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A Guide to the
Helen Octavia Dickens Papers
1933-2001

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UPT 50 D548

Prepared by Amy Miller; revised by Joseph-James Ahern
April 2001; August 2011

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>PROVENANCE</u>	1
<u>ARRANGEMENT</u>	1
<u>BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE</u>	1
<u>SCOPE AND CONTENT</u>	3
<u>CONTROLLED ACCESS HEADINGS</u>	3
<u>INVENTORY</u>	5
<u>BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL</u>	5
<u>CORRESPONDENCE</u>	6
<u>MEDICAL</u>	9
<u>MINORITY ISSUES</u>	12
<u>ORGANIZATIONS</u>	13
<u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	29
<u>RÉSUMÉS</u>	30
<u>STUDENTS, COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS</u>	30
<u>UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA</u>	32
<u>WOMEN'S ISSUES</u>	42
<u>AWARDS, CERTIFICATES, AND PHOTOGRAPHS</u>	42

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PROVENANCE

Donated in 1994 by Helen O. Dickens (accession number 1994: 62), with an incremental addition in 2002 (accession number 2002:7).

ARRANGEMENT

This collection contains Eleven series: Biographical, 1977-1981; Correspondence, 1968-1992; Medical, 1948-1984; Minority Issues, 1972-1980; Organizations, 1934, 1953-1994; Recommendations, 1970-1991; Resumes, 1978-1990; Students/Colleagues/Friends, 1968-1989; University of Pennsylvania, 1945, 1962-1994; Women's Issues, 1980; and Awards, Certificates, and Photographs, 1950-2001. All series are arranged alphabetically except for Correspondence, Recommendations, and Resumes, which are arranged both chronologically and alphabetically.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Helen Octavia Dickens was born in Dayton, Ohio, to Charles and Daisy (Green) Dickens on February 21, 1909. After graduating from Roosevelt High School, she attended Crane Junior College in Chicago, Illinois. She was a 1934 graduate of the University of Illinois School of Medicine, the only African-American woman in her graduating class. She spent two years after graduation at Provident Hospital in Chicago, and then practiced with Dr. Virginia Alexander in a birthing-home practice in North Philadelphia.

After seven years with Dr. Alexander, she sought further training in obstetrics and gynecology, spending a year at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Medicine. Dickens passed the board examinations in 1945, becoming the first female African-American board-certified Ob/gyn in Philadelphia. That year, Dr. Dickens became Director of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Mercy Douglass Hospital in Philadelphia. In 1951, Dr. Dickens joined the courtesy staff of Women's Hospital and would later be named chief of obstetrics and gynecology. When the University of Pennsylvania took over the Women's Hospital in 1956, Dr. Dickens became a member of the staff and faculty in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the School of Medicine, becoming the first black woman to serve in this position. In addition to her medical practice, she was professor of obstetrics and gynecology.

One of her special interests was aiding pregnant teenagers. In 1967, Dickens founded the Teen Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania for school-age mothers in the inner city. The clinic's services included counseling and group therapy, educational classes, family planning assistance, and prenatal care. Another of Dickens's interests was cancer education and services. She initiated a project that brought temporary cancer detection facilities into Philadelphia's inner city. Dr. Dickens also implemented a project funded by the National Institute for Health that encouraged doctors to perform Pap smears to test for cervical cancer.

In addition to her work in medicine, Dr. Dickens was named associate dean of minority admissions at the University of Pennsylvania in 1969. She helped recruit and aid Blacks in the medical school. In her first five years, she increased the number of minority medical students from two or three to sixty-four.

Dr. Helen O. Dickens was a member of many distinguished local, national, and international professional societies. She was a member of the Pan American Medical Women's Association and served as president from 1968 to 1970. She was also a member of the board of directors for a number of organizations, including the American Cancer Society, the Children's Aid Society, and the Devereaux Foundation. Dickens was the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Medical Woman of the Year; Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania; Daisy Lumpkin

Award from Links, Inc.; the Mercy Douglass Hospital Award; and the Sadie Alexander Award for community service by Delta Sigma Theta. She was also the first Black to receive the Gimbel Philadelphia Award in 1971 for her "outstanding service to humanity."

Dr. Helen O. Dickens married Dr. Purvis Henderson and had two children, Dr. Jayne Henderson Brown and Norman Henderson.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Helen O. Dickens Papers document the latter half of Dickens' career in the field of medicine, medical education and public health. The collection contains correspondence, articles, reprints, grant proposals and some notes regarding Dickens' work in teenage pregnancy during the 1960s and 1970s which can be found in the Medical and Correspondence series.

It is Dickens' administrative work and participation in professional organizations which figures most prominently in the collection. Her important role to enhance the participation of minorities in medical education, particularly the University of Pennsylvania, is well represented in the form of correspondence, minutes, and reports in the Minority Affairs subseries of the University of Pennsylvania series and National Association of Medical Minority Education subseries of the Organizations series. The Recommendations series complements the material that documents her support of minority students in medical education. In addition to her advocacy work for minorities, Dickens' papers contain material which highlights her work with women's groups such as the Pan American Medical Women's Alliance and the American Medical Women's Association. Also included are correspondence, minutes, reports, and newsletters of a number of professional organizations in which Dickens was an active member, such as the Marriage Council of Philadelphia, the Devereux Foundation, and the Association of American Medical Colleges. Photographs from throughout Dickens life along with plaques and certificates honoring her professional achievements can be found in the Awards, Certificates, and Photographs series.

