

## Dr. David Frost Papers, 1967-1984



*Dr. David Frost, circa 1960s*

### Overview of the Collection

- Title:** Dr. David Frost Papers, 1967-1984  
**Creator:** Dr. David Frost (1925-2022)  
**Accession(s):** PPL-2022-034  
**Size:** Approximately 1 linear foot of records, comprised of:  
One (1) records storage box  
**Repository:** Plainfield Public Library, Local History Department, 800 Park Avenue, Plainfield, NJ 07060  
**Abstract:** The Dr. David Frost Papers document his life-long commitment to civil rights and political activism, specifically his dedicated involvement with the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee. This all-volunteer group was first established in 1969 by Frost and others to seek justice for Black Plainfielders George Merritt Jr., Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams, all convicted in connection to the death of white police officer John V. Gleason during the 1967 uprising in Plainfield. The collection includes correspondence, copies of court documents and police records, pamphlets, flyers, newsletters, petitions, photographs, and newspaper clippings.  
**Language:** The records are in English.

### Biographical and Historical Information

Dr. David Frost was born on December 19, 1925, to Charles and Rivkah Feivlowitz, in Brooklyn, New York. He attended high school in New York City and graduated from the City College of New York in 1945, with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. Before eventually earning two master's degrees and a Ph.D., the former David Feivlowitz came up against a discriminatory quota system within academia designed to limit or deny Jews from entering medical or

professional schools. As a result, he decided to petition the court to change his name to Frost, a decision he soon realized was based on an injustice. This realization turned out to be an early motivation for his life-long activism.

During Dr. Frost's professional career, which spanned 50 years, he served as a biology and science instructor at schools in New York and a biology professor at Rutgers University, at both the Newark and New Brunswick campuses. He also worked for the Squibb Institute for Medical Research as a science editor before becoming a freelance consultant and scientific journal editor.

Dr. Frost and his wife Ruthann, who were married in 1946, lived in New York City before moving to Plainfield in 1959. They were members of the Unitarian Society of Plainfield and politically active in campaigns for social justice and civil rights throughout the 1960s. Dr. Frost was very much involved in SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in both Plainfield and New Jersey. He was a member, and later vice president, of the Plainfield chapter of the NAACP, leading demonstrations in support of school desegregation. In 1965, Dr. Frost was the local coordinator for the March on Washington to protest the Vietnam War, and in 1966, he ran as the "peace candidate" for the Democratic nomination for United States Senator from New Jersey, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Vietnam. He was elected chairman of the newly established New Jersey Political Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in 1967. The following year, he ran as Dick Gregory's vice-presidential running mate in New Jersey on the Peace Freedom Alternative ticket.

In 1969, Dr. Frost and other concerned citizens, including Black community activist Freeman Whetstone, were compelled to establish the inter-racial Plainfield Joint Defense Committee, to seek justice for George Merritt, Jr., Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams, all convicted in connection to the killing of white police officer John V. Gleason two years earlier. This attack took place in the midst of the 1967 Plainfield uprising, an explosive reaction to the ever-increasing racial tensions with police and the unaddressed grievances of Plainfield's Black community. On the evening of July 16, Williams, a young Black man who was later accused of assaulting Gleason with a hammer, was in turn, shot and critically wounded by him. A crowd of Black onlookers, enraged by what they witnessed and believing Williams to be dead, responded by fatally beating the officer.

Initially, 12 people were arrested and charged with first-degree murder, based on, what the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee believed, were coerced eyewitness statements, several of which were later recanted. Included in the group of defendants was George Merritt Jr., a Marine Corps veteran and missile radar technician and Gail Madden, a young mother of two. In September 1968, after one defendant was severed from the case, the remaining 11 were tried all together, despite their legal pleas for separate trials. The Committee considered the trial unfair from the start: everyone entering the courtroom was searched for weapons, creating an atmosphere of hysteria and prejudice; the recanted witness statements were made at the judge's bench, not in the presence of the jury; and of the 12 jurors, 11 were white. In addition, the only witness who testified against George Merritt misidentified two other defendants, and not a single witness testified that Gail Madden attacked the police officer. The trial, which was considered indecently rushed towards the end, resulted in only two convictions, that of Merritt and Madden, who both faced life terms in prison.

