



ArchivesSpace

# **Curtis (Joseph Owen) Collection**

## **An inventory of Joseph Owen Curtis Collection at DC Public Library**

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English

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

People's Archive, MLK Library

901 G Street NW

Washington, DC

[peoples.archive@dc.gov](mailto:peoples.archive@dc.gov)

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## Summary Information

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|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Repository:</b>               | People's Archive, MLK Library              |
| <b>Creator:</b>                  | Curtis, Joseph Owen                        |
| <b>Title:</b>                    | Joseph Owen Curtis Photographic Collection |
| <b>ID:</b>                       | P007                                       |
| <b>Date [inclusive]:</b>         | 1910-1989                                  |
| <b>Physical Description:</b>     | 1.5 Linear feet                            |
| <b>Physical Description:</b>     | 4 Boxes                                    |
| <b>Language of the Material:</b> | English                                    |

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## Biographical / Historical

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Joseph Owen Curtis was born in 1915 to Hamilton and Aurena E. Curtis and lived in Southwest Washington, D.C. for most of his life. He was close to his older brother William DuBois Curtis, who often appeared in his photographs. Both men went by their middle names throughout their lives. Curtis attended Randall Junior High School, Dunbar High School, Miner Teachers College, and Howard University. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II as a Special Services Officer, stationed in France and Greenland. Curtis eventually earned the rank of Major and worked for many years leading up to his retirement at the Naval Research Laboratory as a math technician. Hamilton Curtis gave Owen his first camera at the age of 11 and encouraged him to learn photographic development to defray the cost of developing negatives. Curtis worked as a snack vendor at local sporting events to pay for the 25-cent rolls of film he used. From an early age he photographed the buildings, people, daily interactions, social events, and street scenes of the Southwest African-American community in which he lived. Curtis became active in civic affairs when redevelopment plans for Southwest began to take shape in the late 1940s. In 1949 Curtis joined the Southwest Civic Association and eventually was appointed chairman of the Redevelopment Committee. Congress chartered the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) in 1946, a new agency with considerable power to condemn and redevelop the city. In a 1950 report, the RLA characterized Southwest as "obsolete" and in need of major redevelopment. By the 1950s when urban renewal was planned for Southwest, a majority of its residents were African-American and nearly two-thirds were low-income. Curtis and his fellow community residents feared they would be displaced as a result of development. Most of their fears were realized when many residents of Southwest were unable to afford to return to their neighborhood after redevelopment. Urban renewal reshaped and forever changed the landscape and culture of Southwest. Curtis died on January 31, 2005. Sources:

"Old Southwest Remembered: The Photographs of Joseph Owen Curtis" Washington History, Fall 1989, Volume 1, Number 2 "A Community Caught in Memory: Photographer Takes Viewers Back to a Simpler Southwest," The Washington Post, March 16, 1995 The Washington Afro-American, October 6, 1979 Kathryn Smith (ed.), Washington At Home, "Southwest Washington: Where History Stopped," Chapter 5, by Keith Melder, Windsor Publications, 1988. The Southwester, March 2005

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## Scope and Contents

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The collection contains approximately 270 black and white prints and 83 slides, the majority of which depict the African-American community of the Southwest neighborhood of Washington, D.C., primarily from the 1920s through the 1970s. The photographs document a historic neighborhood that would be largely razed in the 1950s and 1960s, dramatically changing the landscape and population of the neighborhood. The photographs of streets, businesses, and buildings provide visual documentation of the historic architecture, neighborhood gathering places, and homes of Southwest before and after urban renewal. Photographs of the gatherings and people of Curtis' family and community chronicle the formal and informal organizations of civic and social life in the neighborhood. These include Randall Junior High School, Randall Playground, Miner Teachers College, the Washington Cadet Corps drill competitions, Bruce Wahl's Restaurant and Beer Garden, the Willow Tree Athletic Club and other sports organizations, and the Willow Tree Athletic Club Benevolent Association. Other photographic subjects include Curtis and his fellow servicemen from Southwest D.C. meeting in France during World War II. The collection also contains photographs of programs, announcements, invitations, obituaries, and other items related to the people and organizations Curtis documented. Curtis wrote captions on nearly all of the prints to identify the people, location, and date depicted. On many photographs Curtis also wrote biographical details and memories about the individuals pictured and information about their connections to the Southwest community. The collection's slides were primarily taken by Curtis in the 1980s of some of the same locations he shot in earlier decades. The slides also include copy photographs of his black and white prints.