CONTROLLED ACCESS HEADINGS

Corporate Name(s)

- American Medical Women's Association.
- Association of American Medical Colleges.
- Devereux Foundation.
- Marriage Council of Philadelphia.
- National Association of Medical Minority Educators, Inc..
- Pan American Medical Women's Association.
- University of Pennsylvania. Office of Minority Affairs.

Subject(s)

- Minorities in medicine--United States.
- Teenage pregnancy--United States.
- Women in medicine--United States.

**Helen Octavia Dickens Papers
1933-2001**

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INVENTORY

BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL	Box	Folder
Articles (1)	1	1
Articles (2)	1	2
Biographical sketch, portrait photographs, etc. 1992	1	3
Bordentown Military Institute 1967	1	4
Curriculum Vitae	1	5
Family tree	1	6
Financial	1	7
Henderson, Helen Jane Dickens (daughter)	1	8
Logan Square East	1	9
Medical coverage	1	10
Medical physician and surgeon license 1981	1	11
Membership cards	1	12
News releases 1968-1975	1	13
Photographs	1	14
Photographs of family members	1	15

Photograph of Dickens and Charlotte Kerr at Illini Awards	1	16
Photograph of Dickens and Emily Mudd	1	17
Physicians Mutual Insurance Company	1	18
Profiles	1	19
Questionnaires	1	20
Publicity, newspaper clippings and photographs 1970-1987	1	21
Registries, Medical Specialty Books 1977-1991	1	22
Speeches 1949-1982	1	23
Story, Troy L. (nephew)	1	24
"To Be a Great Black Woman" (play)	1	25
Who's Who among Black Americans 1985	1	26

CORRESPONDENCE	Box	Folder
Alexander, Raymond Pace 1974	1	27
Bascom, Ruth Esherick 1974	1	28
Benayonn, Regine 1976	1	29
Bond, Duane	1	30
Burdens, Beatrice 1976	1	31
Chrysler Motors 1986	1	32
Dodge, Eva F. 1972	1	33
Duffus, Geraldine 1971	1	34
Dungy, Helen 1977	1	35
Edwards, Linn Sheridan, re: Edelin case 1975	1	36
Engs, Robert F. 1986	1	37
Evans, Samuel, re: Dr. James Lewis 1985	1	38

Fitts, William T. 1976	1	39
Frierson, Tonella M. 1991	1	40
Garcia, Celso-Ramon 1976	1	41
Hewlett, Adora 1991	1	42
Jarrett, Cheryl L. 1975	1	43
Kellow, William F. 1969	1	44
King, Brunette M. 1969	1	45
Knox, David L. 1975	1	46
Koons, Linda 1968	1	47
Lang, Neal E. 1972	1	48
McAnarney, Elizabeth R. 1976	1	49
Meyerson, Martin 1973	1	50
Milligan, Jack 1986	1	51
Murray, Peter M. 1970	1	52
Old Women's Hospital of Philadelphia 1973	1	53
Oliver, Marion, Associate Provost 1982	1	54
Robinson, James H. 1976	1	55
Ruff, George E 1991	1	56
Scheffey, Lynn Cox 1973	1	57
Scholl, Mrs. Cornelius L. 1968	1	58
Shipp, Melvin D. 1985	1	59
Stellar, Eliot 1974	1	60
Tompkins, Dr. Pendleton 1974	1	61
Van Dusen, Duncan 1988	1	62

Watson, Goldie E. 1978	1	63
Congratulatory		
1979-1982	1	64
1950-1958, elected as fellow of the American College of Surgeons, with clippings of other medical institutions 1950-1958	1	65
1985	1	66
General		
Correspondence and clippings 1935-1995	1	67
Correspondence and clippings 1951-1982	1	68
1963	1	69
1970	1	70
1971	1	71
1972	1	72
1973	1	73
1974	1	74
1978	1	75
1979-1980	1	76
1982	1	77
1983	1	78
1983-1984	1	79
1984	1	80
1985	1	81
1985	1	82
1986	1	83
1986	1	84

Helen Octavia Dickens Papers

UPT 50 D548

1986-1992	2	1
1987	2	2
1987	2	3
1988	2	4
1989	2	5
1990	2	6
1991	2	7
1992	2	8

MEDICAL	Box	Folder
"Adapting Clinical Medical Education for a Changing Society"	3	1
AIDS (1) 1985-1992	3	2
AIDS (2) 1985-1992	3	3
AIDS reports 1985-1986	3	4
Articles, Reference Material		
(1)	3	5
(2)	3	6
(3)	3	7
(4)	3	8
(5)	3	9
(6)	3	10
Community Health and Safety Networks 1987-1988	3	11
Conduct of Medical Procedures 1987	3	12
CORE seminar	3	13
Diseases and diagnosis during pregnancy 1981	3	14

