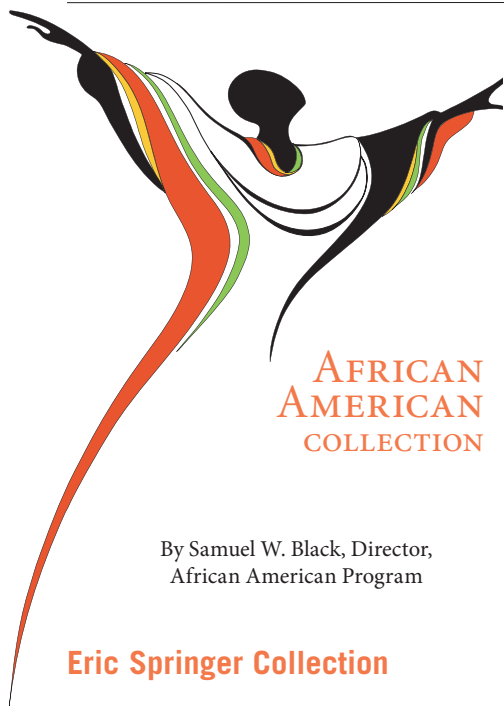


UP FRONT



AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

By Samuel W. Black, Director,
African American Program

Eric Springer Collection

The African American Program is pleased to have received a donation of papers and memorabilia from the family of attorney Eric W. Springer. Attorney Eric Springer may have appeared as an unassuming man—small in stature, quiet, and impeccably dressed in his ubiquitous bowtie—but behind this appearance was a man, attorney, scholar, journalist, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and activist of the highest order.

Springer was a leading attorney focused on health care law. He was a founding partner at Horthy, Springer & Mattern, a Pittsburgh-based law firm that specialized in health care law and initiated innovative legal precedents in national and international health law. In the 1960s Springer used his law and activism to pen a column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* called “Civil Wrongs and Your Rights” as well as a column in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* called “Black on Black.” As an attorney, Springer had an impact on many of the social and legal changes in Pittsburgh since the 1950s. He found friendship and colleagueship with Ivy League law professor, Pittsburgher Derrick Bell. Springer and Bell both were students of African American history and the law.

U.S. Open Oakmont sweater, 1994.

HHC Collections, gift of Christina Springer, 2022.20. Photo by Liz Simpson Romano.



Eric Springer was the son of Panamanian and Barbadian parents. His mother was New York Women’s Labor Rights activist Maida Springer, a labor union disciple of A. Phillip Randolph, who moved from being a seamstress in the New York garment district to a labor leader. She advised colonial and newly independent governments in Africa and Asia regarding labor rights, and, as a labor activist, Mrs. Springer (later Springer Kemp) was a sought-after speaker and labor rights strategist. Eric was born in 1929 in Brooklyn and attended New York University Law School. He was mentored by Civil Rights activist, attorney, and clergy Pauli Murray, who was also a family friend.

Springer came to Pittsburgh in the 1950s to teach law at University of Pittsburgh. His legal work, although focused on medical and health law, developed practical tools that helped advance a greater efficiency of health rights in the field. Horthy-Springer developed an

“action kit” to teach doctors legal liability and educate them on harassment behavior. Their practice had a significant impact on health law both nationally and internationally. When the Johnson administration established the national health care initiative that formed Medicaid, Springer was already a legal expert in the field.

Maida Springer’s labor activism opened the door for Eric’s deep understanding of civil rights laws over the course of American history. In 2014, Eric penned an essay, “The Role of Compromise in the Development of American



Eric Springer and President Lyndon B. Johnson at a White House conference for Human Relations Committee, 1968.

All HHC Detre L&A, Eric W. Springer Papers, 2022.0049.



Eric Springer (back row far left) and fellow soldiers during the Korean War, c. 1952.




Eric Springer receives the oath of the bar from Attorney Levy, September 1955.

Race Relations” in *The Civil War in Pennsylvania: The African American Experience* (Heinz History Center, 2014). Springer’s essay was a lesson in legislative and American jurisprudence from colonial times to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). He tracked the legal decisions that impacted African American freedom as compromises on race rather than American doctrine. Springer noted, “The harsh truth is that the founders of the country and lawmakers since have consistently settled their arguments and disputes about the status of people of color by making ‘deals’ or reaching compromises.”¹ These deals and compromises include the Declaration of Independence; The Constitution; the Naturalization Act of 1790; the Militia Act of 1792; the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793; the Missouri Compromise of 1820; the Compromise of 1850; the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854; the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877; civil rights cases of 1883; as well as *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. These cases, acts, and laws framed the African American citizenship, or lack thereof, covering three centuries leading to the events of the modern civil rights movement of the 20th century.

During his long and distinguished legal career, Springer served as Human Relations Commission chair in the Joseph Barr mayoral administration, appointed to one-year terms

beginning in 1963. In 1994 he became the first African American president of the Allegheny County Bar Association, 140 years after George Vashon was denied admittance to the Bar because of race. Socially, Eric and his wife, Cecile, became the first African American members of the Oakmont Golf Club and attended numerous U.S. Open Championships.

The Eric Springer collection and papers consist of legal papers related to his law practice, including legal files and research sources and notes that formed his legal writings and briefs. Photographs include Eric and Cecile Springer’s trips to Rome and other social gatherings with family and friends (plus one of Springer with President Johnson at a White House conference on Human Relations and Springer in a group photograph with U.S. Army officers during the Korean War); portraits of Maida Springer; and a list of columns and copies from a *Post-Gazette* (Black on Black) as well as the *Pittsburgh Courier* (Civil Wrongs and Your Rights). 

Logo: Spirit Form Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, PA, © artist Carlos F. Peterson.

¹ Black, Samuel W. editor, “The Role of Compromise in the Development of American Race Relations”, in *The Civil War in Pennsylvania: The African American Experience* (Pittsburgh: Heinz History Center, 2014).



Eric and his mother, labor activist Maida Springer, 1990s.