

Grand Rapids History and Special Collections

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Finding Aid for

William Albert Johnson Collection

Collection # 026

May 2007 version

Abstract

The William Albert Johnson Collection includes correspondence, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, papers, four photographs, and miscellaneous materials from Johnson, a Grand Rapids, Michigan policeman and local politician. Johnson was born June 14, 1909, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. He became a patrolman in the Grand Rapids Police Department in 1940. After the war, he returned to his old job in Grand Rapids, rising through the ranks to police chief. These papers document his years as a city commissioner from the First Ward, and when he was on the Charter Commission. There are scrapbooks of newspaper clippings that describe his years as police chief. In addition, the correspondence, papers, and pamphlets provide information on issues that he was confronted with during his tenure as City Commissioner.

For official city documents, contact the Grand Rapids City Archives & Records Center
http://www.grand-rapids.mi.us/index.pl?page_id=3989

Collection #: 029

Accession #: 1986.202

Donor: William Albert Johnson, 1980

Span dates: 1936-1979

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Size: 10 cu.ft.

Search terms: Johnson, William Albert. Grand Rapids, Michigan. Local government.

Related Collections

City Archives and Records Center.

http://www.grand-rapids.mi.us/index.pl?page_id=3989

Box Summary

Box No.	Description of Contents	Box Description
1	Chief of Police papers	gray lid/w 3.5x16x20.5
2	Charter Commission/corr.	standard
3	Charter Comm./financial records	standard
4	untitled	slim legal
5	City Commissioner/papers	standard
6	City Comm./papers	standard
7	City Comm./papers	standard
8	City Comm./papers	standard legal
9	City Comm./papers	standard legal
10	City Comm./papers	standard legal
11	City Comm./papers	standard legal
12	City Comm./papers	standard legal
13	City Comm./papers	standard legal
14	City Comm./papers	standard
15	City Comm./papers	standard legal
16	City Comm./papers	standard legal
17	papers/misc.	slim
18	City Comm./pamphlets	standard legal
19	photographs	slim

Biography

William Albert Johnson was born on June 14, 1909, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, to William Radcliffe Johnson and Adda L. (Cunningham) Johnson. Both parents had been schoolteachers; his father became a lawyer while his mother raised the family. Johnson attended elementary school in Stewart Township, Fayette County, Pa., and high school in Connellsville. He entered the University of Southern California, but his money ran out the first semester, he returned home and went to work for Kresge's, the 5-and-10-cent store chain.

Kresge's sent Johnson to Grand Rapids, where he worked in the as stockman and floorwalker. After subsequent transfer to Port Huron and Flint, Johnson returned to Grand Rapids, ready to take any job he could get. For a while he picked apples. Then he turned to WPA, after which he accepted a position at the United States Gypsum Co. In 1938, Johnson competed with 274 other job seekers for a position in the police department. He took the police examination, which was given at Central High School, and he finished among the top ten applicants.

Johnson started with the police force in 1940, working from the central station as a patrolman. He investigated accidents and walked the beats that included Plainfield Avenue, Lake Drive and downtown areas.

At the beginning of World War II, Johnson enlisted in the Marine Corps. and was sent to boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. After basic training and a short stay in North Carolina, he was shipped overseas to Guadalcanal. He was with the Marines at Okinawa and Saipan. Johnson was discharged in January 1946 as a private first class. The war over, he returned to Grand Rapids and his wife, Helen Sargent, whom he had married in 1931. In a short period of time he was promoted to sergeant, lieutenant, and the license officer in City Hall.

He was promoted to captain in charge of the traffic bureau, and in 1954 he was named deputy to Police Chief Dewey Beaver. Shortly after, he accepted an offer to go to Saigon to help train Vietnamese police, after receiving special training in Washington, D.C. While in school, he received a call from City Manager Donald Oakes informing Johnson that the police chief Beaver had died of a heart attack. Johnson received and accepted the offer as superintendent of police. He remained in that position until his retirement in 1969.

At 60, the mandatory retirement age in the police department, Johnson went to Grand Valley State College, to set up the newly created school's security department. He retired from that position in 1974. After retiring from the police department, Johnson also entered politics. He successfully ran for the Charter Commission. On the Commission he argued forcefully for electing city officials on a partisan ballot and reforming city government to provide for a strong mayor form of administration. In 1976 he ran for city commissioner from the first ward and defeated Richard Schweiger in the runoff election. In 1980 he ran for re-election but was defeated by George Bowman.

