

**Jerome Washington collection  
1979 - 1988**

**Special Collections of the Lloyd Sealy Library  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
899 Tenth Avenue  
New York, NY 10019.**

Collection arranged by Ellen Sexton, August 1999.

## Introduction

This small collection of papers was acquired for the Lloyd Sealy Library by the Chief Librarian Dr. Larry Sullivan in March of 1999, from Bolerium Books, 2141 Mission Street, suite 300, San Francisco CA 94110. When they were accessioned, the papers were housed in one manila folder.

The records are open to researchers under the conditions of the Special Collections access policy. Records may be copied for use by researchers for scholarly or personal use. The library reserves the right to restrict photocopying, photographing or other copy methods if such copying is considered detrimental to the physical condition of the records.

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## **Jerome Washington – biographical note.**

Jerome Washington wrote and published books, poems and a play about his experiences in New York prisons, where he spent 16 years, following his conviction in 1973 for the murder of a bartender, and the attempted murder of the bar owner (6).

He was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1939. “He attended Columbia University and then served in the Army for three years in Vietnam and in Europe. After his discharge, he stayed in Europe for several years. Back in New York, he became involved with the civil rights and peace movement. He went on voter registration drives to the South with the SNCC, helped organize peace rallies for the National Mobilization Against the War in Vietnam, was at Resurrection City in Washington during the Poor People’s March.” (5).

He was “one of the original Yippies” – a member of the Youth International Party (2) “which in the late 1960s became well known for civil disobedience in general and the Vietnam War protests in particular” (4). “Washington was an organizing force behind the popular revolt at the 1968 Democratic national Convention” (3).

“From 1972 to 1989... he spent 16 years and three months in prisons such as Green Haven, Auburn and Attica for murder and attempted murder – charges that were dropped after he left prison”. (1).

“An accomplished journalist before he was convicted, Washington was founder and editor of the Auburn Collective, an award-winning prison newspaper that chronicled prisoner’s struggles and ruffled the feathers of prison officials. Singled out as subversive, Washington was abruptly moved from Auburn to Attica prison in New York and his typewriter and manuscripts were confiscated. At Attica, Washington filed and won a historic First Amendment lawsuit for a prisoner’s “Right to write”. He also organized a successful campaign that advocated prisoner’s rights to free access to books and other reading material.” (1).

He was released in 1988.

In 1995, he was living in Fort Bragg, California, organizing writing workshops for the elderly, and working with “at risk” teenagers. (1).

### **Partial list of works by Jerome Washington:**

Books:

*A bright spot in the yard.* (1981). Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

*Iron house: stories from the yard.* (1994). Fort Bragg, CA: QED Press.

Articles:

Columnist for *Downbeat Magazine* before his imprisonment.

*New York Times* OP-ED pieces.

Articles, poems, etc. have appeared in the *TransAtlantic Review*, *Yardbird Reader*, *Dodeca*, *Contact II*, *CORE*, *the Communicator*, and in local newspapers based in Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo and Ithaca, New York (5).

#### Plays

*The boys in cell block C.*

#### Awards:

1986. Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts for the play *The boys in cell block C.*

1994. Western States Arts Federation Book Award for Creative Nonfiction for *Iron House.*

The *Auburn Collective* received ten awards while Washington was editor, from 1974 to 1978.

#### Sources:

1. Carlson, Scott. (1995). Unbound pages: Jerome Washington recounts prison life in "Iron House". *A & E* November 16, 1995.  
<http://www.daily.umn.edu/ae/Print/ISSUE9/fejerom.htm> downloaded 7/6/99.
2. Jerome Washington: Iron House: stories from the yard. Speak out!  
<http://www.vida.com/speakout/People/JeromeWashington.html>. Downloaded 7/6/99.
3. Burkman, G. (1994). Iron house (book review). *Booklist*, 91(4):380. October 1994.
4. Shafritz, J. (1988). *The Dorsey dictionary of American government and politics*. Chicago. IL: Dorsey Press.
5. Hower, Edward. (1981). Introduction. In Washington, J. *A bright spot in the yard*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
6. East side man convicted of loan-sharking murder. *New York Times*, Tuesday, november 13<sup>th</sup>, 1973, page 49.

## **John Gill – biographical note.**

John Gill was an author, educator and publisher. From 1956 to 1965 he taught English literature at Ithaca College, in New York State, where he held the position of assistant professor. He founded the Crossing Press – a small, independent publishing company - in 1969. He also created a poetry magazine, the *New American and Canadian Poetry*, and authored four books. He died, aged 71, in 1995 (1). Gill was a mentor who “encouraged the work of writers and poets through personal contact and by his leadership in alternative and small press publishing” (2).

### Sources:

1. Obituaries. (1995). *Publisher's weekly*, 242(35): 32.
2. Peters, R. (1996). For John Gill: a personal commemoration. *Poet and writers magazine*, 24(4):14-15.

## Scope and contents.

This collection consists of paper-based materials with two photographic prints. The materials are mostly type-written correspondence with a number of newspaper articles. The condition of these materials is excellent. Newspaper clippings have been photocopied, with the originals discarded due to their deteriorating condition, and concerns least their presence in the collection hasten the deterioration of the other papers.

The collection was housed in one manila folder when it was acquired. There was no apparent order to the arrangement of the papers. I have arranged the collection into six short series, in what seemed to reflect their most likely provenance. The bulk of the collection composes two series – the correspondence between Washington and Gill, and the Crossing Press correspondence. It seems likely that the Crossing Press correspondence was kept at the press, and was later united with the Washington-Gill letters. It seems probable that Washington himself collected the correspondence he received from Gill, keeping it together with copies of the letters he himself had written to Gill.

