

Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection

AFC 1941/018

Prepared by Amy Palmer and Judy Ng



American Folklife Center, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

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Collection Summary

Collection Number: AFC 1941/018

Title: Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection

Inclusive Dates: 1937-1941

Bulk Date: 1941

Repository: Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/folklife.home>

Extent (original): 7 manuscript folders in 1 box; 64 12-inch acetate-aluminum discs

Creators: Sonkin, Robert United States. Farm Security Administration

Language: English

Abstract: Correspondence, field notes, reports, recording logs, transcripts of song texts, and sound recordings of African American music traditions and folkways, collected by Robert Sonkin, primarily in Gee's Bend, Alabama, in 1941.

Scope and Content

The collection consists of documentation from Robert Sonkin's field recording trip to Shell Pile, near Port Norris, New Jersey, and from there to Gee's Bend and other locations in Alabama in June-July 1941. Sonkin recorded two discs of African American quartets performing gospel music in Shell Pile, June 25, 1941. His field notes also describe the African American community of Shell Pile, named for the oyster shucking industry established there near Port Norris, N.J. Forty-nine of the sixty-three discs were made in various locations in Gee's Bend, Alabama, and include prayer meetings, sermons, gospel music, spirituals, hymns, jubilee quartet singing, blues, children's songs, recitations and conversations. These discussions cover health and home remedies, the Gee's Bend school, and the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) Gee's Bend study. Sonkin also recorded ten discs in other areas in Alabama, including gospel quartet music in Bessemer, Alabama; interviews in Camden and Palmyra, Alabama; and gospel music in Rehoboth and Greensboro, Alabama. Narratives by two former slaves, Isom Moseley and Alice Gaston, were recorded on July 22, 1941.

In addition to the recordings, there are typescript copies of research materials about Gee's Bend, Alabama dating from 1937-1939, including a paper, "An exploratory study of the customs, attitudes and folkways of the people in the community of Gee's Bend," by Nathaniel S. Colley of the Tuskegee Institute. Other reports on farm production, construction of new housing and barns, home economics, and community health, which were issued by government agencies, are included in the collection.

Biographical History

Born in the Bronx, New York in 1911, Robert Sonkin was an educator, ethnographic researcher, and author. A graduate of the City College of New York and Columbia University, Sonkin taught at the Department of Public Speaking at City College from 1929 to 1976. In the late 1930s, he worked with Charles L. Todd, his colleague at the Department of Public Speaking, to document the experience of residents of the FSA migrant worker camps in California in 1940 and 1941. In the summer of 1941, using money granted by City College of New York to document Americana, Sonkin traveled to Shell Pile, New Jersey, and Gee's Bend, Alabama to record the religious music and personal reflections of African Americans living in those communities. In Gee's Bend, Sonkin also recorded conversations about the FSA projects that were being undertaken there. During World War II, he worked with the Archive of American Folk Song to document popular reactions to America's involvement in the war, and served in the Army Signal Corps. In the late 1970s, he again collaborated with Todd to produce the book *Alexander Bryan Johnson: Philosophical Banker*. He is also the author of *The Voice and Speech Handbook*. He died in New York in 1980.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

For a list of locations where recordings were made, see [Appendix A](#).

People

Colley, Nathaniel Sextus, 1918- Exploratory study of the customs, attitudes and folkways of the people in the community of Gee's Bend.

Sonkin, Robert, collector.

Sonkin, Robert--Ethnomusicological collections.

Organizations

Archive of Folk Song (U.S.)

United States. Farm Security Administration.

United States. Farm Security Administration.

Subjects

African American families--Alabama.

African American farmers--Alabama.

African American gospel singers--Alabama.

African American gospel singers--New Jersey.

African American school children--Alabama.

African Americans--Alabama--Folklore.

African Americans--Alabama--Interviews.

African Americans--Alabama--Social conditions.

African Americans--Alabama--Social life and customs.

African Americans--Music.

Blues (Music)--1941-1950.

Folk songs, English--Alabama--Texts.

Folk songs, English--New Jersey--Texts.

Gospel music--Alabama.

Gospel music--New Jersey.

Hymns, English--Alabama.

Jubilee singers--Alabama.

Sharecropping--Alabama.

Slave narratives--Alabama.

Spirituals (Songs)--Alabama.

Traditional medicine--Alabama.

Places

Boykin (Wilcox County, Ala.)--Religious life and customs.

Boykin (Wilcox County, Ala.)--Social life and customs.

Shell Pile (N.J.)--Social life and customs.

Titles

Robert Sonkin Gee's Bend collection, 1937-1941

Also known as: Gee's Bend collection, 1937-1941

Voices from the days of slavery.

Form/Genre

Field recordings--Alabama.

Field recordings--New Jersey.

Interviews.

Manuscripts.

