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# Getting by at the Benjamin Mays Black Branch: Library Access for African Americans in Jim Crow South Carolina, 1940-1971

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GETTING BY AT THE BENJAMIN MAYS BLACK BRANCH: LIBRARY ACCESS  
FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS IN JIM CROW SOUTH CAROLINA, 1940-1971

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Library and Information Science

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Library and Information Science

by

Jamie I. Cutter

December 2011

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## ABSTRACT

### GETTING BY AT THE BENJAMIN MAYS BLACK BRANCH: LIBRARY ACCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS IN JIM CROW SOUTH CAROLINA, 1940-1971

by Jamie I. Cutter

This thesis examines a chapter of South Carolina history that has been neglected in the historical record, namely segregated libraries of the twentieth century. Previous works have covered the history of black libraries in the entire South, but details of South Carolina's segregated libraries are incomplete. This study looks first at the broader context of segregated libraries in the American South and then reviews the history of African American libraries in South Carolina. Finally, this study provides a case study of the Benjamin Mays Library, a segregated, African American library in Greenwood, South Carolina. The case study uses primary source documents and oral history interviews to establish the library's background and history, with a focus on progress toward integration. The record of this library and the broader background on South Carolina's black libraries will illustrate that there was no one single catalyst for black library establishment in South Carolina. Rather several agents developed and maintained segregated libraries throughout the state until desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Library service to African Americans in the South<sup>1</sup> during the twentieth century has paralleled civil rights progress. It began with librarians' first attempts to serve African Americans through segregated facilities during the era of forced segregation when legal statutes and social norms meant that blacks and whites could not mix in public settings, such as restaurants, schools, and libraries. As the twentieth century progressed, it became evident that segregated facilities were inherently inferior, and people of all races began to work toward integrated library service for both moral and economic reasons.

This thesis focuses on South Carolina's segregated library history. It is beyond the scope of this study to record a complete history of black libraries in the state. Instead, this work will attempt to thoroughly record the history of one black library's efforts to provide services to disenfranchised African Americans. The history of this library will serve to exemplify the history of segregated libraries and their eventual integration.

The Benjamin Mays Library was a branch of the Greenwood County Library in Greenwood, South Carolina. The library served the African American community in

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis makes reference frequently to the South. For the purposes of this study, the South shall be defined as the southeastern states that were known as the Confederacy during the Civil War and struggled during the Reconstruction era to rebuild economically while redefining the meaning of race. These states are the eleven slave states that declared their secession from the United States, namely South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina. Post Civil War economic struggles were a major factor in library development in this group of states.



Greenwood from 1940 through 1971. It moved through the years to various physical locations, including a high school, funeral home and doctor's office, but it never had its own dedicated library space. This thesis chronicles the evolution of this library from its beginning as a fifty-book deposit station in a local high school to a busy community-center-style library with book clubs, bookmobile service, children's programs, and high circulation rates.

The history of the Benjamin Mays Library serves as a promising case study as it is representative of the evolution of library services for blacks in the South. Moreover, since it existed during such a recent point in history (the library closed in 1971), one of its librarians and many patrons are still living and can provide rich historical details and insights missing from the institution's official record. As interviews with a former head librarian as well as past patrons will make clear, the library served not just as a place to check out books but as a popular community center in the days of segregation when African Americans were limited in their social and recreational choices.

Until recently, the only reminder of the Benjamin Mays Library for the community of Greenwood was a mural in the local shopping mall. The mural was a greatly enlarged black-and-white photograph of the Mays library's long-time and much beloved librarian, Grace Byrd, standing among the stacks of children's books. The short description stated that Greenwood once had a library that served the African American community. Since the library building was gone, the librarian passed away, and no one spoke about the segregated past, the mural became the one reminder of the segregated library's existence. However, recently expansion of the shopping mall meant more than

the memory of the black library. The wall with the mural was taken down and replaced with windows to give customers a view into a new shoe store. Now, more than ever, it is important to record the history of the Benjamin Mays Library before it is completely forgotten.

### **Separation of Races in the United States**

It is important to include a short overview of the history of segregation to understand the context within which the Benjamin Mays Library existed. The Jim Crow era was a time period when blacks and whites did not mix in public settings. It evolved from the Black Codes that began after the Civil War and lasted, in some places, through the first half of the twentieth century. Local laws and customs made it illegal or unacceptable for blacks and whites to share public facilities, such as bathrooms and swimming pools, or to sit together in movie theaters or on public transportation. Sometimes blacks and whites went to separate hospital facilities, but where segregated facilities did not exist blacks simply had no access to hospitals. Blacks were prohibited from sitting in restaurants alongside whites. In most places they were also normally not allowed to use public libraries.