Family Planning (1) 1970-1980	3	15
Family Planning (2) 1970-1980	3	16
Family Planning (3) 1970-1980	3	17
Family Planning (4) 1970-1980	3	18
Guides	3	19
Medical College of Pennsylvania 1987	3	20
Medical Education Reports 1987-1988	3	21
Mercy-Douglass Hospital 1952-1968	3	22
Myomas, Uterine	3	23
"Obstetrical and gynecological patient and the eye" 1985	3	24
Patient Records (files closed for 75 years)		
Pregnancy information 1970-1971	3	25
Proposal for capitation plan to the Pennsylvania Dept. of Public Welfare 1982	3	26
Proposal for early hospital discharge	3	27
Sexual Education Classes 1975	3	28
Teen Pregnancy		
"Adolescent Sexuality: An Exchange of Views"	4	1
Articles, Reference Material (1) 1968-1983	4	2
Articles, Reference Material (2) 1968-1983	4	3
Articles, Reference Material (3) 1968-1983	4	4
Articles, Reference Material (4) 1968-1983	4	5
Articles, Reference Material (5) 1968-1983	4	6
Articles, Reference Material (6) 1968-1983	4	7
"Birth Control, Teenagers, and the Law" 1971	4	8

"Community Health Networks for Early Adolescents" 1992	4	9
Dickens' Writings		
"Adolescent Contraceptive Use" 1980	4	10
"Adolescent Health Services and Contraception" 1978	4	11
"Contraception in Teenagers" 1974	4	12
"Games We Play with Our Children, The" 1972	4	13
General	4	14
"Media Messages in Sex Education" 1978	4	15
"One Hundred Pregnant Adolescents" 1971-1973	4	16
"Teenage Pregnancy" 1980-1983	4	17
"Teenage Pregnancy and Abortion" 1973	4	18
"Teenagers, Contraception, and Pregnancy" 1975	4	19
Educational programs	4	20
Film: "Loving Parents" 1978-1982	4	21
Linda Hurwitz, study by	4	22
Newspaper clippings 1968-1985	4	23
Proposals		
Adolescent Mother/Infant Support and Training Project 1979	4	24
Contraception and Hypertension (1) 1976	4	25
Contraception and Hypertension (2) 1976	4	26
Contraception and Hypertension (3) 1976	4	27
Factors Influencing Adolescent Contraceptive Use 1976	4	28
Proposal for Increasing the Involvement of Male Partners 1985	4	29
Study of Unwanted Pregnancy in Adolescents 1979	4	30

Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the Problem of Teenage Pregnancies and Parenting in Pennsylvania 1986	4	31
Research on the Consequences of Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing 1976	4	32
Research proposals 1976-1977	4	33
"Serving the Adolescent Unwed Mother" 1969	4	34
Smalls, Edna, advocacy 1986	4	35
"Teen Pregnancy and Service Delivery in Philadelphia" 1979	4	36
Temple University Hospital workshop 1978	4	37
Temperature Chart	4	38
Toxoplasmosis	4	39
University of Illinois College of Medicine 1982-1987	4	40
West Philadelphia Black Cancer Educational Program	4	41
"Women's Health" magazine	4	42
MINORITY ISSUES	Box	Folder
Articles (1)	5	1
Articles (2)	5	2
"Black Youth at Life's Crossroads"	5	3
Minority Permanence Development Committee 1973-1993	5	4
Newspaper Clippings	5	5
Scarpelli v. Rempson Law Suit	5	6
Minority and Medicine		
Article citations	5	7
Articles (1)	5	8
Articles (2)	5	9

Articles (3)	5	10
Articles (4)	5	11
Black women physicians	5	12
"Concerning the Backgrounds, Educational Experiences, and Outcomes of Black, Hispanic and White Doctoral Students" 1989	5	13
Enrollment	5	14
"An Experience in the Health Care Profession for Disadvantaged Undergraduate Students" 1972	5	15
"An Exploratory Study of Perceptions of Racism by Black Medical Students in White Medical Schools"	5	16
History	5	17
Lee, Rebecca	5	18
Newspaper clippings featuring Dickens	5	19
Special Health Career Opportunity Grants	5	20
Time Management for Minority Medical Students 1980	5	21

ORGANIZATIONS	Box	Folder
A. Charles Posner Obstetrical Society 1975	5	22
Alan L. Locke School 1974	5	23
Albert Einstein Medical Center Directory	5	24
Alpha Kappa Alpha 1978	5	25
American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, continuing medical education	5	26
American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology		
Certificate of Proficiency April 1946	OS 3	
Diplomat of Board Diploma February 1979	OS 2	
American Cancer Society		

Helen Octavia Dickens Papers

UPT 50 D548

Certificate (1)	5	27
Certificate (2)	OS 1	
General 1970-1983	5	28
General 1984-1993	5	29
Honors 1971	5	30
American Capital Government Securities 1993	5	31
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists		
Article	5	32
Certificates 1953	5	33
Continuing medical education 1976-1987	5	34
Continuing medical education 1978-1991	5	35
Life Fellow correspondence 1987	5	36
Meetings 1974-1975	5	37
Newsletter 1978	5	38
Printed material	5	39
Update for the Practicing Physician 1988	5	40
American College of Physicians		
Diploma 1950	5	41
General 1990	5	42
American College of Surgeons		
Continuing medical education 1986-1988	5	43
General	5	44
American Foundation of Negro Affairs 1974-1988	5	45
American Medical Association		