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## Arrangement

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Series I: Institutions and Organizations, .50 cubic ft. (1926-1989) Photographs in this series depict the people and events of formal and informal institutions and organizations important in the civil, social, and educational life of Southwest Washington, D.C. These include Randall Junior High School, Randall Playground, Miner Teachers College, the Washington Cadet Corps drill competitions, and Bruce Wahl's Restaurant and Beer Garden, a popular café and nightclub on the Southwest waterfront frequented by black Washingtonians after WWII to the late 1950s, and the Willow Tree Athletic Club

and its football team, which was organized and played at the Randall Playground, formerly known as the Cardozo Playground, from the 1930s through the 1950s. Among the photographs are reproductions of ephemera related to the organizations and their events including publicity flyers, announcements and event programs. Folders are organized by related institutions and arranged by date. Series II: People, .50 cubic ft. (1910s-1980s) This series consists of photographs of individuals and groups, almost exclusively in and from Southwest Washington, D.C. The images show Curtis family members and friends, some of whom became important neighborhood figures and leaders, throughout their lives. Most photographs are carefully labeled, identifying the people pictured and including biographical details about the individuals and their ties to Curtis, each other, and the Southwest community. The photographs feature images from Curtis' childhood, parties, holidays, funerals, and weddings. The images were taken at home, abroad during World War II, and at local gathering spots such as Doc Johnson's store, Delaware Avenue, and 4th Street. The World War II photographs include an image of General Dwight D. Eisenhower who visited Curtis' camp in France. Among the photographs are copy reproductions of clippings related to residents of Southwest, including obituaries and articles covering the D.C. release of the film *Black Orpheus*. Folders are arranged by date. Series III: Streets and Buildings, .25 cubic ft. (1930-1989) This series contains photographs of houses, businesses, and the street life of Southwest D.C. Curtis generally does not identify people in the photographs from the neighborhood but meticulously documents the locations in his captions. Areas depicted include businesses and houses along lower 4th Street (600 to 1200 blocks), F and G Street to the 600 block, Delaware Avenue, M and Half Streets, and alley life at 2nd and I Streets. Buildings and landmarks include the Southwest storage tank, Johnson's drugstore, railway viaducts and Randall Elementary School. The photographs are particularly notable for showing Southwest streets and buildings that were completely changed or demolished by urban renewal. Folders are arranged by date. Series IV: Slides, .25 ft. (84 slides), ca. 1914-1982 The series contains 25 black and white slides, primarily of prints in the collection, and 59 unique color images. The black and white slides cover the period before urban renewal of Southwest, from approximately the 1910s to the 1950s. The color images were taken by Curtis in the 1980s to contrast Southwest's streetscapes before and after renewal. Curtis rephotographed streets captured in his earlier black and white prints for comparison. The slides are arranged using a numbering system Curtis devised.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Statement

People's Archive, MLK Library

901 G Street NW  
Washington, DC  
[peoples.archive@dc.gov](mailto:peoples.archive@dc.gov)

### Revision Description

Finding aid revised to be more evergreen. 2020-05-20

## **Custodial History**

In 1979 Joseph Owen Curtis organized Southwest Library's annual Festival of the Arts and brought a sample of his photography to Lessie Owens, Head Librarian of DC Public Library's Southwest Branch. The images had such an impact on the library staff that a permanent exhibition of Curtis Photography was established at the branch. The original photographic prints and slides were later transferred to DC Public Library's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library and officially accessioned in 1998.

