

**Katherine Flowers (1896-1982) Papers, 1934-1981**

**Series 31/6/87**

**Boxes 1-6, including one drop-front box**

**Biography**

Born on May 18, 1896 in Sherman, Texas, dancer and choreographer Katherine Jefferson Flowers exhibited a love for dance early in her childhood. She began performing at local folk festivals at the age of seven, and by age nine she organized shows with neighborhood friends in her backyard in Kansas City, Missouri, where her parents migrated in 1904. However, turn-of-the-century Kansas City provided African-Americans with few opportunities for a professional dance career. Not until she entered Kansas State Teacher's College (later Emporia State University) in 1913 did Katherine finally receive sustained formal training. There she studied voice, dramatics, and pageantry. She was a member of the school's varsity dance club, the Orchesis Society, and taught summer dance classes at the Kansas City YWCA. In 1916, she married Orlando Flowers, Jr. After graduating, she taught physical education at Sumner High School in Cairo, Illinois, and danced professionally at the Cairo Opera House. In 1924 she moved to Chicago and spent twenty-five years as a physical education teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. All the while, Flowers continued to study and teach dance. At Northwestern University, as a student of anthropologist Melville Herskovits, Flowers' interest in African and Afro-American dance was piqued, and she began a lifelong quest to document the evolution of African-American dance in the United States.

After completing her degree in education in 1942 at Northwestern, Flowers opened her own dance school in Chicago, the Flowers School of Dance, in 1944, where she taught ballet and classical dance. Out of this venture emerged a professional dance troupe, The Katherine Flowers Dancers, which toured the United States and Israel during the early 1950s. Their most popular production, originally entitled "Bamboula to Ballet" (later "Bamboula to Bop") traced the development of a distinct African-American dance style. In 1949, Flower retired from the Chicago Public Schools to dedicate herself entirely to her dance company. After completing several highly acclaimed dance tours, Flowers resided briefly in Los Angeles, where her son and daughter lived, and opened a dance school there. In 1955 Flowers moved to New York City, which became her home until her death in July, 1982. In New York, Flowers set up a new dance school, although its success never matched her Chicago-based company. She supplemented her income by substitute teaching in the New York Public Schools, lecturing, teaching summer workshops, and teaching yoga. Flowers conducted yoga classes for many years to the diplomats and employees of the United Nations. In addition to these activities, Flowers hoped to write a book documenting the history of African-American dance as well as a children's book on the same subject, but neither of those projects got beyond extensive notes, which are represented in her papers.

A significant portion of the papers also relate to her children, Posie and Orlando, both of whom achieved some prominence in their own rights. Posie was a noted dancer herself, and enjoyed fame as a member of the Broadway production of "Carmen Jones" in the 1940s. Although we know little else about her life, several clippings and many photographs in this collection document this exciting time in Posie's early career. More information exists regarding Orlando Flowers, Jr. (1920-1974), who became a high-ranking official in Los Angeles county government, eventually holding the position of sanitation chief. A career military man, Orlando also became the first African-American colonel in the California National Guard.

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**Description of the Series**

The papers of Katherine Flowers reflect a life dedicated to the art of dance, particularly African-American dance. They document Flowers' long career as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher. The papers lend insight into the popularization of African-American dance in the twentieth century, a process in which Flowers and her contemporary, Katherine Dunham, played a significant role.

Note: The papers arrived in twenty-two boxes with no discernable organization. The majority of the materials consisted of small scraps of paper on which Katherine Flowers had written incomplete and often repetitive notes about dance routines, lectures, yoga, or research relating to dance. While all significant items found in the papers were retained, only a sampling of these random notes was preserved as examples of their form and content.

The papers are organized into eight major categories: Biographical, Personal Correspondence, Dance Company, Materials relating to other dancers and artists, Miscellaneous, Photographs, Scrapbooks, and Oversized materials.

**Biographical** materials relate to Katherine Flowers and members of her family, including her mother and two children. The biographical material relating to Katherine Flowers spans the years 1939-77 and includes her educational records from Northwestern as well as the University of California, Los Angeles and Columbia University (New York, New York) where she took classes. The biographical material also contains Flowers' birth certificates, resumés, a short autobiographical account, and business cards.

The file relating to Mattie Jefferson (1877-1955), Katherine's mother, contains one item: her death certificate.

The biographical material pertaining to Posie Flowers Saunders (dates unknown) consists of her 1935 Kenwood High School (Chicago, IL) commencement program, a life insurance policy, and two undated clippings featuring her role as a dancer in the Broadway production of "Carmen Jones."

