/036

Creator

Colley, Jerlean Jackson, 1919-1998

Colley, Nathaniel Sextus, 1918-1992

Date Range

c.1940-1992

Extent

5 boxes (7.34 linear feet) of archival material, 188 still images, and 9 artifacts

Language

English

Repository

Center for Sacramento History

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Location

02:I:04 – 02:I:05; Photo Archives

Abstract

The Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley papers document the legal and civic activities of Nathaniel Colley, one of Sacramento's earliest African American attorneys and a national civil rights leader. For nearly 50 years, Nathaniel and Jerlean made Sacramento their home, working to affect social change at the local, state, and national levels. The numerous speeches, statements, editorials, and publications for which Nathaniel Colley was renowned make up a large percentage of the collection, and provide the framework and foundation for each series.

Administrative Information

Access

The collection is open for research use.

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Preferred Citation

[Identification of item, prepared according to standard citation style such as MLA, ALA, or Turabian], [2010/036/Item Call Number], Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers, Center for Sacramento History.

Acquisition Information

Received from Alfred and Ola Marie Brown in October 2010 by the Center for Sacramento History.

Related Materials

Materials related to those in the Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers may be found in the following collections at CSH: the KCRA TV Film Collection (1978/084), the Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey - Black Oral Histories (1983/146), and the *Sacramento Observer* Collection (2011/031).

Processing History

Processed by Robert Davis and Dylan J. McDonald, 2011-2012; finding aid prepared by Heather Lavezzo Downey and Dylan J. McDonald, 2012.

Biographical Sketch

Nathaniel Sextus Colley was born on November 21, 1918 in Carlowville, Alabama. The youngest of six boys, he grew up in Snow Hill, Alabama. Colley graduated with high honors from Snow Hill Institute before attending Tuskegee Institute. He studied chemistry under George Washington Carver, graduating in 1941 with a B.S. degree and high honors. During World War II, Colley served overseas as Captain of a chemical company where he developed a protective suit that could resist poison gas. In 1946, he enrolled at Yale University Law School, winning the C. LaRue Munsun Prize for the most significant contribution of any Yale student to the New Haven, Connecticut Legal Aid Society. He also shared the Benjamin Sharp Prize for best original essay of any Yale student.

In 1948, Colley came to Sacramento, California where he wrote for the *Sacramento Outlook* newspaper as an Associate Editor. He opened his law practice as Sacramento's only African American attorney, quickly establishing a reputation as one of the area's best trial attorneys. He used his skills on behalf of private clients as well as public causes, such as civil rights. In the landmark case *Ming vs. Horgan*, Colley persuaded the United States Supreme Court that those receiving federal funds could not engage in discrimination. Colley also fought for the repeal of Proposition 14, and against housing and educational discrimination in California. As a member of the National Bar Association's Hall of Fame, Colley taught part-time at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law for seventeen years.

In addition to his legal career, Colley was a member, and leader, of many civic and educational associations at the local, state, and national levels. Most notably, he served as Chairman of both the West Coast Region and the National Legal Committee for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Furthermore, Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown appointed Colley to the California State Board of Education in 1960, making him the first African American to serve on the board. Between 1961 and 1962, Colley sat on President John F. Kennedy's Committee on Discrimination for the U.S. Armed Forces. An active Democrat, Colley was a member of the California State Democratic Central Committee and the Sacramento County Democratic Central Committee. In 1972, Colley was the Northern California Chairman of the Humphrey for President Campaign.

Colley met his wife, Sacramento native Jerlean "Jerry" Jackson, while attending Tuskegee Institute and the two married in 1942. They raised their five children in Sacramento, two of which would go on to become attorneys and join their father's law firm. They enjoyed traveling, and visited such places as South America, China, Africa, Europe, and the former Soviet Union. An avid horse racing fan, Colley bred horses on his property in Elk Grove, California, and served on the California Horse Racing Commission.

Nathaniel Colley passed away from brain cancer on May 20, 1992 at his home in Elk Grove, California. He was 74 years old.

Jerlean Colley was born in 1919 in Montgomery, Alabama to Hattie Loubirda Crawford, a homemaker, and Charles Stonewall Jackson, a businessman and entrepreneur. She grew up in Sacramento, California, graduating from Sacramento High School in 1939. She attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama where she earned a degree in early childhood development. While at Tuskegee, Jerlean met Nathaniel Colley and the two married in 1942. In 1948, Nathaniel, Jerlean, and two infant daughters moved to Sacramento, California where they established Nathaniel's law practice.

While her husband was the public face of groundbreaking anti-discrimination lawsuits and numerous civic organizations, Mrs. Colley was an equally influential behind-the-scenes leader. She cared for their five children and was an active PTA member and volunteer with Campfire and Girl Scouts. She worked closely with her

husband as a receptionist, secretary, accountant, and advisor. According to one of their children, Jerlean was “the heart and soul of that law practice.” As Nathaniel’s career progressed, Jerlean entertained governors, Supreme Court Justices, and other distinguished guests in the family’s South Land Park home.