## **Processing Information**

After initial processing in 2001, the collection was organized into five series--Series I: Groups and individual shots, Series II: Special subjects, Series III: Streets and Buildings, Series IV: Family and Personal, Series V: Memorabilia, and Series VI: Slides. Photographs of individuals were separated from those of groups and subjects and were organized by photographer name. All photographs and all unique slides were placed in protective plastic Mylar enclosures. Following digitization, the collection was reprocessed to simplify the series and reunite like photographs of the same events and of related subjects that were separated during the initial processing. Since photographs of Curtis' family and friends were present throughout the collection and the entire collection could be considered personal to the photographer, the three series family and personal, groups and individual shots, and special subjects were combined. The large body of photographs documenting people and events this created were then divided into two series—those related to specific Southwest institutions and organizations, formal and informal, and those of the people of Southwest at-large.

## **Conditions Governing Use**

Copyright for all original photographs by Joseph Owen Curtis was transferred to DC Public Library at the time of accession. However, the collection includes some copy photographs of images taken by Scurlock Studio and by friends and family members of Curtis. In addition, the images include reproductions of newspaper clippings, obituaries, public school activities, and social engagement advertisements. When known, Curtis labeled his copy photographs with the name of the creator or source.

Outside of fair use, it is the responsibility of the researcher to obtain permission from the person or institution holding copyright of an image for publication. The Scurlock Studio Archives are owned by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History Archives Center.

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## Controlled Access Headings

- Photographs
- Slides (Photography)
- Neighborhoods
- African Americans
- Streets
- Buildings
- Urban renewal
- Community development, Urban
- Southwest (Washington, D.C.)
- World War, 1939-1945
- Families
- Soldiers
- Black people

## Collection Inventory

### Series 1: Institutions and Organizations, 1926-1989

#### Scope and Contents

Photographs in this series depict the people and events of formal and informal institutions and organizations important in the civil, social, and educational life of Southwest Washington, D.C. These include Randall Junior High School, Randall Playground, Miner Teachers College, the Washington Cadet Corps drill competitions, and Bruce Wahl's Restaurant and Beer Garden, a popular café and nightclub on the Southwest waterfront frequented by black Washingtonians after WWII to the late 1950s, and the Willow Tree Athletic Club and its football team, which was organized and played at the Randall Playground, formerly known as the Cardozo Playground, from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Among the photographs are reproductions of ephemera related to the organizations and their events including publicity flyers, announcements and event programs.

Folders are organized by related institution and arranged by date.

| Title/Description   | Instances |          |
|---|-----------|----------|
| Athletic Clubs - Cardoza Athletic Club baseball, ca. 1949 | Box 1     | Folder 1 |

|   |       |           |
|---|-------|-----------|
| Athletic Clubs - Cavalier Athletic Club football, ca. 1937  | Box 1 | Folder 2  |
| Athletic Clubs - Oriental Tigers baseball team, 1926  | Box 1 | Folder 3  |
| Athletic Clubs - Willow Tree Athletic Club football and fans, 1934-1950s                            | Box 1 | Folder 4  |
| Bruce Wahl's Restaurant and Beer Garden, 1950s  | Box 1 | Folder 5  |
| Bruce Wahl's Restaurant and Beer Garden - Wahl funeral, 1983  | Box 1 | Folder 6  |
| Churches - Church of Saint Vincent de Paul - Confirmation of Father Everett Muschette, 1958         | Box 1 | Folder 7  |
| Churches - St. Augustine's Church - Sanctuary Choir, 1925   | Box 1 | Folder 8  |
| Individualist Club -Caribbean cruise  | Box 1 | Folder 9  |
| Miner Teachers College - Graduates, 1937  | Box 1 | Folder 10 |
| Miner Teachers College - Football and cheerleaders, ca. 1939  | Box 1 | Folder 11 |
| Randall Jr. High School - Students (includes memorabilia), 1929-1936                                | Box 1 | Folder 12 |
| Randall Jr. High School - Faculty, 1945-1950s   | Box 1 | Folder 13 |
| Randall Jr. High School - Building, ca. 1960  | Box 1 | Folder 14 |
| Randall Jr. High School - 50th Anniversary, 1973  | Box 1 | Folder 15 |
| Randall Jr. High School - Class of 1929 alumni, 1982  | Box 1 | Folder 16 |
| Randall Playground, 1936-1950s  | Box 1 | Folder 17 |
| Randall Playground - Reunion - Lola LaBrandt memorial and father-son basketball game, April 21 1956 | Box 1 | Folder 18 |
| Saturday Nite [sic] Club, 1975-1982   | Box 1 | Folder 19 |
| Washington High School Cadet Corps - 1926, ca. 1936   | Box 2 | Folder 1  |
| Washington D.C. Fire Department, 1926   | Box 2 | Folder 2  |
| Washington D.C. high schools Dramatic Carnival, 1926  | Box 2 | Folder 3  |
| Willow Tree Athletic Club Benevolent Association - Recognition day, June 16 1974                    | Box 2 | Folder 4  |
| Willow Tree Athletic Club Benevolent Association - Cabarets, 1976                                   | Box 2 | Folder 5  |
| Willow Tree Athletic Club Benevolent Association - Picnics, 1974-1979                               | Box 2 | Folder 6  |