Sixteen months after he was shot and while the trial was still underway, Bobby Lee Williams was approached by two detectives who demanded he testify for the prosecution or face indictment himself for the role he played in the attack on Officer Gleason. Since he could not provide the names of those who participated in the attack, Williams was arrested and charged with three

crimes: incitement of personal violence, assault with intent to kill, and assault and battery on a law enforcement officer performing his duties. These crimes were listed in an indictment that had been handed down in December 1967, but for reasons unknown, according to Williams's attorney, it remained sealed until right before the arrest in November 1968. A motion to dismiss all charges was made on the grounds that the three-count indictment was unconstitutional under the 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments; it sought to harass and punish Williams for refusing to testify against the defendants in the Gleason case; and pretrial publicity would prevent him from getting a fair trial in New Jersey. The Plainfield Joint Defense Committee fully supported this move, and tried to convince the Union County prosecutor to dismiss the case. Although they were unsuccessful, the charge of inciting personal violence was dropped. The trial against Williams did not start until April 1970. He was found guilty of an instructed lesser offense, assault with a deadly weapon. The conviction was upheld after an appeal, which contended that Williams was denied his right to a speedy trial because his indictment had been sealed for so long.

Dr. Frost, as co-chairman, and the rest of the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee got to work immediately in early 1969 to assist in an appeal for George Merritt and Gail Madden and to ensure a fair trial for Bobby Lee Williams. The Committee started fundraising money to cover court costs and to carry out an extensive publicity campaign. Their goal was to make the public aware of the facts of these cases in order to elicit their help and support in getting justice for the accused. Committee members did this by writing brochures, newsletters, and articles; speaking before religious, school, civic and social groups throughout the state; appearing on radio programs and holding public meetings featuring prominent speakers and entertainers; sending delegations to the governor and petitioning various governmental agencies.

In 1971, the Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey unanimously reversed the convictions of Merritt and Madden, due to legal errors made in the 1968 proceedings. In addition, the higher court observed that there was pressure to convict someone, which is inherent in a mass trial, and that the State's only witness against Merritt, Donald Frazier, was "unreliable" and his testimony "flimsy and questionable." Despite the appeal and the court's findings, the charges were not dismissed, and the case was retried in 1974, with another all-but-one white jury finding both Merritt and Madden guilty. Appeals were made in 1976, resulting in a unanimous reversal of Merritt's conviction, again due to procedural errors. However, Madden's conviction was upheld. Merritt was tried a third time in 1977 and found guilty by an all-white jury, largely based on the prosecution's use of that same "unreliable" witness. After this verdict, Merritt's attorney immediately began the appeals process. He alleged that the prosecutor deliberately withheld information from the defense, despite a court order to turn it over, that undermined Frazier's credibility as a witness, and that the prosecutor lied to the jury about this information.

Dr. Frost and the Committee continued to rally local, state, national, and even international support to fight for Merritt's freedom. They joined forces with the New Jersey Council of Churches and the New Jersey Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression to form the Committee for Clemency. This group, represented by Frost, other activists, and clergy, encouraged the public to join them and George Merritt in his petition to New Jersey Governor Brendan T. Byrne to grant executive clemency and commute his sentence to time already served. Despite the robust letter-writing campaign, demonstrations, and meetings with the governor, Byrne denied Merritt's request on the grounds that the reversal of his third conviction was still pending.

In March 1979, a state Superior Court appellate panel upheld Merritt's latest conviction. Dr. Frost believed this ruling was politically motivated, that it "reflected an existing sentiment on the part of some people that a black person pay for John Gleason's death." Merritt's attorney appealed the decision to the state Supreme Court, but they refused to hear the case. The next step was to

appeal to the Federal District Court in Newark, arguing that Merritt's constitutional rights were violated because the state withheld evidence related to the investigation, in particular the police report of the initial interview with the prosecution's lone witness, in which he did not identify Merritt. The Federal judge who heard the case ordered authorities to search municipal, county, and state offices for the report. This order also granted the defense attorneys subpoena power to search the records for the first time in 12 years. The search uncovered not only the police report, but documents that showed that the investigators were aware of another eyewitness whose description of Gleason's killer did not match Merritt's and a police memo listing possible suspects, none of whom was Merritt. In February 1980, the judge ruled that failure to disclose this evidence violated Merritt's right to due process under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and deprived him of a fair trial. He was set free on bail, after spending ten years in state prison, but still awaited a possible fourth trial. On April 24, 1980, the Union County Prosecutor's Office announced that they were dismissing the indictment and would not pursue another trial.