Mrs. Colley also managed the family’s real estate and business interests, including Priscilla Bell Farms, an Elk Grove ranch where the Colley’s raised thoroughbred racehorses.

Jerlean Colley passed away on March 11, 1998 in Sacramento, California from complications related to a fall. She was 79 years old.

Scope and Content

This collection primarily documents the legal and civic activities of Nathaniel and Jerlean Colley, with a small amount of material covering their family life and world travels. Collected and preserved by Jerlean, the papers focus mainly on Nathaniel's engagement as an editorial writer for the *Sacramento Outlook* newspaper; as NAACP legal counsel; as a member of the California State Board of Education and California Horse Racing Board; as a Democratic Party operative; as an adjunct faculty at McGeorge Law School; and horse breeder and owner of Priscilla Bell Farms. Other than media accounts and as stated in the container list below, the collection contains very little correspondence and files related to his private law practice. The original order of the papers was not discernable, and an artificial series hierarchy was created based on similar subject material. Items in general are arranged chronologically within each folder. Titles found within brackets in the container list were created by CSH staff to provide context as no original title could be discerned. Most newsprint, telegrams and other brittle paper have been photocopied onto archival paper for preservation purposes.

Contained within the collection are textual records including correspondence; newspapers, newspaper clippings and magazine articles; programs and racing forms; speeches, statements and lectures; editorials and press releases; awards and certificates; campaign ephemera; papers, publications and reports. Other formats include photographs and transparencies; and artifacts include plaques and awards. The geographic focus of the material is Sacramento and California, and dates from the 1940s through the 1990s. Topics and subjects included in the collection are Sacramento's African American community and its history; civil rights issues particularly fair employment and housing, school desegregation, affirmative action, social justice, labor, police procedures, and integration; the American philosophy of law and due process; activities of the Democratic Party and NAACP in California and Sacramento County; and educational issues including policy, attendance areas, vocational training, textbook content, equitable funding, and desegregation.

The following series scope and content notes only offers selected highlights, please see the container list for a full listing of the series contents. The numerous written speeches, statements, editorials and publications authored by Nathaniel Colley, materials that makes up a large percentage of the collection, provide the framework and foundation of each series.

Series 1 – Personal & Family comprises primarily material documenting Nathaniel's awards and tribute dinners (including one less than a year before his death), his military service in World War II, and media accounts of his legal career. Of note are the magazine articles (items .008) for their descriptions of his legal work and standing amongst Sacramento's legal bar. The couple's trips to Central and South America, China, and the former Soviet Union are documented in written and bound reports containing itineraries, accounts and thoughts of their travels. Correspondence to and speeches by Jerlean document her involvement in various community organizations, often in conjunction with her husband, and raising her five children.

Series 2 – Tuskegee Institute contains Nathaniel's lifelong involvement in the school's national alumni association and his speeches delivered to students, graduates, and alumni on the role of Tuskegee and the value of education.

Series 3 – *Sacramento Outlook* includes Nathaniel's numerous editorials, written on behalf of the newspaper's editorial board, and press releases that document his civic interests and current legal cases. From 1948 through at least 1960, his "One Man's Opinion" editorial column ran regularly in the newspaper, covering such topics as local, state, and national politics; African American political power; communism and loyalty oaths; fair employment and housing; Jim Crow and segregation; and the challenges faced by the growing African American population of Sacramento and northern California.

Series 4 – Legal Career focuses primarily on Nathaniel’s jurisprudence course lecture notes taught at McGeorge School of Law. Additional items of note include his written statement of December 14, 1987 to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on the nomination of Judge Anthony M. Kennedy to the Supreme Court; several papers written for coursework at Yale Law School; and speeches on legal topics, including a reminiscence of friend Judge Loren Miller. As previously stated, the series contains very little correspondence and files related to his private law practice.

Series 5 – Politics includes correspondence from various local and state Democratic leaders, including governors Pat Brown and Jerry Brown, expressing thanks for supporting their candidacies. In 1956 Nathaniel ran in the Democratic primary for a state senate seat. Items .076-.078 contain his speeches and campaign material that outlined his platform. Of note is the Colley’s involvement in the 1960 presidential campaign of Sen. John F. Kennedy – advertisements, speeches, endorsements – and their subsequent invitation to the inauguration. Their relationship with the White House continued with additional requests for attendance at a state dinner honoring the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg and Nathaniel’s service on the President’s civil rights discussion group. After the death of the President Kennedy, Nathaniel wrote a tribute to the fallen leader in a speech titled, “He Killed Our Lincoln.”

Series 6 – Education and Youth highlights Nathaniel’s commitment to educational opportunities for California’s youth. The newspaper clippings document his appointment as the first African American on the California State Board of Education in 1960; his subsequent efforts to eliminate textbook bias, desegregate schools, and correct funding imbalances; and the board’s conflict with State Superintendent Dr. Max Rafferty. The publications and speeches in the series cover a wide-range of educational topics including teacher loyalty oaths, the history segregation in California schools, the value of public education, textbook bias, and the challenges faced by African American youth.