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## Series 2: People, 1910-1980



## Scope and Contents

This series consists of photographs of individuals and groups, almost exclusively in and from Southwest Washington, D.C. The images show Curtis family members and friends, some of whom became important neighborhood figures and leaders, throughout their lives. Most photographs are carefully labeled, identifying the people pictured and including biographical details about the individuals and their ties to Curtis, each other, and the Southwest community. The photographs feature images from Curtis' childhood, parties, holidays, funerals, and weddings. The images were taken at home, abroad during World War II, and at local gathering spots such as Doc Johnson's store, Delaware Avenue, and 4th Street. The World War II photographs include an image of General Dwight D. Eisenhower who visited Curtis' camp in France.

Among the photographs are copy reproductions of clippings related to residents of Southwest, including obituaries and articles covering the D.C. release of the film *Black Orpheus*.

Folders are arranged by date.

| Title/Description   | Instances |           |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| People, 1910  | Box 2     | Folder 7  |
| People, 1920s   | Box 2     | Folder 8  |
| People, 1930s   | Box 2     | Folder 9  |
| People, 1940s   | Box 2     | Folder 10 |
| People - World War II, 1940-1945                          | Box 2     | Folder 11 |
| People, 1950s   | Box 2     | Folder 12 |
| People, 1970s   | Box 2     | Folder 13 |
| People, 1980s   | Box 2     | Folder 14 |
| Clippings - <i>Black Orpheus</i> film, 1979               | Box 3     | Folder 1  |
| Clippings - Curtis photography exhibition, October 6 1979 | Box 3     | Folder 2  |
| Clippings - Obituaries, 1980-1984                         | Box 3     | Folder 3  |

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## Series 3: Streets and Buildings, 1930-1989

### Scope and Contents

This series contains photographs of houses, businesses, and the street life of Southwest D.C. Curtis generally does not identify people in the photographs from the neighborhood but meticulously documents the locations in his captions. Areas depicted include businesses and houses along lower 4th Street (600 to 1200 blocks), F and G Street to the 600 block, Delaware Avenue, M and Half Streets, and alley life at 2nd and I Streets. Buildings and landmarks include the Southwest storage tank, Johnson's drugstore, railway viaducts and Randall Elementary School. The photographs are particularly notable for showing Southwest streets and buildings that were completely changed or demolished by urban renewal.

Folders are arranged by date.

| Title/Description | Instances |  |
|-------------------|-----------|--|
|-------------------|-----------|--|

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| Streets and Buildings, 1930s               | Box 3 | Folder 4 |
| Streets and Buildings, 1940s               | Box 3 | Folder 5 |
| Streets and Buildings, 1950s               | Box 3 | Folder 6 |
| Streets and Buildings, 1979-1989           | Box 3 | Folder 7 |
| Streets and Buildings                      | Box 3 | Folder 8 |
| Streets and Buildings - Rent receipt, 1949 | Box 3 | Folder 9 |

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## Series 4: Slides, 1914-1982

### Scope and Contents

The series contains 25 black and white slides, primarily of prints in the collection, and 59 unique color images. The black and white slides cover the period before urban renewal of Southwest, from approximately the 1910s to the 1950s. The color images were taken by Curtis in the 1980s to contrast Southwest's streetscapes before and after renewal. Curtis rephotographed streets captured in his earlier black and white prints for comparison.