Prayers.
Sermons.
Sound recordings.
Transcripts.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

The collection is divided into two series, manuscripts and sound recordings. The manuscripts are broken down by sub-series and arranged alphabetically. These include the administrative file, correspondence, notes, recording logs, reports, and transcriptions of song texts. The sound recordings are arranged and numbered chronologically by the date recorded, beginning with the first recordings made and ending with the last. Original disc dust jackets are housed separately from the collection.

Access

Access copies of the collection are available through the Folklife Reading Room of the American Folklife Center. Duplication of collection materials may be governed by copyright and other restrictions. Please refer to the AFC web site for information on ordering copies of unpublished recordings (<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/recording.html>). For specific questions, researchers should consult with the American Folklife Center reference staff.

Two interviews with Alice Gaston and Isom Mosely recorded in Gee's Bend on July 22, 1941 can also be found on the American Memory website *Voices from the Days of Slavery*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/collafc.af000006> Bibliographic information for titles in this collection is found in the *Traditional Music and Spoken Word Catalog* from the American Folklife Center, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/collafc.af000118>.

Acquisition

Robert Sonkin donated the collection to the Archive of American Folk Song in 1941, which later became the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center. The collection was formerly referred to as the "Gee's Bend Collection."

Preferred Citation

Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection (AFC 1941/018), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Related Materials

Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection , AFC 1985/001
Ethnographic field collection consisting of audio recordings, photographs, manuscript materials, publications, and ephemera, documenting the everyday life of residents of the FSA migrant worker camps in 1940 and 1941. See the American Memory website, *Voices From the Dustbowl: The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection 1940-1941*: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/collafc.af000011>.

Collection Concordance by Format

Quantity	Physical Extent (original)	Location	Item Numbers
Manuscript Materials			
7	folders	AFC	Box 1
Sound Recordings			

Quantity	Physical Extent (original)	Location	Item Numbers
64	12-inch acetate-coated aluminum discs	M/B/RS	AFS 5035- AFS 5098

Description of Series

Container

Series

[Series I: Manuscripts](#)

[Series II: Sound Recordings](#)

[Discs](#)

Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
	Series I: Manuscripts
BOX 1 FOLDER 1	Administrative Folder list, AFC Collections Database and LC Catalog record printouts
BOX 1 FOLDER 2	Correspondence (1938) 2 letters
BOX 1 FOLDER 3	Notes (1937-1941) Field notes covering AFS 5035 to AFS 5098 (October 1937 to July 3, 1941); Field notes (1941); Superstitions (no date); "Taken from Charles L. Todd / California Migrant Labor Collection"
BOX 1 FOLDER 4	Recording Logs (June 25 - July 25, 1941) 3 copies (AFS 5040 to AFS 5098)
BOX 1 FOLDER 5	Reports (1937-1939) "Big World At Last Reaches Gee's Bend," transcript of article from <i>NY Times Magazine</i> (August 22, 1937); "Exploratory Study of the Customs, Attitudes and Folkways of the People in the Community of Gee's Bend," by Nathaniel S. Colley (n.d.); "Gee's Bend," by U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Farm Security Administration, 2 copies (Sept. 16, 1939; revised Jan. 17, 1941); "Gee's Bend Annual Health Report 1938-1939," by Annie E. Shamburg, Project Nurse (n.d.); "Gee's Bend Farms, Farm Security Administration Report of S. T. Haynes, Farm Supervisor" (n.d.); "Gee's Bend Farms Report of W.K. Idlett, Home Economist," 2 copies (n.d.); "Gee's Bend-Report," no author (n.d.); "Gee's Bend: Report on Visit Made April 17-21, 1939," by Constance E. H. Daniel; "Narrative Report Covering the Economic, Educational, Social and Community Progress for the Gee's Bend Project for the Year, 1938"; "Report on Gee's Bend," no author (n.d.).
BOX 1 FOLDER 6	Transcriptions (June 25 - July 25, 1941) Texts of songs, summary of interviews (AFS 5040 to AFS 5073)
BOX 1 FOLDER 7	Transcriptions (June 25 - July 25, 1941) Texts of songs, summary of interviews (AFS 5074 to AFS 5098)
	Series II: Sound Recordings
	Discs

Series II: Sound Recordings

Container

Contents

AFS 5035-5098

64 disc recordings recorded in Port Norris, New Jersey and Alabama.
Specific locations in Alabama include Gee's Bend, Palmerdale,
Birmingham, Bessemer, Camden, Greensboro, Selma and Rehoboth.

Appendix A: Locations where Recordings were Made

Alabama

- Bessemer (Ala.)
- Camden (Ala.)
- Gee's Bend (Ala.)
- Greensboro (Ala.)
- Palmyra (Ala.)
- Rehoboth (Ala.)
- Selma (Ala.)

New Jersey

- Port Norris (N.J.)
- Shell Pile (N.J.)