



Office of the Mayor
Richard M. Daley
Mayor

News Release

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Contact:

Mayor's Press Office
312-744-3334

Chicago Public Library
Leland Elder

312-747-4053

University of Chicago
Josh Schonwald
773-702-6421

MAYOR DALEY, LIBRARY OFFICIALS ANNOUNCE ABBOTT-SENGSTACKE FAMILY PAPERS OPEN TO PUBLIC

*Collection of Founding Family of Chicago Defender is a Major National Resource
of African-American History and Culture*

Mayor Richard M. Daley and Chicago Public Library officials today formally opened to the public the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers, which chronicle the history of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper and its founding family.

The collection, considered to be one of the most significant resources of African-American history and culture found anywhere in the United States, was donated to the Chicago Public Library's Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature by Robert Sengstacke, the son of John H. Sengstacke, who edited the newspaper from 1940 until his death in 1997.

John Sengstacke inherited the newspaper from his uncle, Robert S. Abbott, who founded the newspaper in 1905. At its height, the *Defender's* estimated readership was more than 500,000 people each week, attracted by its strong positions on racial inequity.

During the "Great Migration" from the South to the North in the first half of the 20th century, Chicago was the destination for more than 500,000 African-Americans, many of whom were attracted to the city by the accounts written in the *Defender*.

"The Abbott-Sengstacke family has been at the center of just about every significant social and political debate that has taken place in our city for the last 100 years," Daley said in a ceremony held at the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, 9525 S. Halsted St., where the collection will reside.

City Hall, Room 502 121 North LaSalle Street Chicago, Illinois 60602
(312) 744-3334 FAX: (312) 744-2325

“They have helped Chicago become what I believe it is today: a city that has set a tone of tolerance and worked to improve life for everyone, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or economic background.

“On behalf of all Chicagoans, I am here to thank Robert Sengstacke for the decision he made in 2007 to make sure that the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers remain in Chicago for all time,” the Mayor said.

The extensive collection will be the largest single primary source on the history of African-American journalism made available to the public, underscoring the vital role played by the black press in the making of American democracy.

The Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers could easily classify as one of the most significant resources of African-American history and culture found anywhere in the United States. The archive holds the personal and business papers of Robert S. Abbott dating from the 1880s to 1940, and the personal and business papers of John H. Sengstacke, from the 1920s to 1997.

In addition, this archive spotlights the emergence of the City of Chicago as a pioneering and premier hub of African-American journalism and communications.

The Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers were presented to the Chicago Public Library as a gift by Robert Sengstacke, although he had been approached by other nationally recognized repositories including the renowned Smithsonian Institution, which was prepared to purchase the papers.

“There is no way to place a value on this generosity or on the fact that this incredible resource will be available to anyone who wants to use it – and not just to academic researchers – in a public library on the South Side of Chicago,” Daley said.

“The story of the Abbott-Sengstacke family and the story of the *Chicago Defender* and of the “Great Migration” from the South to Chicago should be known to everyone.

“Now, through this generous gift of Robert Sengstacke, those stories will be told and re-told to more people than ever before,” he said.

The task of processing this enormous collection has been the extensive, 18-months-long project of “Mapping the Stacks,” a research team of doctoral students from University of Chicago’s English, History and Cinema & Media Studies departments, led by Associate Professor Jacqueline Goldsby and trained by archivists from the University of Chicago Library’s Special Collections Research Center, with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Working with Harsh Collection staff, the “Mapping the Stacks” team arranged the manuscript, photograph and moving image holdings of the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers. The team described the collection using detailed finding aids which make the collection easily accessible to the public.

The collection’s offers a look into the *Chicago Defender’s* historic legacy in African-American culture and African- American journalism in the United States. Some of the items include:

- Rare unpublished photographs of Robert S. Abbott with Jack Johnson, Oscar DePriest, Ida B. Wells, Duke Ellington, Noble Sissle and many other notable African American cultural icons.
- Remembrances of Booker T. Washington, sent to the *Chicago Defender* by scores of prominent political, business and academic leaders from that era.
- Rare early issues of the *Chicago Defender*, as well as selected manuscript material from past editors, reporters and cartoonists.
- Extensive correspondence, confidential communications and official reports from John H. Sengstacke’s involvement in the U.S. armed forces race relations and desegregation policies from World War II through the Korean War.
- Approximately 4,000 photographs and nearly 100 home movies documenting more than 130 years of the history of the Abbott-Sengstacke family, *Chicago Defender* activities from the World War I era through the 1990s, and other organizational events in which members of the Abbott-Sengstacke family participated.

The Chicago Public Library is composed of the Harold Washington Library Center, two regional libraries and 76 neighborhood branches. All locations provide free access to a rich collection of books, DVDs, audio books and music; the Internet and WiFi; sophisticated research databases, many of which can be accessed from a home or office computer; newspapers and magazines; and continue to serve as cultural centers, presenting the highest quality author discussions, exhibits and programs for children, teens and adults.

For more information, please visit the website at www.chicagopubliclibrary.org.