Certificates of membership 1985-1994	5	46
Continuing medical education accreditation 1979	5	47
General 1985-1993	5	48
Physicians Recognition Awards 1979-1987	5	49
American Medical Student Association 1979	5	50
American Medical Women's Association		
1971-1986	5	51
1981-1990	5	52
1989-1990	5	53
Newsletter featuring Dickens	5	54
American Red Cross		
Charles Drew Awards 1978-1980	5	55
Charles Drew Awards 1990	5	56
Association of Academic Health Centers 1989	6	1
Association of Academic Minority Physicians 1987	6	2
Association of American Medical Colleges		
Certificate 1988	6	3
Facts: Applicants, Matriculants, Graduates 1984-1990	6	4
1975-1977	6	5
1978-1980	6	6
1981-1982	6	7
1982-1983	6	8
1985	6	9
1986	6	10

1987	6	11
1988	6	12
1990	6	13
1992	6	14
Meetings		
1972-1973	6	15
1987	6	16
1988	6	17
1990	6	18
1991	6	19
Minority affairs		
1975	6	20
1979	6	21
1984	6	22
1988	6	23
1990	6	24
Minority applicants		
1981	6	25
1985	6	26
1988	6	27
Northeast group on student affairs 1975	6	28
Northeast group on student affairs 1990-1991	6	29
Reports 1978	6	30
Reports 1989-1990	6	31

Women liaison officers 1976-1991	6	32
Association of Planned Parenthood Professionals		
Continuing medical education 1973-1979	7	1
General 1982-1985	7	2
Meetings 1971 1975	7	3
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals		
Bebashi	7	5
Better Family Planning, Inc. 1972-1973	7	6
Black Science Students Organization	7	7
Black Women's Collective	7	8
Boston City Hospital 1973	7	9
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation 1983	7	10
Children's Aid Society		
General 1971-1993	7	11
Nanny School 1984-1985	7	12
Children's Hospital of Philadelphia	7	13
Children's Television Workshop 1975	7	14
Chronicle of Higher Education 1993	7	15
Coalition of 100 Black Women 1981-1983	7	16
College of Physicians		
Continuing medical education 1982-1987	7	17
General 1976-1994	7	18
Invitation 1992	7	19
Memorandum 1994	7	20

Community College of Philadelphia 1979	7	21
Consortium on Financing Higher Education 1992	7	22
Cosmopolitan Club 1975	7	23
Delta Sigma Theta	7	24
DePauw University 1977	7	25
Detroit Medical Society 1962	7	26
Devereux Foundation		
Annual report 1989	7	27
Board of Trustees		
1984-1985	7	28
1988	7	29
1988-1989, (1) 1988-1989	7	30
1988-1989, (2) 1988-1989	7	31
1988-1990	7	32
1989, (1) 1989	7	33
1989, (2) 1989	7	34
1990, (1) 1990	7	35
1990, (2) 1990	7	36
1990, (3) 1990	7	37
Organizational Manual 1990	7	38
Organizational Manual 1991	7	39
Common Fund, The 1988	7	40
Earl D. Bond Center	7	41
Financial Statement 1987-1989	7	42

Financial Statement 1991	7	43
Foundation, Department, and Individual Goals 1990	7	44
General Correspondence		
1979	8	1
1980-1987	8	2
1984	8	3
1984-1986	8	4
1985	8	5
1986-1987	8	6
1987	8	7
1988, (1) 1988	8	8
1988, (2) 1988	8	9
1989	8	10
1990, (1) 1990	8	11
1990, (2) 1990	8	12
1991, (1) 1991	8	13
1991, (2) 1991	8	14
Insurance program 1988-1989	8	15
Investment committee meeting 1989	8	16
Plan for operations 1990	8	17
Plan for operations 1991-1992	8	18
Quality assurance plan 1989-1990	8	19
Quality assurance plan 1991	8	20
Real estate investment program 1988	8	21

Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania

General 1974-1989	8	22
Members 1986	8	23
Douglass Hospital	8	24
E. Luther Cunningham Community House award, speech 1985	8	25
E. L. French Center 1990-1991	8	26
Family Workshop #1 1980	8	27
Fifty Year Club of American Medicine 1985	8	28
Ford Foundation 1981-1983	8	29
Fox Chase Cancer Center 1992	8	30
Frankford Hospital, directory	8	31
Franklin Institute 1975-1984	8	32
Frederick Douglass Society 1993	8	33
Fundraising groups	8	34
Gimbel Philadelphia Award		
Correspondence 1971-1982	8	35
Nominations 1981-1982	8	36
Nominations 1987-1988	8	37
Nominations 1989-1991	8	38
Nominations 1992	8	39
Programs 1971-1990	8	40
Selection Committee 1987	8	41
Speeches 1971	8	42
Girl Scouts of America 1988-1989	9	1

Graduate Hospital, directory	9	2
Hahnemann University, correspondence and speech	9	3
Health and Human Services, Dept. of 1988	9	4
Howard University Hospital 1989	9	5
Infertility hospitals directory	9	6
International College of Surgeons 1989	9	7
James Memorial United Methodist Church 1973	9	8
Jefferson Medical Center		
Advertisement	9	9
Continuing medical education 1987	9	10
Keystone State Medical Society 1974-1979	10	11
Links, Inc.		
Daisy Lampkin Award 1971-1972	9	12
General 1966-1988	9	13
Plaque	9	14
Macy Foundation		
"Adapting Clinical Education to the Needs of Today and Tomorrow" 1988	9	15
"Clinical Education and the Doctor of Tomorrow" 1988	9	16
Conferences 1968-1974	9	17
Marriage Council of Philadelphia		
Board of Trustees 1987-1990	9	18
By-laws 1976 1991	9	19
Correspondence 1983	9	20
Correspondence 1987-1988	9	21

