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Ernest Ayer Ponder Collection : A Finding Aid

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Ernest Ayer 1918-1998.

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The Ernest Ayer Ponder Collection

The Ernest Ayer Ponder Collection consists of 2 document boxes, a scrapbook, and one folder containing oversized material. Mrs. Ernest Ponder (Clara M. Ponder) donated the collection to the library in August 2000.

Ernest Ponder (born April 3, 1918) came to St. Petersburg in 1924 with his parents, James Maxie Ponder, the city's first black physician, and Fannye Ayer Ponder, a teacher. He attended local schools until St. Petersburg's segregated black schools were closed during the Depression. He completed his degree at a high school affiliated with Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona, where he became a protégé of his mother's good friend, Mary McLeod Bethune. After two years of college at Bethune-Cookman, Ponder completed his junior senior years as Morehouse College in Atlanta. After his graduation in 1938, he worked in the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department, serving there until the end of World War II. He married Clara Meshaw on February 3, 1942.

In 1945, Ernest and Clara Ponder returned to St. Petersburg. He began teaching at Gibbs High School, taking over his mother's courses and classroom after she was forced to retire due to ill health. He continued at Gibbs for the next 25 years, becoming chairman of the social studies department. He also directed the school's noted St. Cecelia Choir and later the chancel choir of Bethel Community Baptist Church. While a teacher, he did postgraduate courses at Fisk University, Stetson, New York University, and the University of South Florida.

In 1969, he transferred to Lakewood High School and served there during the tumultuous first years of school integration until his retirement in 1979. Among his accomplishments at Lakewood was helping to develop a resource guide on African American history for the Pinellas County Public Schools. He also taught an innovative black history course for Lakewood students, although the course was listed under the non-controversial title of "Humanities."

Following his retirement, Ponder continued his interests in African American history, working on a revised curriculum guide to the subject for 8th and 11th graders and writing "A Panoramic Glimpse of Black History in St. Petersburg," a narrative that traces the black community's history back to John Donaldson in 1868, the city's first black landowner. He often spoke on black history topics to community groups and gave several interviews to reporters. He also became active in aging issues, serving on various state and local committees and advisory groups. Ponder's lifetime of community service and his legendary devotion to his students led to October 15, 1994, being declared Ernest Ayer Ponder Day in St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, and the State of Florida. He died January 18, 1998, at age 79.

The Ernest Ayer Ponder Collection is arranged as follows:

Box I:

1. Ponder, Ernest. (Removed to oversized folder: "The struggle for political power" and "Schools must be target, educator says" by Will Rodgers, *St. Petersburg Times*, 11/4/90, and "History texts are filling in the gaps" by Peggy Peterman, *St. Petersburg Times*, 2/3/89.)
2. Ponder, Ernest, and Gibbs High School. (Removed to oversized folder mementos of 1950 Cecelia Choir event.)
3. Ponder, Clara.
4. Ponder, James Maxie.
5. Ponder, Fannye Ayer. (Removed to oversized folder "Fannye Ponder: timeless crusader" by Peggy Peterman, *St. Petersburg Times*, 7/9/72.)
6. Ponder, Fannye Ayer, Council House, St. Petersburg Metropolitan Council of Negro Women.
7. St. Petersburg Metropolitan Council of Negro Women.
8. Ambassadors Club.
9. Ponder, Ernest. Speeches.
10. Ponder, Ernest. "Panoramic Glimpse of Black History in St. Petersburg" with community map.
11. Ponder, Ernest. "Panoramic Glimpse of Black History in St. Petersburg" alternate versions.

Box II.

1. Pinellas County Social Studies Council, "The Study and Teaching of Negro History," 197?.
2. Pinellas County Schools Black History Committee, "The African American in American History," 1990.
3. "Biographical Resource Guide for Classroom Teachers," n.d.
4. St. Petersburg black history, general. (Removed to oversized folder "Heroes of Our History" by Betty Jean Miller, *St. Petersburg Times*, 4/3/94.)

5. St. Petersburg black history, individuals.
6. Obituaries and funeral bulletins.
7. Babb, Ellen. Text of 1994 exhibit at historical museum.
8. Wyland, Ben, Rev. "Integration: how it came to St. Petersburg."
9. Miscellaneous articles on black history and race relations.
10. Unidentified miscellaneous materials.

Scrapbook of letters and mementos of "A Celebration of Love" dinner honoring Ernest Ponder, October 15, 1994, and framed letter from Representative Rudy Bradley, House District 55.

Folder of oversized laminated clippings.

Kathy Arsenault
January 17, 2001