While a hard-won victory was finally achieved for George Merritt, David Frost and the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee never stopped seeking justice for Gail Madden. Although her conviction was upheld after the first appeal, she was still included alongside Merritt in the campaign to exonerate him. After the Appellate Division's decision in 1976, Madden filed a petition for certification to the New Jersey Supreme Court to review it. The petition was denied in December, but she was not informed until March 1977. In April 1981, her public defender motioned the Criminal Resentencing Panel to review her sentence, based on changes in New Jersey's penal code. This motion was denied and the decision was appealed. In November 1982, the Appellate Division ruled that Madden was not entitled to a reduced sentence under those revised criminal laws, thus continuing her life term in prison. Madden's parole was denied in early 1983, but future eligibility was set for 18 months. Dr. Frost and others on the Committee continued to raise money for Gail and regularly visited her in prison to keep up her morale.

For well over a decade, Dr. David Frost and the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee worked tirelessly to get justice for people they believed were victims of social and judicial inequality. They insisted on Merritt and Madden's innocence, challenged the state's case against them, questioned the evidence, rallied national and international support for their defense, and raised funds for their legal battles. Throughout this fight for justice, Dr. Frost stood out as a leader who never gave up. In 1978, the Essex County chapter of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression awarded Dr. Frost the Human Rights Award for his "leadership and struggle for the freedom of George Merritt and Gail Madden." He covered Merritt's \$10,000 bail in 1980 with the deed to his Plainfield home. He continued to support and advocate for Gail Madden, remaining optimistic about her future freedom.

After his work with the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee, Dr. Frost went on to become the newsletter editor of the Central Jersey/Masaya, Nicaragua Friendship Cities Project, the president of the Council of Scientific Editors, and a member of the Plainfield Shade Tree Commission. On September 28, 2022, he availed himself of New Jersey's Medical Aid in Dying for the Terminally Ill Act to die peacefully at home.

*[Source: David Frost obituary, Courier News articles, and materials found in collection]*

## Scope and Contents

The Dr. David Frost Papers document his dedicated involvement with the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee and its pursuit of justice for George Merritt Jr., Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams. The collection includes a variety of materials, dating from 1967 through 1984. Record types

include correspondence, press releases, progress reports, newsletters, copies of court documents and police records, pamphlets, flyers, petitions, photographs of Merritt, and newspaper clippings. Five of the clippings from 1984 pertain to Mayor Everett C. Lattimore, and although they do not relate to Dr. Frost's work with the Defense Committee, they do show his continued interest in Plainfield, local politics, and the education system.

## Arrangement

The Dr. David Frost Papers are arranged into four series:

**Series 1:** Publicity Materials

**Series 2:** Legal Documents

**Series 3:** Correspondence

**Series 4:** Newspaper Clippings

## Index Terms

### People:

Frost, David, 1925-2022

Glenn, Gail Madden

Merritt, George, Jr.

Williams, Bobby Lee

### Organizations:

Committee for Clemency

New Jersey Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression

New Jersey Council of Churches

Plainfield Joint Defense Committee

### Places:

Plainfield, N.J.

### Subjects:

Activism--New Jersey--Plainfield

Civil rights--New Jersey--Plainfield

Social advocacy--New Jersey--Plainfield

## Related Items

Plainfield Black History Resources on the [July 1967 Uprising / Civil Unrest "Plainfield Riots"](#) (Civil Unrest 1967 tab).

[David W. Hardy Papers](#)

## Physical Characteristics and Technical Requirements

This collection consists of paper documents that do not require any additional technology for access.

### Series Description

#### Series 1: Publicity Materials [1969-1981]

##### Description

Series 1 contains materials related to publicity about the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee and the Committee for Clemency and their pursuit of justice for George Merritt, Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams. The series includes pamphlets, flyers, petitions, press releases, progress reports, newsletters, and photographs of Merritt.

##### Arrangement

Series 1 is arranged chronologically by material type and fills six folders.