To understand the genesis of this code of behavior and the legal statutes that governed the daily movement of blacks in the South, one must look back to the days of slavery when, to quote historian C. Vann Woodward, “The white man sought to define the Negro’s status, his ‘place,’ and assure his subordination.”<sup>2</sup> According to Woodward,

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<sup>2</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, 2002), 11.

at the end of the Civil War, the South was defeated and slavery was abolished. However, many “whites clung unwaveringly to the old doctrine of white supremacy and innate Negro inferiority that had sustained the old regime.”<sup>3</sup> Under slavery, whites were able to control blacks; however, with their relationships changed after the war, new compulsory methods of control were needed to maintain traditional white superiority.

After the Civil War, many whites feared being attacked or killed by former slaves seeking revenge. Ex slave-owners were on guard against rebellion or insurrection. It was in this tense atmosphere of apprehension that the Black Codes were enacted to establish a basis for controlling blacks by limiting their civil liberties, human rights and, especially, freedom of movement. The Black Codes invaded all aspects of the freedman’s life. The laws varied by state and city, but the general goal was control of the newly freed slaves. Freedmen were required to present, on request, documentation proving their residence and permit to work. If anyone was found to be without proper documentation, he was declared a vagrant and turned over to the authorities to work off the fine. Any freedman that ran away from his job contract could be captured by bounty hunters and severely punished.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the freedmen were not entirely free to move about as they wished. In South Carolina, servants were to be on call twenty-four hours a day and were permitted to leave the master’s house only on Sundays and had to return before sundown.<sup>5</sup> The Black Codes determined a black person’s rights in court with regulations, such that blacks could

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War: 1865-68* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 129.

testify as a witness in cases involving only other blacks.<sup>6</sup> The codes defined African American rights to marriage contacts and land ownership. In Mississippi, for example, blacks could lease land only in towns or cities, effectively shutting them out of farming and keeping them confined in a controllable area. Many black codes, such as those in Florida, dictated movement in public places. There, blacks could not enter a railcar or church when a white man was present. If one did, he would be subjected to standing an hour at the pillory or twenty-nine lashes on his back.<sup>7</sup>

The legal and extra-legal separation of the races in the South continued through more than half of the twentieth century as the original Black Codes evolved into what came to be known as the Jim Crow Laws. There are no specific dates for the end of the black codes nor the beginning of the Jim Crow era. It is more accurate to think of these periods as a continuum of control that changed and evolved through the years after the Civil War. The origin of the term Jim Crow is a matter of historical debate with some believing that the term might have been taken from an 1832 song titled “Jim Crow.”<sup>8</sup> According to the *Dictionary of American English*, the term Jim Crow was in common use by 1904.<sup>9</sup> It is not known when this terminology first was used to refer to the *de jure* and *de facto* practice of segregating the races.

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<sup>6</sup> Forrest G. Wood, *The Black Scare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 105.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Jim Crow laws infiltrated the daily lives of every Southerner for almost a century. Two to three generations knew no other way of life. The omnipresence of the separation of the races was a systematic reminder to African Americans that they were second-class citizens. The segregation of schools and the inherent inferiority of black students seemed to seal African American's fate as a marginalized group.

African Americans lived with a constant fear of punishment for breaking these laws and social norms. As historian William Chafe has explained, there was a "dailiness of the terror blacks experienced at the hands of capricious whites."<sup>10</sup> Lynch mobs took the law into their own hands and punished blacks for grievances by hanging, beating, and dragging men and women to their deaths. Segregation was more than just an inconvenience or matter of pride. For many in the South, it was a matter of life or death, and blacks often simply self-segregated to avoid inadvertently offending someone that might try to punish them.

To avoid whites whenever possible, black communities often found it possible to serve their own needs by establishing their own institutions. African Americans began founding their own churches, for example, and black-owned businesses, such as restaurants and grocery stores, took root in cities and towns across the South. In many cases, even the schools open to black children were founded not by the public school system but rather by the black community itself. Often, there were black doctor's offices,

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<sup>10</sup> William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001), xxx.

funeral homes, banks, and general stores. Black communities even worked to open their own libraries.

