

## Arthur Alfonso Schomburg

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1874-1938

The work of Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, a distinguished black bibliophile, is a tribute to the world of scholarship and is preserved in one of the world's largest repositories of materials for the study of peoples of African descent--the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. A self-taught historian with a remarkable memory, he worked to inspire racial pride both through his organizations and through the encouragement of study and research on black themes.

### **Narrative Essay**

Schomburg was born on January 24, 1874, to Carlos Federico Schomburg, a German-born merchant, and Mary Joseph, a black midwife and washer woman. On January 28 of that year, young Schomburg was baptized Arturo Alfonso.

Although the story of his birth and early childhood is often conflicting and mysterious, Schomburg chose not to clear up many of the mysteries. According to his biographer, Eleanor Des Verney Sinnette, he knew little about his father. He identified his mother as born free in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, in 1837; she was educated at the elementary level and later became a midwife. He had one sister, Dolores Maria, known as "Lola," who was born in San Juan and was 14 years older than he. Both maternal grandparents were born free in St. Croix.

Although the only primary schools available to him in San Juan charged tuition, Schomburg may have attended, but did not complete his work at the Instituto de Parvulos, a Jesuit school. Schomburg also claimed to have attended the Institute of Popular Teaching, or Institute of Instruction in San Juan. There are also statements that he was completely self-educated.

During his childhood, Mary Joseph either remained in San Juan and sent Arturo to the Virgin Islands to live with her parents to attend school, or she moved to the Virgin Islands with him. In either case, he had friends in St. Croix and St. Thomas, joined a debating team there, and according to his biographer, Schomburg claims, without documentation, that he attended St. Thomas College.

Schomburg was preoccupied with his own heritage and is said to have become curious about his past through a literary club in Puerto Rico, where history was a favorite topic of discussion. When whites spoke of the accomplishments of their Spanish ancestors, he became curious about his own ancestors and about people of color in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture was one of his early heroes. He began to read widely in areas of his interest, both in Spanish and English, and developed a lifelong interest in Caribbean and Latin American history.

By adolescence, Schomburg was described in his biography as "somewhat self-effacing, soft-spoken ... of medium height with a cafe au lait complexion, soft curly brown hair, and rather large, limpid, warm brown eyes." While Schomburg was in the Virgin Islands, he became more curious about Puerto Rico's and Cuba's struggle for independence than his own heritage. He knew that he needed to leave the islands to become educated, and he had considered either a career in medicine or a place in the revolution. He may have returned to San Juan to work as a printer to earn money to travel north. Aged 17, Schomburg left the Caribbean for New York City, arriving on Friday, April 17, 1891, with letters of introduction to cigar makers in

Manhattan verifying his experience as a typographer. He settled on the lower east side of Manhattan.

To sustain himself while attending night school at Manhattan Central High School, Schomburg held various jobs--elevator operator, bellhop, printer, and porter. He sustained his interest in the Puerto Rican struggle for independence and on April 3, 1892, when he was 18-years old, he became a founding member and secretary of a political club, Las Dos Antillas (The Two Islands), that assisted in Cuba's and Puerto Rico's independence. His last major involvement in the movement came on August 2, 1898, when a meeting was held in which the revolutionary support groups disbanded. His interest later shifted from the Cuban and Puerto Rican movement to the freedom of people of color everywhere. Later, however, he severed his ties with the Puerto Rican community and from then on lived as a black man, or "a Puerto Rican of African descent," as he became known.

Schomburg became active in fraternal organizations, first in freemasonry through El Sol de Cuba Lodge, No. 38, founded by Cuban and Puerto Rican exiles. By 1911 he was elected master; later the organization was renamed the Prince Hall Lodge to honor Prince Hall of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the first black accredited Mason. While serving as master,

Schomburg gathered and organized the Masons' documents, papers, books, pamphlets, correspondence, photographs, and other items, and was largely responsible for preserving the black lodge's early history. From 1918 to 1926 he was grand secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York and in 1925 became a Thirty-third Degree Mason.

For a while Schomburg may have considered becoming a lawyer. From 1901 to 1906 he worked with the New York law firm Pryor, Mellis & Harris and, according to his biographer, led others to believe that he was studying toward a degree from the firm by "reading law." After he was denied permission to take the New York State Regents examination to qualify for a "law certificate," he left the clerk-messenger position and became messenger for the Latin American department of Bankers Trust Company in lower Manhattan. He rose in rank to become supervisor of the mailing department before retiring in 1929 on a medical disability.

### **Collects Black Materials**

Schomburg's interest in collecting evidences of black history became apparent in 1911, when he began to collect rigorously and systematically. He had met John Edward Bruce (Bruce Grit), journalist, lay historian, and bibliophile, and joined the Men's Sunday Club that Bruce founded. The

club meetings usually included some discussion of racial issues as well as books, and the members raised funds to purchase items on black history for the club's library. In April of that year, Schomburg and Bruce co-founded the Negro Society for Historical Research, which would greatly influence black book collecting and preservation as well as the study of African American themes. In 1914 Schomburg became a member of the American Negro Academy (ANA), founded in 1897 by Alexander Crummell, where he met such black scholars as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Kelly Miller, and Carter G. Woodson. This affiliation furthered Schomburg's interest in collecting black materials. In 1922 he was elected fifth president of the ANA. Since the ANA was based in Washington, D.C., Schomburg was primarily an absentee president; his friend John W. Cromwell attended the executive committee meetings and provided direct supervision of the organization until he died in 1927. In time, Schomburg became unhappy with the ANA, lost his enthusiasm for the weakening organization, and received little comfort for his efforts. He held the office until the ANA dissolved in 1929.