Correspondence 1990-1992	9	22
Meetings 1990-1991	9	23
Meetings 1992	9	24
Meetings 1993-1994	9	25
Newspaper clippings 1993	9	26
Reports 1990-1991	9	27
Reports 1991-1993	9	28
Reports 1994	9	29
Medical College of Pennsylvania		
Archives and special collections on women in medicine 1988	9	30
Commencement program 1974	9	31
General 1969-1986	9	32
Honorary degree 1979	9	33
National Fund for Women's Health 1979	9	34
Newsletter 1975	9	35
Medical Society of Eastern Pennsylvania		
General 1978-1994	9	36
Mercy-Douglass Lectureship		
Plaque 1988	9	37
Speech 1985	9	38
PULSE Newsletter		
1978-1979	9	39
1982-1985	9	40
1987-1990	9	41

1991-1992	9	42
Medical Women's International Association		
XIII International Congress 1972	9	43
XVI International Congress 1978	9	44
Meharry Philadelphia Alumni Association 1984	9	45
Middle Run Baptist Church 1993	9	46
Morehouse School of Medicine		
Correspondence 1987	10	1
Invitation, program 1983	10	2
Invitation, newsletter, program 1989	10	3
Mount Carmel Baptist Church 1978-1979	10	4
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, plaque 1967	10	5
National Association of Medical Minority Educators		
Award 1985	OS 1	
Bylaws	10	6
Conference 1990	10	7
Conference 1993	10	8
Constitution	10	9
General Correspondence		
1975-1976	10	10
1977-1978	10	11
1979-1980	10	12
1980	10	13
1981	10	14

1982-1986	10	15
1985-1986	10	16
1989-1990	10	17
1991-1992	10	18
National Association of University Women, Philadelphia Chapter 1976-1979	10	19
National Coalition of 100 Black Women 1983-1990	10	20
National Council of Negro Women, plaque 1975	OS 2	
National Council of Negro Women, speech 1975	10	21
National Medical Association		
Agendas 1992-1993	10	22
General 1974-1980	10	23
Plaque 1990	10	24
National Residency Matching Program 1983	10	25
Obstetrical Society of Philadelphia		
Constitution and bylaws 1962-1978	10	26
General 1979-1983	10	27
General 1985-1993	10	28
Newsletters 1988 1993	10	29
Programs 1974-1983	10	30
Orthopsychiatric Association 1978	10	31
Pacesetters 1970	10	32
Pacesetters, plaque 1971	10	33
Palmetto Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association 1975	10	34
Pan American Medical Women's Alliance		

Certificates 1977 1979	11	1
General		
1967-1968	11	2
1967-1983	11	3
1969	11	4
1970	11	5
1971	11	6
1972	11	7
1973	11	8
1974	11	9
1975	11	10
1976	11	11
1977-1978	11	12
1979-1980	11	13
1981-1983	11	14
1985-1987	11	15
1988-1989	11	16
1994	11	17
History	11	17
Member lists	11	18
Photographs		
Undated	11	19
1967	11	20
1975	11	21

Speech 1968	11	22
Pennsylvania Coalition of 100 Black Women 1983	11	23
Pennsylvania Department of Community Affairs, report 1966-1968	11	24
Pennsylvania Hospital	11	25
Pennsylvania Medical Society		
Continuing medical education 1980-1987	11	26
Continuing medical education 1987-1993	11	27
General 1974-1993	11	28
Plaque 1984	11	29
Philadelphia		
Citation (1) 1991	11	31
Citation (2) 1991	OS 1	
Adolescent pregnancy conference 1985	11	30
Inauguration of W. Wilson Goode 1988	11	32
Philadelphia Academy of Medicine and Allied Science		
Photograph		
Testimonial banquet to professional men in practice 25 years or more 1939	OS 3	
Philadelphia County Medical Society		
Certificates and membership cards 1990-1994	11	33
General 1968-1977	11	34
General 1978-1994	11	35
Philadelphia School District, adult education 1984-1985	11	36
Philadelphia Miniversity, sexual responsibility classes 1977	11	37
Planned Parenthood Federation of America		

Correspondence and published material re: speech 1973	11	38
General 1974-1992	11	39
Speech 1985	11	40
Postgraduate Obstetrics and Gynecology 1992	11	41
Presbyterian Medical Center, directory	11	42
Resources for Children's Health 1989-1990	11	43
Rita Doucet Clinic 1975	11	44
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, report 1987	11	45
Rockefeller Foundation, correspondence 1986	11	46
Saint Christopher's Hospital for Children, directory	11	47
Saint Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church, correspondence and speech 1975	11	48
Sojourner Truth Award, program 1974	11	49
Soroptimist International, Women of Distinction Award 1991	11	50
Spruce Family Planning Clinic 1985-1986	11	51
Spruce Medical Center		
Correspondence 1987	12	1
Plaque 1987	12	2
Student National Medical Association		
Conference 1990	12	3
General 1974-1983	12	4
Swarthmore College, extern program 1977-1984	12	5
Teen Aid, Inc. 1971	12	6
Temple University		
Continuing medical education 1987 1989	12	7