Series 7 – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People contains speeches and official position statements written and delivered by Nathaniel. Item .116 includes a 1975 pamphlet, “Who Will Lead the NAACP,” outlining his qualifications to serve as chair of the NAACP National Board of Directors; the 56-page publication contains seven speeches/papers stating his views on subjects of interest to organization members. Item .119 includes a signed 1964 Sacramento Branch banquet program signed by speaker Jackie Robinson.

Series 8 – Civil Rights comprises Nathaniel’s lifelong work to ensure equal opportunity for all through California law. Many of the speeches in this series focus on fair housing, *Ming v. Horgan*, and Proposition 14; the establishment of a statewide Fair Employment Practices Commission; and affirmative action. Of note are items .150, a c.1959 paper coauthored with Loren Miller on legal and judicial enforcement of fair housing, and .152, a 1963 report on U.S. military integration, a presidential committee on which Nathaniel served.

Series 9 – Horse Racing includes correspondence and newspaper clippings on Nathaniel’s service with the California Horse Racing Board and his family’s breeding and training thoroughbred horses at their Elk Grove, California ranch, Priscilla Bell Farm.

Series 10 – Oversize Items contains the plaques and awards bestowed upon Nathaniel, copies of the *Sacramento Outlook*, the city’s first African American newspaper for which he served as an editor, and other large items separated out from the collection for easier storage. If an item was pulled from its original folder, a separation sheet will indicate the item has been removed and its new location.

Series 11 – Photographs includes 188 black and white, and color photographic stills and color transparencies. These images mostly focus on family activities, Nathaniel’s public speaking engagements, the horse breeding at Priscilla Bell Farm, and winner’s circle portraits.

Indexing Terms

Personal Names

Brown, Edmund Gerald "Jerry," Jr., 1938-
Brown, Edmund Gerald "Pat," Sr., 1905-1996
Colley, Jerlean Jackson, 1919-1998
Colley, Nathaniel Sextus, 1918-1992
Evers, Medgar Wiley, 1925-1963
Kennedy, Anthony M., 1936-
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
Miller, Loren H., 1903-1967
Robinson, Jackie, 1919-1972

Corporate Names

California. State Board of Education
California Horse Racing Board
Colorformia
Democratic Party (U.S.)
Executive Place
Know
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Sacramento Bee
Sacramento Magazine
Sacramento Observer
Sacramento Outlook
Sepia
Tuskegee Institute
United States. Supreme Court
University of the Pacific. McGeorge School of Law
Yale Law School

Subjects

African Americans
Civil rights
Education
Housing
Horse racing
Sacramento (Calif.)—History
Travel

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Location: 02:I:04 – 02:I:05; Photo Archives

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- .220 *Sacramento Outlook*, October 17, 1952; p.1
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- .237 *Renegade Rip*, October 13, 1961; p.1
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- .239 *Sacramento Legal Press*, December 19, 1967; p.1
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- .242 Lieutenant Nathaniel Colley; c.1942
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- .257 Nathaniel Colley, Jr. with Santa Claus; c. December 1962
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- .278 Tuskegee Institute Alumni, Nathaniel and Jerlean Colley middle row, third and seventh from the left, Los Angeles, CA; August 1961
- .279 NAACP West Coast Region biennial conference; September 1961
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- .295 Unknown meeting with Nathaniel Colley; c.1980
- .296 Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, Nathaniel Colley, Sen. Clair Engle; c.1962
- .297 Nathaniel Colley, Jerlean Colley, Bernice Brown, Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, unknown, Sen. Clair Engle, unknown; c.1962
- .298 Sen. Clair Engle, Eddie Hall, Nathaniel Colley, Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, Clarence Canson, Rev. Joseph Williams, Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown; November 1960
- .299 Rep. John E. Moss and Nathaniel Colley; November 5, 1968
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- .305 Nathaniel Colley and Jerlean Colley in classroom; c.1961
- .306-314 Nathaniel Colley attending 30th Anniversary events of the Little Rock Nine, included Gov. Bill Clinton, Little Rock, AR; October 1987
- .315 John Garamendi, Patti Garamendi, Jerlean Colley, Nathaniel Colley; 1986

- .316 Unknown, Jerlean Colley, Nathaniel Colley; c.1948
- .317 Jerlean Colley with United Crusade trophy; October 1967
- .318 NAACP event, unknown, Rev. Odom, Nathaniel Colley, unknown, unknown, unknown, Novalin Sims, Sacramento, CA; c.1950s
- .319 NAACP event, front row – fourth from right, Novalin Sims, second from right Virna Canson, back row – first and second from left, Rev. Odom, Nathaniel Colley, Sacramento, CA; c.1950s
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- .330-338 Nathaniel Colley receiving humanitarian award from the National Asthma Center, Sacramento, CA; December 4, 1980
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