Orlando Flowers' (1920-1974) biographical material is more extensive, including his church confirmation record, military papers relating to his service on the SS Theodore Roosevelt in 1940, and an eligibility statement from the Veterans' Administration. The material also includes a birth announcement for his daughter Yolanda born in 1954, a wedding announcement from his second marriage dated 1961, tax returns, and several awards he received while in the Health & Sanitation Department for Los Angeles and as the first African-American Colonel in the California National Guard. There are several business cards; one gives Orlando Flowers the title of "Provost Marshal" for the Army National Guard, and the other names him as a director for the Bureau of Health and Environmental Services for Los Angeles. Also included are his death certificate and memorial service programs, in which Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley served as an honorary pall bearer.

Teaching materials relate solely to Flowers' experience in the New York Public Schools and include competency certificates and teaching assignments.

Original pieces of writing by Katherine Flowers include a 1945 column in the *Chicago Bee*, undated news writing assignments (presumably from a class in magazine writing Flowers

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took at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1952), and drafts for a fellowship proposal in which Flowers sought funding for a book on the history of African-American dance.

Schedules and announcements for radio interviews of Katherine Flowers are contained in the Radio Interviews folder.

Clippings related to Katherine Flowers date from 1946 to 1963, and consist mostly of undated social items and announcements of her involvement with various cultural functions in Chicago, such as the “Follies Bergere,” a pageant she coordinated in 1947. There is also a clipping regarding a dance recital at P.S. 11 (New York) that Flowers produced and an announcement for a scholarship competition to her New York dance school. Clippings documenting dance productions and relating to the dance troupe are located in the Dance Company folders.

News items relating to Orlando Flowers, Jr., are contained in his clipping file. They document Flowers career in the Los Angeles Health Department and California National Guard. A clipping also shows Flowers at the 1964 Kappa Delta Black and White Ball in Los Angeles. These items demonstrate Orlando Flowers’ prominence among the community of black Los Angelinos.

Katherine Flowers’ **Personal Correspondence** consists mainly of personal letters and greeting cards received from family members and friends, and date from 1947 to 1981. Separate folders document the relationship Flowers had with her children, of which the set pertaining to Orlando Flowers is the most enlightening, revealing the close relationship she had with her son, his life as a prominent Los Angeles citizen, and the sometimes dreary financial situation she faced as an aging artist in New York City. One folder of miscellaneous correspondence holds some legal and business-related correspondence. However, all dance company correspondence is found with the other Dance Company materials.

**Dance Company** materials cover the years 1945-80 and relate to Katherine Flower’s extensive career in dance including her renowned professional dance company, The Katherine Flower’s Dancers. The dance troupe toured the United States and Israel in the early 1950s and received wide acclaim. These records document the formation of Flowers’ first dance school in Chicago followed by the rise of the famous dance group. Programs for the groups’ many performances, press releases, management records, correspondence, and clippings compose the majority of materials in this set. Also included are records of Flowers’ dance schools in Los Angeles and New York, her work as a freelance dance instructor and lecturer, and yoga instructor.

**Materials Relating to Other Dancers/Artists** include Flowers’ memorabilia and clippings pertaining to the world-renowned Katherine Dunham, ballerina Janet Collins, choreographer Charles Weidman, and singer Bessie Hunter. They date from 1946-78, with some are undated materials. Included are autographed dance programs to Flowers from Dunham and a letter from Flowers’ daughter Posie about Collins’ early career and rise to fame as the nation’s first African-American prima ballerina.

**Miscellaneous** items reflect Katherine Flowers’ varied interests including health and nutrition and the “science” of mind control. Also included is a dinner theater flyer for “Same Time, Next Year” signed by one of the stars, Beverly Penberthy, and a tribute to Lenwood Morris.

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**Photographs** include numerous photographs, mostly undated, of Katherine Flowers, her dance company, her daughter Posie, and son Orlando. Also included are many unidentified photographs of people and places whose pertinence to Katherine Flowers or the collection is unknown.

**Notes** folders contain a sampling of Katherine Flowers' undated, mostly handwritten notes. Most relate to dance research or yoga. It must be stressed that there was no discernable organizational method to the items in this group when they arrived. The sample reflects the more coherent sets of notes relating directly to Flowers' career. Included are bound or tied notebooks and materials containing choreography for dance performances, such as instructions on how to perform the "Bamboula" or "Ring Shout." There are also instructions for performing various yoga poses. The remainder of the boxes of notes was separated and discarded.