For most of his life, Johnson was a volunteer for one agency or another. In February of 1982 he received a plaque in recognition of his long time service on its advisory board. He was a

president of the Metropolitan Garden Council, and was a volunteer at Kent County Community Hospital. As a member of Kiwanis and the Breakfast Club, he served as a secretary-treasurer; he also served as treasurer for the Area Agency on Aging which covered a nine-county area. Johnson was one of the founders of Project Rehab and was a member of the Senior Neighbors' board of directors. Finally, he spent most of his Fridays at the Kent County prosecutor's office as one of 12 volunteers who processed cases of victims of criminal actions, a program conducted in conjunction with the state's Crime Victims Compensation Board.

Series Descriptions

The collection consists of four series:

- I. Chief of Police Papers & Scrapbooks**
- II. Charter Commission**
- III. City Commissioner Papers**
- IV. Photographs.**

The Chief of Police Papers & Scrapbooks describe or portray the activities of the police department during his term as superintendent. The City Commissioner Papers shows the organizations and people that Johnson had contact with during his days as city commissioner for the first ward. But, it is most valuable in describing the different issues that he encountered during his term. The series is divided into sub-series: correspondences, papers, and pamphlets.

The Charter Commission Papers are divided among the following sub-series: correspondence, notes, papers, documents, newspaper clippings, proceedings, financial records, city charters, pamphlets, brochures, presentations, and miscellaneous. These sub series portray the activities of the commission in setting up a new charter for the city.

Photographs pertain to him when he was Chief of police and city commissioner. Overall, these series cover the story of Johnson's professional career in Grand Rapids.

Series I. Chief of Police papers and scrapbooks

Includes regulations that pertain to Johnson and the Grand Rapids Police Department. In addition, there are scrapbooks that describe or show some of the activities that he was involved in during his term as chief of police. Correspondence includes incoming and outgoing letters with Harry Golden (editor of the *Carolina Israelite*), and police personnel matters.

Series II. Charter Commission

This series consists of material that pertains to Johnson, and the charter commission. It is valuable in tracing the development of the charter commission in revising and rewriting Grand Rapids city charter. The time span covers from 1970-1973. The series is divided among the following sub series: correspondence brochures, documents, financial records, magazine articles, newspaper clippings, notes, pamphlets, proceedings, and miscellaneous. Correspondences provide valuable background information in regards to the revision of the city charter, Johnson's victory in the election for the charter Commission seat, tasks of the commission, legal representation, and the failure of the commission's proposed charter. In addition, there are

correspondences that contain comments about the charter commission meetings.

Brochures are valuable in describing the positive aspects of the proposed charter. In addition, there is a message from the charter commission on their work. Documents provide samples of the three proposed charters that were presented or offered by the charter commission, and charters from Michigan cities. In addition, there are copies of the 1951 and 1952 charters, and the Home Rule Act. Furthermore, there are documents that provide valuable information on the pros and cons of the proposed charter.

Series III. City Commissioner papers

This series is divided into the following sub-series: correspondence, papers and pamphlets. The majority of the material in this series is papers on subjects that pertain to Johnson and the City Commission. The papers are arranged alphabetically from Affirmative Action Plan to Zainea (City Manager). These papers contain background information on particular subjects or projects that Johnson was involved with during his years as commissioner of the first ward of Grand Rapids. Correspondences consist of letters that describe some of the issues that he faced or came across as city commissioner. Some of the important issues include the following: zoning ordinance, community needs and proposals, education, senior housing development, health hazards, construction of the West River Bank Parking, housing inspections, street improvement project, Affirmative Action Plan, landfill site, alley refuse collections, Schaffer Avenue Water main Project, appointment of alternate members to the Board of Zoning Appeals, Chief of Police Robert Anderson Case, Fair Housing Plan, Neighborhood Organizing Project, Johnson's salary and pension, reducing taxes, human rights, Michigan Public Service Commission Case No. U-5545, improvement and sale of city owned vacant lots, contract compliance standards, and the police department. Moreover, there are letters from his constituents that describe their feelings toward his viewpoints on certain issues, and the admiration they had for him as their representative. In addition, there are letters that pertained to invitations that he received to attend local events, and meetings of local organizations.