Finally in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in the ground-breaking case, *Brown v. the Board of Education*, that laws allowing for segregated schools were unconstitutional and that separate was inherently unequal. This laid the legal framework for the unconstitutionality of all separate public facilities. Yet, the South, so reluctant to change, shed its statues and social norms that separated the races slowly and only after additional pressure. In the 1960s, civil rights workers, energized and empowered by the *Brown* decision, were victorious in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The federal government had laid the legal framework for equal rights, and the barriers preventing equality could no longer stand.

Equal access to public facilities was a highly visible aspect of the struggle. Sit-ins were conducted across the South to bring media attention to segregation in a civilized, non-violent manner. The 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth lunch counter sit-in was one of the earliest and most influential, and it inspired many more protesters to form their own sit-ins in non-violent protest of segregation in public places such as universities, museums, parks, bowling alleys, and public transportation. There were demonstrations at libraries, too, and the media dubbed them read-ins.

### **Why Study Segregated Libraries?**

It is important to record the history of segregated libraries as part of the story of the Jim Crow era. Public memory is selective and will choose to suppress unpleasant

memories. Today, many southern whites are likely to be embarrassed to recall the period of forced segregation. Many African Americans would prefer to forget the unpleasant past as well. Therefore, it is important now to record the memories of the last generation who experienced segregation first hand so that we might learn from their experiences and better understand the history of a nation. It is the responsibility of historians to “bear witness” to these events of historical significance and to capture the experiences and perspectives of those not currently reflected in the historical record. Libraries are a particularly important aspect of the segregation period because many people, both black and white, saw library access as a portal to personal educational advancement. In fact, because of Jim Crow laws, many individuals worked to create segregated libraries for African American communities. The libraries frequently focused on services to children since the goal was often educational advancement. But, of course, segregated libraries served adult patrons as well.

It is in the positive and negative aspects of the segregation era that we can see that this is not a simple one-dimensional story of oppression and suppression but, rather, a complex history that includes the black community’s will to persevere and the collective means by which they worked for a better future for themselves and their children. The history of segregated libraries in the South provides an ideal window into this process.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE EVOLUTION OF PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSE ON LIBRARY SEGREGATION: 1913-2010**

Through the twentieth century, the professional conversation about library services to African Americans has taken several turns. The focus went from supporting segregation as the best means of providing library services to blacks, to advocating for quiet integration of public libraries, to finally, as a result of the civil rights movement, demanding complete integration. Near the end of the twentieth century, librarians and historians began to study the history of library segregation as a scholarly topic. This research continues today as scholars and information professionals seek to understand how library segregation fits into the broader picture of African Americans' struggle for equal rights.

### **Literature of the Jim Crow Era: Segregation as Paradigm, 1913-1960**

Prior to the civil rights movement, librarians' discourse on segregated libraries in the South was generally of a descriptive nature. These accounts, published in professional journals such as the *ALA Bulletin* and *Library Quarterly*, reported on the dismal state of literacy among African Americans in the South and the even more dismal nature of collections in segregated libraries. They also noted scattered successes, as African Americans sought to develop library services for their own communities. These early works contributed to a sometimes low-key national discussion of whether African



Americans would be best served in segregated facilities or in facilities that were, to varying degrees, integrated.

The first person to publically address the issue of library services for blacks was William F. Yust in his speech to the American Library Association at the Kaatersville Conference in July 1913. His talk, titled “What of the Black and Yellow Races?” was later published in its entirety in the *Bulletin of the American Library Association*. Yust stated that the black man in the library was “a problem,” especially in the South.<sup>1</sup> He described the condition of segregated libraries and observed that the prevailing attitude in 1913 regarding library service for blacks was “indifferent.” His speech is cited in nearly every future study of this topic, particularly his observation that “libraries cannot flourish in illiteracy as trees cannot grow in a desert.”<sup>2</sup>

Yust’s contentions were clearly grounded in the paradigm of the day. He stated that the only way to move forward in the South was to build segregated libraries since public sentiment would not allow for integrated facilities. He pointed out that for “peace and cordial relations,” libraries were best kept separate and that blacks would be more comfortable in segregated facilities and more likely to use them.<sup>3</sup> “In the South,” Yust argued, “any arrangement which aims to serve the two races in the same room or in the same building is detrimental to the greatest good of both. Complete segregation is

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<sup>1</sup> William Yust, “What of the Black and Yellow Races?” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 7 (June 1913): 159.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

essential to the best work for all.”<sup>4</sup> It was in this turn-of-the-century mindset that the first libraries designated to serve black patrons began to appear in the South.