Correspondence 1979	12	8
Directory	12	9
Tennessee, certificate 1971	OS 1	
Thirteen School Consortium, members	12	10
Thomas Jefferson University		
Correspondence re: award 1984	12	11
Directory	12	12
United Negro College Fund 1971-1980	12	13
University of Illinois		
Correspondence 1987	12	14
Diploma 1934	12	15
Illini Award (1) 1981-1982	12	16
Illini Award (2) 1981-1982	12	17
Illini Award 1984	12	18
Publications	12	19
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey 1987	12	20
University of Southern California School of Medicine, Continuing medical education 1990	12	21
University of Texas 1987	12	22
Urban League of Philadelphia 1970	12	23
W. C. Atkinson Memorial Service Center, committee membership 1991	12	24
Wayne State University, speech re: teen pregnancy 1979	12	25
Williamsport Hospital 1977-1978	12	26
World Affairs Council of Philadelphia 1976-1980	12	27

RECOMMENDATIONS	Box	Folder
Undated	12	28
1970	12	29
1972	12	30
1973	12	31
1974	12	32
1975	12	33
1976	12	34
1977	12	35
1978	12	36
1979	12	37
1980	12	38
1981	12	39
1982	12	40
1983	12	41
1984	12	42
1985	12	43
1986	12	44
1987	12	45
1988	12	46
1989	12	47
1990	12	48
1991	12	49

RÉSUMÉS	Box	Folder
1978-1984	12	53
1985	12	54
1985-1990	12	55
STUDENTS, COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS	Box	Folder
Alexander, Sadie Tanner Mussell 1979-1989	12	56
Alexander, Dr. Virginia	12	57
Alexander-Minter, Rae	12	58
Arnold, Alison Joy 1981-1982	12	59
Brisbon, Delores Flynn 1985	12	60
Carter, Paulette 1981	12	61
Cave, Lawrence	12	62
Cooper, Edward S.	12	63
Davis, Patricia 1984-1988	12	64
Durr, Virginia Foster	12	65
Fakeye, O. O.	12	66
Farmer, Harold	13	1
Gamble, Marguerite 1981-1982	13	2
Gamble, Vanessa	13	3
Gellhorn, Alfred A. 1968-1980	13	4
Gonzalez, Victor 1988	13	5
Green, John	13	6
Harvey, William R.	13	7

Hayre, Dr. Ruth Wright	13	8
Head, Alexander 1968-1969	13	9
Henry, Audrey 1987	13	10
Henry, Thomas	13	11
Hicks, Eric L.	13	12
Jenkins, Vikki	13	13
Julian, Dr. Percy Lavon	13	14
Lawry, William	13	15
Lights, Vernanda	13	16
Marshall, Dr. Carter Lee	13	17
Mayo, Anna	13	18
Mays, Huey	13	19
Minter, Thomas	13	20
Morial, Julie	13	21
Mudd, Emily 1973-1977	13	22
Mudd, Emily 1971-1983	13	23
Pearson, Starr	13	24
Pierce, Dr. Harold E.	13	25
Pinn, Dr. Vivian 1978-1980	13	26
Pinn, Dr. Vivian and Dr. Henry W. Wiggins	13	27
Quansah, Arabaa 1988	13	28
Roach, Dierdra 1977	13	29
Spencer, Beverly	13	30
Staton, Mary	13	31

Stewart, Meloyde	13	32
Tanner, Henry O.	13	33
Weiss, Dr. William 1979	13	34
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA		
Academic coordinators 1986-1989	13	35
Academic Programs		
1980-1981	13	36
1986-1993	13	37
1988-1989	13	38
Office of, Annual Report 1983-1984	13	39
Office of, Planning Retreat 1990	13	40
Unit leaders 1989-1991	13	41
Administrative organization 1977	13	42
Admissions Committee 1977-1983	13	43
Admissions, Director of, Candidates	13	44
Admissions Office 1988-1989	13	45
Admissions Office 1989-1992	13	46
Admissions policy 1987	13	47
American Association of University Professors 1974-1988	13	48
Asbury, Arthur 1988-1989	13	49
Behavioral and handicapped brochures	13	50
Case presentation seminar 1985-1986	13	51
Case presentation seminar 1987-1988	13	52
Century of Obstetrics	13	53

Clinical practice 1988	13	54
Crown, Victor 1978-1983	13	55
Dean's retreat 1972-1987	13	56
Diplomas 1945 1971	13	57
Directory, HUP	13	58
Extramural Activity		
Annual report 1970-1975	13	59
Annual report 1984-1994	13	60
Faculty research survey and annual report 1978 1987	13	61
Guidelines and annual report 1991-1993	13	62
Professorial and professional personnel activity report 1989-1994	13	63
Financial Aid 1989	14	1
Graduation program 1986 1992	14	2
Harassment 1985-1990	14	3
Faculty Advising 1986-1987	13	64
Faculty Advising/Career Counseling Systems 1983-1987	13	65
Faculty Advisors 1982-1987	13	66
Faculty Club 1977	13	67
Family Involvement Study	13	68
Honors		
Correspondence 1983-1992	14	4
Honorary degree 1982	OS 3	
Honorary degree 1982-1983	14	5
Plaque from School of Medicine 1974	14	6