Schomburg was in New York when the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak. If he had not known them already, he came in contact with such luminaries as Claude McKay (who became his closest friend), Walter White, and James Weldon

Johnson. He had great respect for Marcus Garvey and supported many of Garvey's principles of black development. The Harlem Renaissance period provided fertile ground for Schomburg to promote his interest in black themes and stimulated further his interest in collecting black books. The rigor with which Schomburg collected was manifest in the sizeable collection that he gathered. He sought out materials from booksellers throughout the United States as well as in Europe and Latin America. By 1925 he had acquired 5,000 books, pamphlets, manuscripts, prints, etchings, and other items. When the New York Public Library opened the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints at the 135th Street Branch in May that year, he sold his collection for \$10,000 to the Carnegie Corporation to be placed in the new library. His collecting practices continued. He sailed for Europe on June 25, 1925, in search of missing pieces of black history to strengthen his collection now at the library.

Schomburg's close relationship with Charles Spurgeon Johnson, who had headed the Department of Research and Investigations for the National Urban League and edited the league's official journal, *Opportunity*, and by 1928 chaired the Social Science Department at Fisk University, led to Schomburg's position in 1929 as curator of the Negro Collection in the university library. During his brief tenure at Fisk, Schomburg established a distinguished collection

similar to his own, then left in 1932 to become curator of the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints at the New York Public Library (renamed in 1973 the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). Continuing to travel extensively, he spoke at conferences and before other groups to solicit materials for the collection. The same meticulous care was used in developing the collection that he used in building his private library, and was instrumental in building an impressive collection of rare and current books and materials for the library that he now served. Schomburg sought support for the collection wherever he could, using friends such as Langston Hughes to locate materials during Hughes's travels, and persuading black writers, composers, artists, and others to contribute works. He also built a network of people who led him to materials in this country or abroad, or purchased them in his stead. Schomburg did what he could to persuade the library system to purchase items for the collection, and when the library refused to pay for materials he had ordered improperly, he often paid for the works himself. He also organized two notable exhibitions--one on the achievements of blacks, and a traveling exhibition of African art and handicrafts.

### **Writes on Black Themes**



Schomburg's interest in the black experience was expressed also in his writings. Although he had little formal training and clearly was not a good writer, influential black intelligentsia respected his potential for enhancing scholarship. Such scholars as W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Spurgeon Johnson, and Alain Locke edited his works carefully to make them more readable. Schomburg also promoted the study and research on black themes in the nation's black colleges, as seen in his essay "Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools, Colleges, etc.," published in 1913 in Nancy Cunard's work, *Negro*. His publications also included such works as "A Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry" (1916) and "Economic Contribution by the Negro to America," published in 1916 as an occasional paper of the American Negro Academy. He also published articles in *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *the Messenger*, *Negro World*, *Negro Digest*, *the A.M.E. Review*, *New Century*, and *Survey Graphic*.

Once highly visible through 30 organizations to which he belonged, his memberships included the Urban League, the NAACP, and the Negro Writers' Guild. In time Schomburg became disenchanted with black organizations--often because of a dispute--and resigned. He became annoyed with the black intelligentsia as well, sometimes because of

trivial matters, sometimes because he felt overlooked, or merely due to dissatisfaction with another person's point of view. In time he removed himself from the limelight.

On June 30, 1895, Schomburg married Elizabeth "Bessie" Hatcher, a fair-skinned beauty from Staunton, Virginia, and they lived in the San Juan Hill section of New York. They had three sons, Maximo Gomez, Arthur Alfonso Jr., and Kingsley Guarionex. After Bessie Schomburg died in 1900, he married Elizabeth Morrow Taylor on March 17, 1902, a native of Williamsburg, North Carolina. She died early, leaving two young sons, Reginald Stanfield and Nathaniel Jose. All of his children lived with their respective maternal relatives-- Bessie's in Virginia and Tennessee, and Elizabeth's in Virginia and New Jersey. About 1914 Schomburg took a third wife, Elizabeth Green, a nurse and friend of Bessie Schomburg's sister, and they had three children--Fernando, his only daughter, Dolores Marie, and Placido Carlos.

Schomburg, who was of medium build, had remarkable energy and determination. His health began to fail in late 1936, and his pace was slowed. As late as 1938, Schomburg expected to continue his speaking engagements and attend meetings. He developed a dental infection, however, that required extraction. After that he became ill, failed to respond to treatment, and on June 10, 1938, died at

Brooklyn's Madison Park Hospital. After a private funeral held on June 12 at Brooklyn's Siloam Presbyterian Church, Schomburg was buried in Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Charles Spurgeon Johnson's tribute to Schomburg at a memorial service held on June 8, 1939, serves as a summary of his work. He called the Schomburg Collection a "visible monument to the life's work of Arthur Schomburg. It stands for itself, quietly and solidly for all time, a rich and inexhaustible treasure store for scholars and laymen alike, the materialization of the foresight, industry and scholarship" of Schomburg.

### **Sources**

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## **Collections**

Schomburg's personal papers and private library are in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City. Additional materials are scattered and are in the possession of the Schomburg family; others are included in the Thomas Elsa Jones Papers and the Charles S. Johnson Collection, Fisk University Library; the Arthur Schomburg Papers, the John Edward Bruce Collection, and the John Wesley Cromwell Collection in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University; the James Weldon Johnson Collection and the Claude McKay Papers at Yale University; the Henry P. Slaughter Collection, the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, and elsewhere.