Practically the same argument was made by Rachel D. Harris, an African American librarian at the newly opened black branch library in Louisville, Kentucky. In a 1915 article appearing in *The Southern Workman*, Harris claimed that white people cannot understand black needs and are therefore “incompetent” to serve black patrons. Like Yust, she believed that blacks would be more comfortable in their own library branch. Drawing on her own experiences as a librarian, Harris pointed out that small children, especially, were too sensitive to the unpleasant atmosphere that would be created if blacks and whites mixed in an integrated library.<sup>5</sup>

The body of scholarship is scant for nearly two decades after Yust’s and Harris’s contributions, even though a small number of black libraries began to take shape in the Southeast and libraries in general became more common. A handful of descriptive works were published during the 1920s, 30s and 40s, and in them the paradigm gradually began to shift from advocacy of segregation to a realization that separate facilities would never serve the black population well.

One small hint that attitudes were changing comes from the July 1922 issue of the *ALA Bulletin*. At that year’s ALA convention, Ernestine Rose, a pioneering white librarian at the New York City Public Library, delivered a paper to the ALA’s Work with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel D. Harris, “The Advantages of the Colored Branch Libraries,” *The Southern Workman* 44 (1915): 390.

Negroes Roundtable describing her research into current services for blacks. The paper, which was subsequently published in the *ALA Bulletin*, described the results of a survey she conducted with 122 libraries across the country. Rose found that while northern and western libraries were opening their doors to blacks, southern libraries were not giving blacks access to their facilities. Neither were southern libraries employing blacks or allowing them to serve on library advisory boards. Although there were a few exceptions, the number of southern libraries serving blacks was so small, they had no impact on the overall library service in the South.<sup>6</sup>

Research and writing done in the 1930s and early 1940s further documented the discrimination against blacks in southern libraries and moved the profession to support “quiet” integration that would not gain media attention, provoke staunchly anti-integration locals or generally bring strife to the libraries. Librarians in many cases felt it was best not to shake the foundations of social norms but, rather, to allow blacks to slowly begin using main branches so as not to draw the attention of those in society who might oppose such integration of the races in a public setting.

Some of the most important research was done by Tommie Dora Barker, who, at the time, was Dean of Librarianship at Emory University. Based on research she did as the American Library Association’s field agent in the South, Barker wrote several articles on the state of southern library affairs. In 1936, she published a monograph titled

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<sup>6</sup> Ernestine Rose, “Work with Negroes Roundtable,” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 16 (1922): 361-66.

*Libraries of the South: A Report on Developments, 1930-1935* in which she reported that there were 782 counties in the South without any type of public library service. She also indicated that among the communities that did have public libraries only 95 served black patrons.<sup>7</sup> Barker did, however, indicate that library service to blacks was improving. In 1926, 89.5 percent of southern blacks did not have access to a public library. By 1935, she found, this percentage had improved slightly to 83 percent without access.<sup>8</sup> In a 1942 article titled “Library Progress in the South, 1936-42,” Barker compared five areas of library services for different populations in the South: 1) extension services, 2) university libraries, 3) education for librarians, 4) school libraries, and 5) services to African Americans.<sup>9</sup> In the latter area, she pointed to the continuing disparities in services provided for blacks and whites. On a positive note, she mentioned that the Atlanta library school had opened in 1941, giving black librarians an opportunity for professional training. She also commented on the significance of a newly published monograph on the history and current status of southern libraries by Dr Eliza Gleason, which she predicted would be “fundamental to the future planning of library service to Negroes.”<sup>10</sup> However, in large part Barker found that little, if any, significant progress for blacks in the South had been made between 1936 and 1942.

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<sup>7</sup> Tommie Dora Barker, *Libraries of the South: A Report on Developments, 1930-1935* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1936), 88.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Tommie Dora Barker, “Library Progress in the South 1936-42,” *Library Quarterly* 12 (1942): 353-62.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

The most complete picture of the development of black libraries in the early part of the century can be found in the book praised by Barker, Eliza Atkins Gleason's 1941 monograph, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library*. Gleason was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. in library science, which she earned from the University of Chicago in 1940.<sup>11</sup> Her aforementioned publication is considered to be the first complete history of library service to blacks in the South.<sup>12</sup>

Gleason's book documents the inadequacies of black libraries at that time. She argued that segregated libraries were underfunded and understaffed. She also felt that many black libraries were perfunctory in nature, token libraries existing only to satisfy the white upper class that something was being done for the black population. She lamented that accurate and thorough statistics did not exist that would make possible an objective study of service to the black populations.<sup>13</sup> Departing from early opinions such as that of William Yust in 1913, Gleason recommended that southern cities and towns cease wasting resources trying to maintain separate library facilities and instead concentrate their efforts on creating one good library to be used by all.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next two decades, the library literature continued to report on the status of library services for African Americans, providing on-going documentation of discrimination against blacks. In 1953, for example, the Southern Regional Council

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<sup>11</sup>Robert Wedgeworth, "Eliza Atkins Gleason," *World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1993), 325-26.