Plaque from School of Nursing 1983	14	7
Press releases 1979 1985	14	8
Programs	14	9
Family Planning		
Advisory Board 1962	13	69
Grant (1)	13	70
Grant (2)	13	71
Grant (3)	13	72
HUPdate 1984	14	10
Infections control manual	14	11
Information management at School of Medicine 1990	14	12
Kelly, William N. 1989-1990	14	13
Laser	14	14
LEAD program, summary of activities 1988	14	15
Liberal Studies program	14	16
Long range planning committee 1973-1989	14	17
Maternity leave for residents 1984-1985	14	18
Medical alumni society	14	19
Medical staff bylaws 1982-1985	14	20
Medical student awards 1986	14	21
Medical student government 1989	14	22
Memorandum		
1972-1974	14	23
1975-1982	14	24

1981-1983	14	25
1982-1987	14	26
1989-1990	14	27
Mentor program 1987	14	28
Minority Affairs		
Admissions policies 1974-1984	14	29
Admissions, scholarships, black studies 1968-1985	14	30
Affirmative Action report 1988-1990	14	31
African-American studies 1969 1983	14	32
African-American studies 1982	14	33
Alumni 1982	14	34
Alumni fundraising 1988-1989	14	35
Applicants	14	36
Bakke case and related articles 1979	14	37
Black Alumni Society 1981-1984	14	38
Black Centenary 1979-1980	15	1
Black Permanence 1991	15	2
Black Presence 1973-1988	15	3
Black Presence Steering Committee 1985-1987	15	4
Black Presence Steering Committee 1989	15	5
Case Presentations Lunch-Time Series 1994	15	6
"Colorlines: The Enduring Significance of Race" 1986-1988	15	7
Faculty and administrators 1974-1992	15	8
Fontaine Fellowship 1987-1989	15	9

General 1987-1989	15	10
General 1988-1994	15	11
Health and Human Services, Department of 1987	15	12
Higginbotham, Leon 1975-1983	15	13
Howard-Penn Symposium 1988-1990	15	14
Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Survey 1994	15	15
James H. Robinson Scholarship		
Correspondence 1988-1992	15	16
Meeting June 1992	15	17
Meeting October 1992	15	18
Memorandum 1973 1985	15	19
Minority Affairs Advisory Council 1987-1988	15	20
Minority guides 1985-1986	15	21
Minority Permanence		
Development committee 1992	15	22
Document update 1992	15	23
General (1) 1990-1991	15	24
General (2) 1990-1991	15	25
Planning Group 1992	15	26
Program 1990	15	27
Retrospective Analysis 1993	15	28
Second Century Fund 1988	15	29
Minority Presence		
Development committee 1989	15	30

Development committee funds, oversight committee 1982-1992	15	31
Minority Students		
Correspondence 1978	15	32
Lists 1960-1981	15	33
Lists 1982-1983	15	34
Office of Minority Affairs		
Budget 1977-1985	15	35
General 1975-1992	16	1
General (1) 1993-1994	16	2
General (2) 1993-1994	16	3
Office Assistant	16	4
Status Report 1978-1985	16	5
PennMed minority medical student network 1988	16	6
Presidents' Forum 1986-1987	16	7
Racist and sexist implications of hysterectomies in black women 1978	16	8
Undergraduate minority concerns coordinating committee members 1985-1986	16	9
Minutes Minutes		
Board of Overseers of School of Medicine		
1991	16	10
1991	16	11
1991	16	12
1992	16	13
1994	16	14

1994	16	15
1994	16	16
Board of Overseers of School of Medicine and Board of Hospital Joint Meeting		
1993	16	17
1993	16	18
Health System Trustee Board		
1994	16	19
Medical Center Trustee Board		
1991	16	20
1991	16	21
1991	16	22
1992	16	23
1992	16	24
1993	17	1
1993	17	2
1994	17	3
1994	17	4
1994	17	5
Mussell Lecture 1985-1986	17	6
Obstetrics and Gynecology		
Articles and publications 1979-1990	17	7
Departmental		
Correspondence 1979-1993	17	8
General (1) 1988-1993	17	9

General (2) 1988-1993	17	10
Obstetrical care and West Philadelphia 1984	17	11
Patient statistics 1975-1976	17	12
Post Graduate Course	17	13
Penn medical scholars program 1987	17	14
Photographs, School of Medicine staff c. 1980	17	15
Print highlights 1994	17	16
Reappointments 1988-1994	17	17
Reappointments and salary 1972-1987	17	18
Reduced schedule residency survey 1975	17	19
Release for photograph	17	20
Report of the survey, School of Medicine 1976	17	21
Report to the task force 1984	17	22
Residency matching program 1988	17	23
Revisions to bylaws and staff lists 1970-1984	17	24
School of Allied Medical Professions 1977-1978	17	25
Social aspects of healthcare 1981-1991	17	26
Sociology, Department of, Chairman's final report 1978	17	27
Status summary of proposed curricular changes 1989	17	28
Stemmler, Dr. Edward J. 1980-1990	17	29
Student performance evaluation guidelines 1976	17	30
Students in academic difficulty 1982-1986	17	31
Subcommittee on educational facilities 1986	17	32
Teaching		

Intercession course, multidisciplinary 1972-1974	17	33
Memorandum 1975	18	1
OG 200	18	2
OG 250, course material	18	3
OG 250, students 1969-1985	18	4
Student evaluation of elective courses 1979	18	5
Teen Clinic		
Articles	18	6
Correspondence 1971-1982	18	7
Episcopal Diocese contribution 1983-1986	18	8
General, undated	18	9
General 1973-1982	18	10
General 1978-1980	18	11
Grant, correspondence 1977-1980	18	12
Grant proposal, 1980		
(1)	18	13
(2)	18	14
(3)	18	15
(4)	18	16
Patients 1960-1970	2	9
Inception 1967-1974	18	17
Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation Grant Program (1) 1972	18	18
Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation Grant Program (2) 1972	18	19
Mothers Club 1969	18	20

