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Finding Aid for Charles Chesnutt Papers- Western Reserve Historical Society

Charles W. Chesnutt

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Finding aid for the Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers

Repository:	Western Reserve Historical Society
Creator:	Chesnutt, Charles Waddell
Title:	Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers
Dates:	1889-1932
Extent:	0.80 linear feet (2 containers)
Abstract:	Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was a Cleveland, Ohio, court reporter, novelist and short story writer. He was the first African American novelist and short story writer to win recognition on a nationwide scale. The collection consists of correspondence, copies of speeches and writings, newspaper clippings, invitations, programs, photographs and other papers relating to Chesnutt's activities as a court reporter and writer.
MS Number	MS 3370
Location:	closed stacks
Language:	The records are in English

Biography of Charles Waddell Chesnutt

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was the first African American novelist and short story writer to gain national distinction in the United States before 1900.

Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 20, 1858, the son of Andrew Jackson and Maria Sampson Chesnutt, who had come from North Carolina to Cleveland as "free persons of color" in a covered wagon two years earlier. After he was discharged from service in the American Civil War, Andrew Jackson Chesnutt remained in his native North Carolina and his Cleveland family moved there. Charles Chesnutt was educated in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and at the age of 16 began teaching in small country schools. Constantly engaged in self study, he mastered in Latin, Greek, and shorthand.

In 1882, at the age of 25, Chesnutt went to New York City and worked as a newspaper reporter. Six months later, he returned to Cleveland and worked as a clerk while studying law. Although he never actually practiced law, he remained in the field by becoming a court reporter.

Chesnutt found time to write, and he became a master in the difficult art of short story writing. Starting in 1887, he had seven short stories published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, one of the leading magazines of the day. In 1899 the Houghton Mifflin Company published a collection of

his stories under the title *The Conjure Woman. The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* appeared in 1899 also and received most complimentary reviews. In quick succession, other novels followed: *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow Tradition* (1901), *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), and several others. He was a frequent contributor to magazines, writing serious articles on various phases of race relations in America.

The work of Chesnutt brought the African American experience into serious recognition on the basis of merit. His experiences in the South during the difficult period of Reconstruction furnished the inspiration and theme for his writings. The bitter heritage of slavery, the clash of races, the striving of the disadvantaged created dramatic situations, and he depicted them with the pen of a master. With the passing of the generation that followed the American Civil War, interest in the type of literature created by Chesnutt had declined by 1910. Chesnutt died on November 15, 1932.

[click here to view the Encyclopedia of Cleveland History entry for Charles Waddell Chesnutt](#)

Scope and Content

The Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers, 1889-1932 and undated, consist of correspondence, copies of speeches and writings, newspaper clippings, invitations, programs, photographs and other papers relating to Chesnutt's activities as a court reporter and writer.

This collection will be useful to researchers studying the life and career of Charles Waddell Chesnutt and his activities as a court reporter, novelist, and short story writer in Cleveland, Ohio, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The bulk of this collection consists of Chesnutt's correspondence with magazine and book publishers and editors, local and state political and civic leaders, representatives of various African American welfare organizations (including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP), and with business associates, 1921-1932. Chesnutt had extensive dealings during this period with the Houghton Mifflin Company and the Micheaux Film Corporation in regard to the publishing and to the securing of the motion picture rights to his writings. Correspondents represented in the collection include W. B. Pratt, Ferris Greenslet of the Houghton Mifflin Company, Oscar Micheaux of the Micheaux Film Corporation, Ernest Angell, Harry E. Davis, W. E. B. DuBois, Joel and Arthur Spingarn, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White. The letters which Chesnutt wrote to Walter White, 1930-1932, reveal Chesnutt's civil rights activities and support of the program of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Also included are the following: a journal of Chesnutt's trip to Europe in 1896; typescript and manuscript copies of some of Chesnutt's shorter writings; invitations and programs; advertisements for Chesnutt's books and lectures, as well as those for other speakers and entertainers; a collection of newspaper clippings; and several photographs.

Statement of Arrangement

The collection is arranged by document type and then chronologically.

Restrictions on Access

While there are no access restrictions on this collection, researchers will be asked to use the microfilm of this collection.

Related Material

The researcher should also consult MS 3379 John Patterson Green Papers.

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Subjects:

African American authors -- Correspondence.
African American authors -- Ohio -- Cleveland.
African Americans -- Ohio -- Cleveland.
Authors, American -- Correspondence.
Authors, American -- Ohio -- Cleveland.
Chesnutt, Charles Waddell, 1858-1932.

Preferred Citation

[Container __, Folder __] MS 3370 Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio

Acquisition Information

Gift of the Rowfant Club in 1969.

Processing Information

This collection was re-processed for microfilming by Olivia J. Martin in 1972.

Other Finding Aid

A list of all correspondents represented in this collection is available at the Reference Desk of

the WRHS Research Library. This collection formed the basis for the biography *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line*, written by his daughter, Helen M. Chesnutt, and published in 1952 by the University of North Carolina Press.

Detailed Description of The Collection

Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers 1889-1932

Box	Folder	
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1	1-6	Correspondence of Charles W. Chesnutt, including family matters, business and financial affairs, the publication of his books and their production as motion pictures, and observations and opinions on political leaders and race relations during the period 1889-1932
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Box	Folder	
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2	1	Correspondence of Charles W. Chesnutt, including family matters, business and financial affairs, the publication of his books and their production as motion pictures, and observations and opinions on political leaders and race relations during the period undated
2	2	Diary August 1896
2	3	Writings of Charles W. Chesnutt dates vary
2	4	Miscellaneous manuscripts dates vary
2	5	Printed advertisements and programs dates vary
2	6	Newspaper clippings dates vary
2	7	Photographs dates vary