<sup>12</sup> Eliza Atkins Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library Service to Negroes in the South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941), 187.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Delete extra space above

<sup>14</sup> Gleason, *The Southern Negro*, 188-89.

surveyed 172 southern libraries in 13 states and reported its findings in a 1954 article appearing in the *New South* magazine. Written by Anna Holden, a librarian and Southern Regional Council member, the article reported that just fifty-nine southern cities opened their main branch libraries to black patrons. Moreover, four of these “integrated” libraries barred African American children because white parents felt it would detrimental for their children to mix with blacks.<sup>15</sup>

Holden, who would become an important voice during the civil rights movement, described other semi-integrated arrangements that were found in southern libraries at the time. For example, in Gastonia, North Carolina, while library materials were available to black patrons, they could not use them in the main reading room. Instead, a conference room was reserved for African Americans who wanted to remain in the library. Similarly, the New Orleans Public Library reserved separate tables for its black patrons. Some libraries allowed only “professional negroes or college students.”<sup>16</sup> Holden’s article also revealed that cities with the highest level of integration had the smallest percentage of black citizens. Thus, the fifty-nine libraries that were open to black adults were generally located in towns with black populations of less than 20 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Another influential article was published in the same 1954 issue of *New South*. Authored by L. D. Reddick, African American head librarian at Atlanta University, the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2. Of the fifty-nine libraries open to African Americans twenty-one were in Kentucky which was not a former Confederate state. Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina did not have any main branch libraries open to black patrons in this study.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Holden, “The Color Line in Southern Libraries,” *New South* 9 (1954): 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

article reported that two-thirds of blacks in the South still had no library access.<sup>18</sup> When libraries did provide library services, Reddick claimed that most were inadequate black branches that were “old, badly located, as uncomfortable, ill-lighted, and as ugly as buildings can get.”<sup>19</sup> Reddick did find that a few cities, such as Columbus, Georgia, did have black branches that were “modern” and “up-to-date.” He nonetheless denounced the existence of separate black branch libraries, calling them, “economically indefensible.”<sup>20</sup> Reddick believed that state and local statutes perpetuating segregation were legally questionable. He urged that southern libraries expand library services to blacks “in the most economically sound and socially intelligent basis possible.” As he forcefully concluded, “Forget the color line, consider a reader a reader, [and] open all public libraries to the whole public.”<sup>21</sup>

Reddick’s sentiments were exemplary of a new paradigm emerging within the library profession. During the first half of the twentieth century, little progress was made in advancing library services to African Americans while the professional literature supported the idea that segregated facilities were the best way to serve African American communities. After 1950, however, professional research and writing revealed the dismal state of black library branches, making it increasingly clear that separate facilities were not the most advantageous models for library service to blacks. By the end of the

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<sup>18</sup> L. D. Reddick, “Where Can a Southern Negro Read a Book?” *New South* 9 (1954): 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

decade, librarians -- most notably black librarians -- were speaking out against discrimination and segregation and advocating full integration of libraries.

### **The Civil Rights Era: Debating Integration, 1960-1970**

The sixties were a time of protest against social injustice, and this new social ethic permeates library literature produced at this time. Armed with the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which set the legal basis for equality the 1960s, civil disobedience entered the library world as sit-in's took place in libraries in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi. However, it is abundantly evident that the full realization of civil rights for blacks was not completed in the 1960s, as the professional literature continued to report on inadequacies and inequalities, especially in southern libraries.