The slides are arranged using a numbering system Curtis devised.

| Title/Description   | Instances |          |
|---|-----------|----------|
| M Street, SW, north side from Half Street and South Capitol                   | Box 4     | Binder 1 |
| <b>General</b><br>BxW - 1; Color - 1A-1F                                      |           |          |
| 4th Street, west side, between L and M Streets                                | Box 4     | Binder 1 |
| <b>General</b><br>BxW - 2; Color - 2A-2C                                      |           |          |
| 4th and G Streets, northeast corner   | Box 4     | Binder 1 |
| <b>General</b><br>BxW - 3; Color - 3A-3B                                      |           |          |
| N Street, south side from South Capitol toward Half Street                    | Box 4     | Binder 1 |
| <b>General</b><br>BxW - 4; Color - 4A-4B                                      |           |          |
| John Marshall's Printing Shop, 4th Street, west side, between I and K Streets | Box 4     | Binder 1 |

**General**

BxW - 5; Color - 5A-5C

4th Street, west side, between M and N Streets

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 6; Color - 6A-6D

2nd and F Streets, northwest corner, north side toward 3rd Street

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 7; Color - 7A

2nd and F Streets, northeast corner, north side toward 1st Street

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 8; Color - 8A-8B

D Street, north side, between 1st and 2nd Streets

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 9; Color - 9A-9B

2nd and G Streets, northwest corner

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 10; Color - 10A-10B

4th and I Streets, northeast corner, toward H Street

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 11; Color - 11A-11E

4th Street, east side, between F and E Streets

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 12; Color - 12A-12B

1st and Virginia Avenue railroad viaduct looking east

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 13; Color - 13A

F Street, north side, between 2nd and 3rd Streets, toward 2nd Street

Box 4

Binder 1

**General**

BxW - 14; Color - 14A

|   |       |          |
|---|-------|----------|
| G Street, north side between 3rd and 4th Streets, toward 4th Street | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|---|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 15; Color - 15A-15B

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| 3rd and F Streets, northeast corner, north side of F Street, toward 2nd Street | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 16; Color - 16A

|   |       |          |
|---|-------|----------|
| 1st Street, east side, from I Street, toward K Street | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|---|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 17; Color - 17A-17C

|   |       |          |
|---|-------|----------|
| G Street, north side, between 6th and 7th Streets | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|---|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 18; Color - 18A-18B

|   |       |          |
|---|-------|----------|
| 831 Delaware Avenue at I Street, northwest corner (Hampton Curtis with William D. and Joseph O. Curtis) | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|---|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 19; Color - 19A

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| Half and M Streets, northeast corner toward L Street | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 20; Color - 20A-20C

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| Half and M Streets, northwest corner, north side toward 1st Street | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 21; Color - 21A

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| Dr. Nathaniel Johnson's drugstore, 3rd and F Streets, southeast corner | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 22; Color - 22A-22B

|   |       |          |
|---|-------|----------|
| Delaware Avenue and I Street, northwest corner, toward 2nd Street, north side | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|---|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 23; Color - 23A-23B

---

|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| 2nd and G Streets, northwest corner, north side toward Delaware Avenue | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 26; Color - 26A-26C

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|  |       |          |
|--|-------|----------|
| Joseph O. Curtis, B.S. Ed., Miner Teachers College | Box 4 | Binder 1 |
|--|-------|----------|

**General**

BxW - 27; Color - 27A-27C

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|                                  |       |          |
|----------------------------------|-------|----------|
| Duplicate slides (6 slide boxes) | Box 4 | Folder 1 |
|----------------------------------|-------|----------|

**General**

Miscellanea

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|                |       |          |
|----------------|-------|----------|
| Copy negatives | Box 4 | Folder 2 |
|----------------|-------|----------|

**General**

Miscellanea

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|                                   |       |          |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------|
| Southwest library exhibit plaques | Box 4 | Folder 3 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------|

**General**

Miscellanea

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