

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY • CONTENT WARNING

The Voice They Tried to Silence

Paul Robeson and Eight Years Without a Passport

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Persecution / Contribution Track • ERA V-VI • Princeton, New Jersey

Content Warning

This entry discusses political persecution, a documented suicide attempt, and psychiatric hospitalization. Reader discretion is advised.

Who He Is

Paul Robeson was born April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey, the youngest of five children of William Drew Robeson, a man born into slavery who escaped as a teenager and became a Presbyterian minister, and Maria Louisa Bustill, from a prominent Quaker and abolitionist family. Robeson entered Rutgers College in 1915 as its only Black student, won consensus All-American honors in football twice, was elected class valedictorian, and went on to earn a law degree from Columbia while playing professional football to pay for his studies. He left the practice of law, reportedly after a white secretary refused to take his dictation, and turned to the stage.

Ol' Man River, Rewritten

Robeson became one of the era's most celebrated performers — his Othello ran a then-record 296 performances on Broadway in 1943 — and an internationally famous concert bass-baritone, especially for his interpretations of spirituals. He is closely associated with Show Boat's "Ol' Man River," which he performed from the show's 1928 London production onward; over the years he deliberately revised his own performances of it, replacing dialect words with standard English and rewriting its fatalistic closing verse into a more defiant one — turning a song written for him into an argument against the resignation it originally voiced.

A Passport Revoked

Robeson's politics radicalized through the 1930s: he supported the Spanish Republic against fascism, spoke for Indian independence and African anti-colonial movements, and, after visiting the Soviet Union in 1934, said he felt treated with full human dignity there for the first time in his life — a remark that, along with his continued praise for the USSR, made him a central target of Cold War anticommunism. In 1949 an Associated Press report claimed Robeson told the Paris Peace Congress that Black Americans would never fight against the Soviet Union; Robeson and later historians have disputed this as a mischaracterization of his actual remarks, but the report set off a firestorm. That August, a scheduled concert in Peekskill, New York, was violently disrupted by anti-Robeson demonstrators; a rescheduled concert a week later went forward under armed escort, and concertgoers leaving were attacked afterward.

In 1950 the State Department revoked Robeson's passport, and it would not be restored for eight years — a period in which his income reportedly fell by roughly 95 percent as concert bookings and recording contracts dried up domestically and he could not travel internationally to perform at all. Called before the House Un-American Activities Committee on June 12, 1956, Robeson refused to answer questions about Communist Party membership and turned the hearing back on his interrogators.

"I am being tried for fighting for the rights of my people." — Paul Robeson, HUAC testimony, June 12, 1956

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1958 decision in *Kent v. Dulles*, ruling that the State Department could not deny a passport without due process, restored Robeson's right to travel. But the years of blacklisting had taken a toll: in March 1961, while in Moscow, Robeson attempted suicide and was hospitalized, later undergoing electroconvulsive therapy amid a prolonged period of depression and declining health. Some biographers have raised — as a disputed, not established, claim — the possibility that intelligence-agency interference contributed to his breakdown; this entry treats that specifically as a contested claim in the literature, not a documented fact. Robeson largely withdrew from public life afterward and died in Philadelphia on January 23, 1976, at seventy-seven.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Paul Robeson and Fayetteville or Cumberland County, North Carolina was found in this research pass, despite his extensive national concert touring in the 1930s and 1940s, an era when Black artists of his stature often performed at Southern HBCUs and Black churches. This entry claims no NC connection while flagging the gap as unresolved — the sources best positioned to confirm or rule out a tour stop, including his standard biography's index of engagements and North Carolina newspaper archives, could not be checked in this pass. Note also that North Carolina's own Robeson County is named for a Revolutionary War officer unrelated to Paul Robeson, a coincidence worth flagging to avoid confusion in future research.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Passport revocation date: commonly dated to 1950, tied to an ongoing multi-year legal fight that included a 1954 refusal to sign a State Department affidavit — some sources render the effective date as 1951; not fully reconciled here.

Financial impact figures: sources vary on exact pre- and post-revocation income; treat any specific dollar figure as approximate pending Duberman's biography.

1961 breakdown — intelligence-agency involvement claim: genuinely disputed in the biographical literature; present as a contested claim, never as settled fact.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Martin Bauml Duberman, Paul Robeson: A Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).
2. Paul Robeson, Here I Stand (New York: Othello Associates, 1958).
3. U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities, testimony of Paul Robeson, June 12, 1956, official transcript.
4. Kent v. Dulles, 357 U.S. 116 (1958).
5. "Paul Robeson," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026,
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Robeson>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.