Pamphlets are valuable in describing some of the issues that pertained to the city commission, and in describing the rules and regulations of the city commission. In addition, there are some pamphlets that contain historical information on Grand Rapids. Those pamphlets that are valuable include: "A Landmark In Cooperation", "City Commission Policy Manual", "Final Report of the Task Force on Citizen Participation", "Forecasting Electric Energy Demand in Michigan", "Handbook for Newly Elected Michigan Municipal Officials", "Proposed 1978 State Plan for Services to the Elderly", "Standing Rules: Grand Rapids City Commission", and "What we do today will be tomorrow's heritage".

Series IV. Photographs

Consists of one folder of photographs on William Albert Johnson. Of note is a view of Lassie with a key to the city in her mouth.

Contents

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Description</u>
		Series I. Chief of Police Papers and Scrapbooks, 1959-1961.
1	1	Correspondence, 1960-5.
	2	Rules and Regulations, 1959.
	v.1-2	Scrapbooks, 1960-1.
		Series II. Charter Commission, 1936-1974, n.d.
2	1	Correspondence, 1968- 1973.
	2	Brochure: "How Can The New Charter Help Me," n.d. Documents
	3	New Charter Committee, 1971.
	4	Bill Johnson Says "Yes" to Current Charter Proposal, 1970.
	5	City charters: Battle Creek and Saginaw, 1936, 1961
	6	City charters of Kalamazoo and Dearborn, 1966, 1942.
	7	City charter of Port Huron, 1969.
	8	Constitutional Provisions of the Home Rule Act, n.d.
4	1	Grand Rapids Survey Analysis, 1972
2	9	"Harold Hannah Says "No" To Current Charter Proposal"
	10	Home Rule Charter, 1952.
	11	Proposed Charter, 1971.
4	2	Suggested Charter Changes, 1970.
2	12	Proposed Charter of Grand Rapids, 1971.
	13	Rules and Regulations of Procedure and Organization of the 1951 Charter Commission of Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1951.
	14	Second Proposed Charter of Grand Rapids, 1972.
	15	Third Proposed Charter of Grand Rapids, 1972.
3	1	Financial record, 1970.
	2	"So you Want A New Municipal Charter," 1965.

Series II. Charter Commission, 1936-1974, n.d.

Newspaper Clippings

3	3	1970-1971.
	4	1970-1973.
	5	Mar 30, 1970-Oct 30, 1971.
	6	Apr 7, 1970; Oct 20, 1971.
	7	Nov 4, 1971-Mar 30, 1972.
	8	1972-1973.
	9	Responses to Charter Questionnaires, 1971.
	10	Second Proposed Charter of Grand Rapids, 1972.
	11	Third Proposed Charter of Grand Rapids, 1973.

Notes

3	12	Apr 14, 1970-Dec 11, 1972.
4	3	Special Election Results, 1973.

Pamphlets

3	13	"A Guide for Charter Commissions," 1968.
	14	"Model City Charter," 1964.
	15	"Preparation of a Municipal Charter," n.d.
	16	"The Nature and Purpose of a Home Rule City Charter," 1971.

Presentations

4	4	Outline for Talk
3	17	Resume of Joy Bylsma's talk, 1970.
	18	WOTV Editorial, 1972.
	19	Proceedings, 1971-2.
	20	Miscellaneous, 1974, n.d.

Series III. City Commissioner Papers, 1969-1979.