Program for adolescent fathers 1982	18	21
Proposal for Funding Educational Component 1977	18	22
Proposal to Increase Services 1980	18	23
Putative Fathers Group 1968	18	24
Reports		
Carter, Sarah 1973	18	25
General (1)	18	26
General (2)	18	27
Hardman, Wendy 1973-1974	18	28
Sarrell, Paul 1967	18	29
University City High School Outreach (1)	18	30
University City High School Outreach (2)	18	31
University Council 1971-1987	18	32
University Senate 1967-1983	18	33
Walk-In Clinic 1972	18	34
Ware College House, Health and Society Residential Program	18	35
Women		
College of Liberal Arts for Women 1971-1976	18	36
Mandelbaum, Dorothy 1974	19	1
Students	19	2
Women for Equal Opportunity at U. Penn. 1972 1983	19	3
Women of Color Day 1994	19	4
Women's Advisory Board to Provost 1976-1984	19	5
Women's Faculty Club 1973-1982	19	6

Women's hospital division 1971-1980	19	7
Women's Studies 1971-1974	19	8
WOMEN'S ISSUES		
General	19	9
Women in medicine		
Article citations	19	10
Articles (1)	19	11
Articles (2)	19	12
Articles (3)	19	13
Articles and statistics	19	14
AWARDS, CERTIFICATES, AND PHOTOGRAPHS		
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Omega Omega and Gamma Epsilon Chapters, Testimonial 1953	OS 24	1
American Cancer Society Award (plaque), for distinguished service in cancer control 1970	20	1
American Heart Association, 2001 Edward S. Cooper Award (Glass plaque), with a stand (edge broken) 2001	20	2
American Medical Women's Association, Elizabeth Blackwell Award (Medal with ribbon) 1989	20	3
American Red Cross, West Philadelphia Branch, Charles Drew Community Service Award (metal plate), n.d.	20	4
Association of American Medical Colleges, Group on Student Affairs Minority Affairs Section, award for contributions to medical education 1990	20	5
Association of Women Faculty and Administrators, Leonore Rowe Williams Award 1991	20	6
Awards and certificates 1933-2000	OS 26	1

Awards and diploma, five, rolled oversize 1933-1971	OS 25	1
Charles Drew Award Committee, Charles R. Drew Award (stature), n.d.	20	7
Chinese-style water-color scrolled painting presented by Cui Jiu, n.d.	OS 25	2
City Council of Philadelphia, Citation 1999	OS 24	2
Delaware Valley Chapter of the Links Inc., Certificate of Appreciation (plaque) 1981	20	8
E. L. Cunningham Memorial Award 1985	21	1
Family Planning Council Award 1995	OS 24	3
Franklin Institute Board of Managers, award, n.d.	21	2
Frederick Douglass Society, Dedicated Service Award (crystal bowl) 1993	22	1
Gimbel Award, with newspaper clipping 1971	OS 26	2
House of Ballantine Scotch, tribute (plaque) 1972	21	3
Links Inc., 15th National Assembly, group photograph 1966	OS 24	4
Links Inc., Delaware Valley Chapter, 25th anniversary Porcelain photo plate	21	4
Links Inc., Philadelphia Chapter, Crystal vase 1994	22	2
Links Inc., The Eastern Area of, Daisy Lampkin Award 1972	21	5
Mabel M. Keys Chapter No. 99, O.E.S., P.H.A., award (plaque) 1994	OS 25	3
Medical Women's International Association, 10th Congress, group photograph 1966	OS 26	3
Mercy-Douglas Hospital, Board of Auxiliaries, award (plaque) for outstanding services to the community in cancer detection 1965	21	6
Mercy-Douglass Hospital, photographs on receiving an award, etc. 1988-1989	OS 26	4
Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Red Carpet Club, membership certificate, n.d.	OS 24	5

National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Candace Award (Crystal hexagonal cube) 1986	22	3
National Medical Association Section of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Lifetime Achievement Award 1994	21	7
Obstetrical and Gynecological Staff of Mercy-Douglass Hospital, tribute (plaque) 1967	21	8
Omnia Bona, Inc., plaque 1966	21	9
Pan American Medical Women's Alliance, diploma 1970	OS 24	6
Phila. Academy of Medicine and Allied Science, Testimonial Banquet to Professional Men in Practice 25 years or more, group photograph 1939	OS 24	7
Philadelphia Congress of the National Political Congress of Black Women, Chisholm Award (glass plaque) 1997	23	1
Philadelphia Tribune Charities Inc., Humanitarian Award 1971	23	2
Photographs, group pictures 1950-1988	OS 26	5
Photographs, snapshots, miscellaneous 1962-1988	OS 26	6
Portrait photograph, c. 1990	OS 24	8
Portrait unveiling, photographs 1991	OS 26	7
Quaker City Alumnae, plaque 1978	23	3
Senate of Pennsylvania, tribute 1999	OS 24	9
Sketch portrait, oversize, taken in the Philippines 1973	OS 24	10
Women of Mt. Zion, Salute (a plaque) 1963	23	4