The undated, disassembled **scrapbooks** contain a wide array of clippings and photographs with no discernable theme or organizational method. Many relate to the dance company while others to dance and Flowers' many interests more generally. **Oversized materials** include a 1947 program for the Artists & Models Ball, a cabaret-style performance Katherine Flowers produced in Chicago, and sheet music she used for her dance company programs. Also included are several undated and unsigned original drawings of African dancers, two posters advertising the Katherine Flowers Dancers, Orlando Flowers' 1951 commission as a Major in the Transportation Corps of the National Guard, his 1954 commission as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Reserves, and a commendation from the California Legislature honoring his retirement from public service in 1971.

**Provenance:** The Katherine Flowers Papers were donated to the University Archives by Clare Schulke, Executor of the Frank Fedyk Estate, on April 27, 2005, as Accession Number 05-28.

**Restrictions:** None.

**Separations:** Sixteen cubic feet of duplicate and extraneous material and notes was separated from the Papers and discarded. Materials relating to Peter Greene and Frank Fedyk were separated and retained in the Archives pending the location of an appropriate repository. Serial publications unrelated to Flowers, Greene, or Fedyk were transferred to the Charles Deering McCormick Special Collections Library. Two boxes of books were transferred to the Northwestern University Library's Gifts and Acquisitions Department.

**Processor:** Carole Emberton, June - July 2005.

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**Container List**

<b><u>Box</u></b>	<b><u>Folder</u></b>	<b><u>Title</u></b>	<b><u>Dates</u></b>
		<b>Biographical Materials</b>	
1	1	Katherine Flowers Biographical	1939-77, n.d.
	2	Mattie Jefferson Biographical	1955
	3	Posie Flowers Saunders Biographical	1935-52, n.d.
	4	Orlando Flowers, Jr. Biographical	1934-74, n.d.
	5	Katherine Flowers Teaching	1955-71, n.d.
	6	Katherine Flowers Writings	1945, n.d.
	7	Katherine Flowers Radio Interviews	1965, n.d.
	8	Katherine Flowers Clippings	1946-65, n.d.
	9	Orlando Flowers Clippings	1962-64, n.d.
		<b>Personal Correspondence</b>	
	10	Katherine Flowers Correspondence - General	1947-77
	11	Katherine Flowers Correspondence - General	1978-81
	12	Katherine Flowers Correspondence - General	n.d.
	13	Katherine Flowers - Orlando Flowers Correspondence	1959-74, n.d.
	14	Katherine Flowers - Posie Flowers Correspondence	1956-67, n.d.
	15	Katherine Flowers Miscellaneous Correspondence	1959-73, n.d.
		<b>Dance Company</b>	
2	1	Katherine Flowers School of Dance - Chicago	1945-48, n.d.
	2	Katherine Flowers Dance Company - Programs	1946-65, n.d.
	3	Katherine Flowers Dance Company - Press Releases	1953, n.d.
	4	Katherine Flowers Dance Company - Management	1949-62, n.d.
	5	Katherine Flowers Dance Company Correspondence	1946-71, n.d.
	6	Katherine Flowers Dance Company Clippings	1945-50
	7	Katherine Flowers Dance Company Clippings	1951-53
	8	Katherine Flowers Dance Company Clippings	1954-59
	9	Katherine Flowers Dance Company Clippings	n.d.
	10	Katherine Flowers Dance Studio - Los Angeles	1954
	11	Katherine Flowers School of Dance - New York	1957-63, n.d.
	12	Dance workshops and lectures	1961-72, n.d.
	13	Yoga	1970-80, n.d.
		<b>Materials Relating to Other Dancers/Artists</b>	
3	1	Katherine Dunham	1945-79, n.d.
	2	Janet Collins	1953-55, n.d.
	3	Charles Weidman	1961-72, n.d.
	4	Bessie Hunter	1978, n.d.
	5	Miscellaneous	n.d.

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		<b>Photographs</b>	
3	6	Katherine Flowers Photographs	n.d.
	7	Dance Company Photographs	n.d.
	8	Posie Flowers Saunders Photographs	n.d.
	9	Orlando Flowers Jr. Photographs	n.d.
	10	Unidentified Photographs	n.d.
		<b>Notes</b>	
4	1	Notes	n.d.
	2	Notes	n.d.
	3	Dansez Bamboula	n.d.
	4	Ring Shout Choreography	n.d.
	5	African Dance	n.d.
5	1	Notes	n.d.
	2	Notes	n.d.
	3	Dance Technique	n.d.
		<b>Scrapbooks and Oversized Materials</b>	
6	1	Sheet Music	n.d.
	2	Artist's & Models Ball	1947
		Scrapbooks and Oversized Materials	n.d.