Correspondence

- | | | |
|---|-------|---|
| 5 | 1 | Jun 13, 1974-Aug 14, 1979. |
| | 2 | Jan 19, 1976-Dec 20, 1976. |
| | 3 | May 7, 1976-Jun 11, 1979. |
| | 4 | Apr 3, 1978-Apr 17, 1979. |
| | 5 | Miscellaneous Papers |
| | 6 | Affirmative Action Plan, 1977. |
| | 7 | Annual Salary Rates, 1978-9. |
| | 8 | Alcoholic Incentive Ladder, 1977-8. |
| | 9 | Chief Robert Anderson, 1979. |
| | 10-11 | Blueberry Lakes Project, 1974-8. |
| 6 | 1-2 | Board of Zoning Appeals, 1976-8. |
| | 3-6 | Boards and Commissions, 1976-8. |
| | 7 | Cable Television, 1975-6. |
| | 8 | Cable TV Consent Agreement, 1976-7. |
| | 9 | City Administrative Policy, 1978. |
| | 10 | City Planning Commission, 1976-8. |
| 7 | 1 | City Planning Commission, 1978-9. |
| | 2 | Community Development Committee, 1979. |
| | 3 | Committee of the Whole, 1976-7. |
| | 4-5 | District Court, 1977-9. |
| | 6 | District Court Budget, 1980. |
| | 7 | Downtown City Project, 1976. |
| | 8 | Downtown Development Authority, 1976-7. |
| 8 | 1 | Drain Commissioner, 1978. |
| | 2 | Eastown Association, 191977-8. |
| | 3 | Economic Dev. Adm., Title IX Grant, 1976. |
| | 4 | Electronic Data Processing, 1976-8. |
| | 5 | Electronic Development Corporation, 1976-8. |
| | 6 | Family Housing Development, 1979. |
| | 7 | City of Flint, 1976-7. |
| | 8 | Fire Department, 1976-9. |
| | 9 | Fiscal Committee, 1976-7. |
| | 10 | Ford Museum, 1977. |

Series III. City Commissioner Papers, 1969-1979.

Correspondence

- 11 GRAETC (Grand Rapids Area Employment & Training Council), 1979.
12 Grand Valley State Colleges, 1976-8.
9 1 Grand Rapids Riverfront Project Program, 1972.

2 Heidenga news clippings, 1977-8
3 Hospitals, 1978.
4-5 Housing Assistance Center, 1976-8.
6 Human Relations Commission, 1977-9.
7 Human Resources Department, 1977-9.
8 Humane Society, 1976-8.

9 Int'l City Management Association, 1976-7.
10 Invocation, 1976.

11 James Knack (City Planner), 1976.
12 Jellema House, 1979.
13 Job Corps, 1978-9.
14 Junior Chamber of Commerce, 1978.

10 1-4 Kent Community Action Program, Inc., 1977-9.
5 Kent County, 1970-1.
6 Kent County Commissioner, 1977-9.
7 Kent County Jail, 1977.
8 Kent County Prosecutor, 1977-9.
9 Kent County Health Department, 1978-9.
10 Kentwood, 1966-77.

11 1 Latin American Council, 1977-9.
2 Labor Negotiations, 1977.
3 League of Women Voters, 1977-8.
4 Legislature, 1977-9.
5 Library, 1976-8.

Series III. City Commissioner Papers, 1969-1979.

Correspondence

- | | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 11 | 6 | Memos, 1976-9. |
| | 7 | Mental Health, 1978. |
| | 8 | Meredith, Jere E.(Transportation Dir.), 1978. |
| | 9 | Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 1978. |
| | 10 | Michigan Dept. of Transportation, 1977-8. |
| | 11 | Michigan State Housing Devel. Authority, 1978-9. |
| | 12 | Michigan State Police, 1978. |
| | 13 | Monroe Center Project, 1976. |
| | 14 | Municipal Utilities, 1976-8. |
| | 15 | Murray, Ken (Deputy City Manager), 1977. |
| | 16 | Museum Association, 1977. |
| 12 | 1 | Native Americans, 1978. |
| | 2-3 | Neighborhood Associations, 1976-7. |
| | 4 | Neighborhood Improvement, 1977-9. |
| | 5 | Neighborhood-West Side, 1976-8. |
| | 6 | Olds Manor. 1978. |
| | 7 | Park Department, 1977-9. |
| | 8 | Parking, 1975-8. |
| | 9 | Pensions, 1976-7. |
| | 10 | Planning Commission Meetings, 1976-9. |
| | 11 | Plant Act, 1977. |
| 13 | 1-2 | Police Department, 1976-9. |
| | 3 | Police-Fire Advisory, 1978-9. |
| | 4 | Polish Heritage Society, 1976-7. |
| | 5 | Project Proposals, 1975-8. |
| | 6 | Public Recreation Board, 1966-76. |
| 14 | 1-2 | Red Barn Hearing, 1976. |
| | 3-4 | Reinstra, M. Howard, 1978-9. |
| | 5-6 | Retired Senior Volunteer, 1976-1979. |
| | 7 | 2050 32nd St. Rezoning - R-1 to P.V.D., 1979. |

Series III. City Commissioner Papers, 1969-1979.