Most of the collection is concerned with the publication by Crossing Press of Washington's book *Bright spot in the yard*. As such, it is the story of a book, in that it portrays the entire publication process, from initial approach to the publisher, the collection of sufficient material, the editing process, cover-design and marketing, and the disposal of remainder copies. It is particularly unusual in that the author remains a prisoner for a number of years before and following the publication date. The publisher, John Gill, maintained a correspondence with the author, which, while it centered on *Bright spot...* also ranged over other topics. One topic of interest that concerned Washington was prisoner Henry Abbott, the author of *In the belly of the beast*, a much-publicized book which Norman Mailer championed, in which Abbott describes his experience of prison. Ted Hower wrote that he would approach Mailer on the subject of Washington's work, in 1980, but no more is heard about it. Mailer's name is notably absent from the list of authors who endorsed *Bright spot...* Washington discusses Abbott and his work in his correspondence with Gill, apparently not thinking very highly of his work or of the accuracy with which he depicts prison life.

Washington also writes of the difficulties he encountered in writing behind bars. Relatively little is written in this collection about his right-to-write case, although he does allude to it on occasion in his letters to Gill. There is some correspondence in the collection about the campaign to allow prisoner's access to printed materials.

## Series descriptions

1. *Materials accompanying the papers.*

This includes the manila folder in which the papers were housed when the library acquired them. There is some writing on it, which may indicate that the file originated from the Crossing Press, and held material relating to Jerome Washington. Also included is the sheet of paper with the paragraph on it describing the papers when they were offered for sale by the vender. A copy is included in the appendix of this finding aid.

2. *Miscellaneous.*

These are materials which did not fit easily into any of the other series. There are two prints of the same photo of Washington sitting at a desk, some typewritten pages (unsigned) listing his activities and accomplishments while in prison, published articles about Washington and the prison writing program, a flier written by Ted Hower describing Washington and seeking contributions for his defense fund, and an undated sheet of statements from various literary figures written in support of Washington and/or his right-to-write case.

3. *Jerome Washington – correspondence with John Gill.*

John Gill founded Crossing Press in 1969. He published Washington's descriptions of prison life entitled *Bright spot in the yard* in 1981. Many of these letters are concerned with the details of editing, publishing and publicizing this book. The letters from Gill appear to be originals; the letters from Washington may be copies. Washington's letters tend to be longer than Gill's and have a wider range of topics. Washington discusses Jack Henry Abbott, *In the belly of the beast* and Norman Mailer, his own poetry and other works, the problem of packages to him getting lost en route, and mentions, among other matters, the right-to-write suit, parole and the Democratic Convention protests in Chicago.

4. *Crossing Press correspondence.*

This is material generated at, or directed to the Crossing Press. Much of it is concerned with distributing review copies of *Bright spot in the yard*, soliciting book reviews and publicizing it. Included are letters from Gill to authors asking for statements for support for the book, to be included on the back cover of the book. Letters/statements of support are present from Alan Sillito, Tom Wicker, Nat Hentoff, Carol Muske, Paul Krassner, Kathrin Perutz and Ken Kesey.

5. *Ted Hower – correspondence.*

Ted Hower wrote the introduction to *Bright spot in the yard*. Hower is an author who also taught creative writing at Ithaca College, and Duke and Cornell

Universities. This correspondence includes a long letter from Hower to Washington, agreeing to write the introduction, and some letters between him and Nancy Bereano, the book editor at Crossing Press, and Gill about the introduction.

6. *Correspondence regarding the “publishers-only” rule.*

This rule was a directive issued by the Department of Correctional Services forbidding prisoners to receive any printed mater other than directly from a publisher or approved distributor. Washington challenged this rule, and won. This series includes a note from Washington to Gill, accompanied by an article explaining the rule, and a typed circular appealing for help. There is correspondence between Gill and the Commissioner, a letter from the State Assembly Oversight Committee to Washington, a memo to inmates rescinding the rule, and a typed “after-action report” written by Washington.



## Folder list.

		Folder number
<b>Series 1</b>	<i>Materials accompanying the papers</i>	
Original manila folder		1 ( i )
Description of papers written by the vender		1 ( ii )
<b>Series 2</b>	<i>Miscellaneous.</i>	
Photographs	Undated	2 ( i )
Jerome Washington – articles	1979 – 1986	2 ( ii )
Jerome Washington – biographical materials	Undated	2 ( iii )
Jerome Washington Defense Fund flier	Undated	2 ( iv )
Support statements for right-to-write case.	Undated	2 ( v )
<b>Series 3</b>	<i>Jerome Washington – correspondence with John Gill</i>	
	1979 – 1980	3 ( i )
	January 1980 – October 1 <sup>st</sup> 1981	3 ( ii )
	October 8 <sup>th</sup> 1981 – 1982	3 ( iii )
	1983 – 1988	3 ( iv )
	Undated	3 ( v )
<b>Series 4</b>	<i>Crossing Press correspondence</i>	
Crossing Press correspondence	1979 – 1981	4 ( i )
Endorsements and cover design for <i>Bright spot...</i>	1981	4 ( ii )
Crossing Press correspondence	1982 – 1983	4 ( iii )
Crossing Press correspondence	1985 – 1986	4 ( iv )
<b>Series 5</b>	<i>Ted Hower – correspondence</i>	
	1980 – 1981	5 ( i )
<b>Series 6</b>	<i>Correspondence regarding “publishers-only” rule</i>	
	1986	6 ( i )