

Frank Grace Papers

1974-1985

1 box (0.25 linear feet)

Call no.: MS 863

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A radical political organizer, Frank "Parky" Grace was a founding member of the New Bedford chapter of the Black Panther Party. Radicalized by a tour of duty in Vietnam in 1967, Grace became involved in the antiwar movement upon his return and organized the local branch of the Black Panthers shortly before the New Bedford Rebellion of 1970. In 1972, he and his brother Ross were charged with the murder of a young drug dealer, receiving life sentences. Parky contended all along that he had been framed by the police for his political activity and in 1982, Ross corroborated his brother's claim that he was not present at the scene and admitted his own responsibility for the murder. Parky Grace was released from prison in 1984 and lived subsequently in New Bedford and Boston. He died in Boston on October 2001.

The Grace Papers consist of a powerful series of letters written to Gloria Xifaras Clark while Grace was confined in Walpole State Penitentiary. Informed by his revolutionary politics, the letters offer insight into the conditions of imprisonment, his treatment by guards, and his relations with fellow prisoners.

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Background on Parky Grace

A political organizer and founding member of the New Bedford chapter of the Black Panther Party, Frank "Parky" Grace was born in the south end of New Bedford, Mass., on Apr. 6, 1944, the son of Cape Verdean parents. While he was in his teens, Grace's family moved to the city's West End, the "Negro" side of town. Raised "not to take anyone's crap," in his words, he became a leader in the West End Gang and was said to have been arrested a dozen times before he turned twenty-one.

Military service was a turning point in the development of Grace's political consciousness. Drafted into the army, he served in a combat unit in Vietnam in 1967, experiencing both the full impact of racism in the military and American intervention abroad led. In Vietnam, he was introduced to the ideas of the new Black Panther Party for Self-Defense for the first time and began to shift the focus of his life. "The Vietnamese schooled a lot of the brothers," he later wrote. "It's like they say, sometimes you don't get to know your country until you leave it."

Returning to New Bedford after leaving the service in 1968, Grace took part in antiwar demonstrations and began to question the root causes of the high unemployment, racism, and structural neglect that afflicted his community. Studying revolutionary theorists from Malcolm X to Che Guevara, he began to adopt a more militant approach. With the approval of the Party, Grace established a branch of the National Committee to Combat Fascism to build the New Bedford Black Panther Party in the spring 1970. Despite harassment from the police and FBI, Pieraccini's became a sort of community center and site for a free breakfast program for city children and political education classes. Increasingly, Grace and his colleagues spoke out at city council meetings, confronting councilors over their failure to address the city's issues with poverty, housing, and police brutality. The violent New Bedford Rebellion of July 1970 only served to increase Grace's profile in New Bedford, particularly after 21 people were arrested during a police raid on Pieraccini's on July 31.

In August 1972, a teen-aged heroin dealer named Marvin Morgan was shot to death near the West End Social Club in New Bedford. Although Grace insisted that he was with friends at another club at the time of the murder, he was nevertheless arrested along with his brother, Ross, and two associates. At their trial in January 1974, the prosecution called two friends of Morgan's who were present at the murder, Eric Baker and Jasper Lassister, to testify they had seen the Grace brothers with guns and both claimed to have seen Parky Grace firing twice. Based primarily on this testimony, Ross Grace was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to life in prison and Parky was convicted of murder and "armed anarchy" and sentenced to life without parole.

Throughout his imprisonment, Grace remained steadfast that he had been framed by the police due to his political activity and high profile in the community. His conviction began to fall apart in 1982 when his brother, who ultimately served fifteen years, came forward and admitted to his parole that he had killed Morgan and confirming that Parky was not at

the scene. Two years later, Lassiter recanted his testimony, leading a judge to call for a new trial and mandate Grace's release. Although a new trial never took place, all charges were dropped by the Bristol County District Attorney in 1987. Politically, Grace remained unbowed. Upon release, he told a reporter for the *Boston Phoenix*: "I always considered myself a soldier... And being a soldier, POW, prisoner of war, I had to conduct myself in a special way, you know? Because I hold a special position, you know?"

Grace returned to New Bedford and in about 1990, relocated to Boston. For several years he worked on behalf of prisoners' rights and was employed as a youth counselor at the Freedom House in Roxbury, a community nonprofit run by Rev. Eugene Rivers. Frank Grace died in the West Roxbury Veterans Administration Hospital on Oct. 22, 2001. He was survived by his daughters Dana Rebeiro and Nikia Arshima Gonzales and a son Che Grace.

Scope of collection

The Grace Papers consist of a powerful series of letters written to Gloria Xifaras Clark while Grace was confined in Walpole State Penitentiary. Informed by his revolutionary politics, the letters offer insight into the conditions of imprisonment, his treatment by guards, and his relations with fellow prisoners.

Collection inventory

Correspondence with Gloria Xifaras Clark	1976-1985	
Grace, Frank: Biographical information	1982-1985	Box 1: 1
Grace, Frank: Letters to Gloria Xifaras Clark	1976	Box 1: 2
Grace, Frank: Letters to Gloria Xifaras Clark	1977	Box 1: 3
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Legal files	1974-1985	
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Newsclippings	1984-1986	Box 1: 21

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Dana Rebeiro, April 2015.

Bibliography

For additional information on Parky Grace, see:

Lazerow, Jama, "A rebel all his life: the unexpected story of Frank 'Parky' Grace," in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. Duke University Press: Durham, N.C., 2006.

Doherty, John, "Radical legend never lost his fire," *New Bedford Standard Times* 1996

Related Material

The papers of Parky Grace's correspondent in these letters, Gloria Xifaras Clark, are **housed in Special Collections** (MS 865). Clark is a civil rights worker and community activist, who was involved with the New Bedford branch of the NAACP, Black Panthers, and draft resistance and antiwar organizations, and was a friend and major supporter of Grace's before and during his incarceration.

Digitized content

The Grace Papers have been digitized and are available online through **Credo**.

Processing Information

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Search terms

Subjects

- New Bedford (Mass.)--History
- Prisoners--Massachusetts

- Clark, Gloria Xifaras, 1942-
- Walpole State Prison

Names

- Black Panther Party

Genre terms

- Correspondence

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