#### Series 2: Legal Documents [1971-1983]

##### Description

Series 2 contains official copies of motions, briefs, affidavits, police records, and applications related to the appeals process of George Merritt, Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams. Please note that the copies of police records were used as evidence in Merritt's 1980 federal appeals case.

##### Arrangement

Series 2 is arranged chronologically by defendant name and fills 13 folders.

#### Series 3: Correspondence [1971-1980]

##### Description

Series 3 contains letters and notes written by David Frost, George Merritt, Gail Madden, attorneys on the behalf of the defendants, and clergy, civic, and union leaders writing on the behalf of Merritt. Please note that letters that directly relate to the legal documents they were originally attached to, remain together and can be found in Series 2.

##### Arrangement

Series 3 is arranged chronologically and alphabetically by name of sender and fills four folders.

## **Series 4: Newspaper Clippings [1970-1984]**

### **Description**

Series 4 contains newspaper clippings about George Merritt, Gail Madden, and Bobby Lee Williams and their subsequent trials. Please note that five newspaper articles from 1984 pertain to Mayor Everett C. Lattimore and do not relate to Dr. Frost and his work with the Plainfield Joint Defense Committee.

### **Arrangement**

Series 4 is arranged chronologically and fills five folders.

## **Administrative Information**

### **Access & Restrictions**

The Dr. David Frost Papers are available for research.

Access is restricted to materials prepared by the Local History department staff. All materials must be viewed in the Plainfield Room and may not be removed to another area of the library without permission of the Library Director or designee. Materials must be handled carefully and kept in order. Materials must not be leaned upon, altered, folded, ripped, or traced upon. Marks may not be added or erased from materials. Materials must be returned directly to Local History department staff and inspected before the researcher leaves the Plainfield Room.

One photocopy may be made (by Plainfield Public Library staff) of each document for the purpose of research; official Local History departmental reproduction fees may apply. Permission to publish must be obtained by the Plainfield Public Library Board of Trustees as delegated to the Library Director. Permission to publish does not constitute a copyright clearance. The researcher is responsible for further copyright restrictions. The Plainfield Public Library is not responsible for the misuse of copyrighted material.

### **Preferred Citation**

Identification of item; Date (if noted); "Dr. David Frost Papers", Box and Folder Number, Local History Department, Plainfield Public Library, Plainfield, New Jersey.

### **Acquisition Information**

The collection was donated in November 2022 by Dr. David Frost's daughter, Jane Frost-Guzzo.

### **Processing Information**

This collection was inventoried and processed by Sally Weiner in December 2022 and the finding aid written by Sally Weiner in November 2025. Finding aid content follows the guidelines suggested by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

## Collection Inventory

### Series 1: Publicity Materials [1969-1981]

Box	Folder	Title/Description	Date(s)
1	1	Pamphlets	1969-1978
	2	Progress reports and newsletters	1969-1981
	3	Petitions	[1975], 1976
	4	Press releases	1976-1980
	5	Flyers	1977-1979
	6	Photographs of George Merritt Jr.	[1978]

### Series 2: Legal Documents [1971-1983]

Box	Folder	Title/Description	Date(s)
1	7	George Merritt Jr.	1971
	8	George Merritt Jr.	1974-1975
	9	George Merritt Jr. and Gail Madden	1976
	10	George Merritt Jr.	1976
	11	George Merritt Jr.	1976
	12	George Merritt Jr.	1977-1978
	13	George Merritt Jr.	1979
	14	George Merritt Jr.	1980
	15	George Merritt Jr. (police records)	1967, 1977
	16	Gail Madden	1971
	17	Gail Madden	1976
	18	Gail Madden	1980-1983
	19	Bobby Lee Williams	1970

### Series 3: Correspondence [1971-1980]

Box	Folder	Title/Description	Date(s)
1	20	Attorneys	1974-1980
	21	Clergy, civic and union leaders	1977-1979
	22	Dr. David Frost	1977
	23	George Merritt Jr.	1971-1978

### Series 4: Newspaper Clippings [1970-1984]

Box	Folder	Title/Description	Date(s)
1	24	Newspaper clippings	1970, 1973
	25	Newspaper clippings	1976-1977
	26	Newspaper clippings	1978-1979
	27	Newspaper clippings	1980
	28	Newspaper clippings (Mayor Everett C. Lattimore)	1984