Correspondence

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 15 | 1 | Sawyer, Hal, 1977. |
| | 2-3 | Senior Neighbors, 1977-9. |
| | 4 | Sinking Fund Trustees, 1978-9. |
| | 5 | Snow Removal, 1977-9. |
| | 6 | Southwest Community Center, 1977. |
| | 7 | Street Department, 1976-9. |
| | 8 | Street Lighting, 1975. |
| | 9 | Target Area Councils, 1977-9. |
| | 10 | Tax Abatement, 1973-9. |
| | 11 | Tenants' Union, 1976. |
| | 12 | Tool Lending Library. 1978. |
| | 13-14 | Touche, Ross & Company, 1975-7. |
| | 15 | Transit Authority, 1976-8. |
| | 16 | Truck Routes, 1978. |
| 16 | 1 | United Fund, 1976-7. |
| | 2 | Urban Development Action Grant, 1979. |
| | 3 | Urban League, 1977. |
| | 4 | Victimless Crimes, 1978. |
| | 5 | Walker, City of, 1972-9. |
| | 6 | Walker, Thomas W., 1975-8. |
| | 7 | Waste, n.d. |
| | 8 | Wealthy Street Business Alliance, 1978. |
| | 9 | Weed Cutting/Rubbish Removal, n.d. |
| | 10 | West Leonard Business Men's Assoc., 1979. |
| | 11 | West Michigan Health Systems Agency, 1978-9. |
| | 12 | West Michigan Planning, 1977-8. |
| | 13 | West Michigan Regional Planning Comm., 1977. |
| | 14 | Women's Resource Center, 1977-8. |
| | 15 | Wyoming, City of, 1976. |
| | 16 | Zainea, Joseph(City Manager), 1976-9. |
| 17 | 1-3 | Miscellaneous, 1977-9. |

Series III. City Commissioner Papers, 1969-1979.

Pamphlets

- 18 1 "A Landmark In Cooperation," 1969.
 2 "A Profile of the Partial Skid Rows of Grand Rapids : Their Residents,
 3 Businesses, and Social Agencies," n.d.
 4 Boards and Commissions,1970, 1977.
 5 "City Commission Policy Manual," 1977.
 6 "Development Proposal for Campau Square Office Building," 1978.
 7 "Final Report of the Task Force on Citizen Participation," 1977.
 8 "Forecasting Electric Energy Demand in Michigan," 1976.
 9 "GR Music Hall Feasibility Study," 1969.
 10 "Handbook for Newly Elected Michigan Municipal Officials," 1974.
 11 "Kent County Substance Abuse,"1975.
 12 "Program Proposal Public Act 339," 1975.
 13 "Proposed 1978 State Plan for Services to the Elderly," 1977.
 14 Public Management,1977.
- 15 "Standing Rules: Grand Rapids City Commission," 1976.
 16 "Regional Service Authority: Preliminary Report of Background
 17 Information on Area wide Cooperation Potential," 1973.
 18 "Substance Abuse Among Michigan's Senior Citizens: Current Issues &
 Future Directions," 1978.
 "West Control Michigan Transportation System Study," n.d.
 "What we do today will be tomorrow's Heritage," 1976.

19 1

Series IV. Photographs

Photographs (4 total 9/99).

1. Welcoming Lassie (collie dog) to Grand Rapids ca. 1955-1960. Key to the City. Group photo with six people standing in front of a Capital airplane, with Lassie posing in front of them. Lassie has the key in his/her mouth.

L-R:

Fred Barr

Unknown woman

Ted Corson, Manager, Pantlind

Frank Burns, Fire Chief

William Johnson, Police Chief

Unknown man

2. Group photo, 3 men, with Abe Drasin at left, William Johnson is on the right. Ca. early 1970's?

3. Group photo of 5 men seated in an office, Abe Drasin appears to be speaking. William Johnson is seated at his left (center right in the photo), ca. early 1970's?

4. Group photo, unidentified team. 6 young African American men are kneeling in the front row, holding trophies. The trophies read Golden Glove Champions, 1962. Three old men are behind them, the man at the left in a Grand Rapids Police uniform. William Johnson is on the right. Punching bags hang in the background. Wood Photo.