In previous decades, the American Library Association took halting steps toward advocating integration, but by 1960 the ALA finally realized that it was time to declare its official position. In that year, American Library Association President Benjamin Powell formed a special committee to study the ALA's existing civil rights statements to determine if they should be changed. Archie McNeal, University of Miami library director from 1952-1979, was appointed committee chair, and his committee recommended that the ALA's Library Bill of Rights be revised to include a clause stating that library use could not be restricted based on race.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the committee's

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<sup>22</sup> Carlton B. Joeckel, *Post-War Planning for Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1943).



work, the ALA added Article V to its Library Bill of Rights: “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.”<sup>23</sup>

Delving even further into the topic, McNeal published an article in 1961 on “Integrated Service in Southern Public Libraries.” Although supportive of library integration, McNeal questioned the wisdom of library sit-ins and, instead, advocated what he termed “quiet integration.” Protests, he argued, often brought media spectacles, and McNeal felt that such publicity was detrimental to the development of library services for blacks in the long run. Southern librarians, he said, were trying to “keep the peace and at the same time to develop service.”<sup>24</sup>

Bernice Lloyd Bell also reported on the profession’s “quiet integration” in a brief article appearing in *Library Journal* in 1963. Drawing on research done for her doctoral dissertation at Atlanta University, Bell described how some southern libraries were quietly integrating. In at least ten major southern cities, she found, blacks were also beginning to serve on library boards.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, even though almost a decade had passed since the *Brown* decision, Bell’s dissertation research showed that 16 percent of the libraries responding to her survey were still following unconstitutional state laws mandating segregation. She also listed some of the restrictions black patrons still experienced, such as being allowed to check out books but not being able to sit down to

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<sup>23</sup> American Library Association, *Library Bill of Rights*.  
<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/lbor.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Archie L. McNeal, “Integrated Service in Southern Public Libraries,” *Library Journal* 86 (1961): 2045-48.

<sup>25</sup> Bernice Lloyd Bell, “Public Library Integration in Thirteen Southern States,” *Library Journal* 88 (1963): 4713-15.

read them inside the facility, and various types of age restrictions aimed at keeping young blacks out of the library.<sup>26</sup>

An important study by E. J. Josey in 1964 further exposed the lingering discrimination in southern libraries. A civil rights activist and future ALA President, Josey surveyed 270 libraries, publishing his findings in an article titled, “A Mouthful of Civil Rights and an Empty Stomach.”<sup>27</sup> Focusing on African American employment in libraries, Josey reported that in 1964 just 10.6 percent of public libraries employed African American librarians. While Josey acknowledged that negative attitudes toward blacks working in libraries were, perhaps, changing, progress, especially in the South, was very slow. For example, his research revealed that only 56 percent of librarians surveyed felt that their patrons would feel comfortable being served by a black librarian.<sup>28</sup>

Josey would become a leading spokesperson for the black library community. His next and most significant contribution to the literature was *The Black Librarian in America*, a collection of essays published in 1970. These essays, which consisted of autobiographical sketches written by twenty-five African Americans, examined the experience of black librarians in America and, according to Josey, provided “unassailable evidence that discrimination in employment and promotional opportunities has been

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Josey, “A Mouthful of Civil Rights,” 202-205.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

rampant and blatant.”<sup>29</sup> For example, Carrie C. Robinson of the Alabama State Department of Education reminisced about a job interview at which she was asked, “Mrs. Robinson, do you know how to talk to white folks?”<sup>30</sup> Fisk University librarian Jessie Carney Smith had similarly negative experiences: “At meetings with southern whites,” he claimed, “it is not uncommon for me and for other black people to be totally ignored.”<sup>31</sup> Although many of the librarians’ narratives revealed other examples of prejudice and discrimination, their professional perseverance provided inspiration for the next generation of African American librarians.

In addition to serving as role models for young black professionals, the narratives in *The Black Librarian* displayed a sense of black pride not present in the earlier literature. Indeed, as editor Josey stated in the introduction, a black librarian must “define and accept himself as a black librarian, not just another librarian.”<sup>32</sup> Josey further argued that in order to properly serve a black population, the librarian must relate to his patrons and empathize with them. In order to do this, Josey urged librarians to embrace their black identity. This mindset was certainly not evident in any earlier literature when African Americans were simply trying to gain a foothold in society. By 1970, however, many black professionals were standing firm in their careers and racial identities.

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<sup>29</sup> E. J. Josey, *The Black Librarian in America* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1970), x.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, *xiii*.

E. J. Josey continued his contribution to black librarianship in 1977 by editing, along with Ann Allen Shockley, the *Handbook of Black Librarianship*. Containing essays contributed by numerous black librarians, the handbook was meant as a ready reference source, including a chronology of black library history, biographical information about important black librarians, and data pertaining to library and information science education.<sup>33</sup>

The civil rights period was a time of internal debate within the library community. Opinions in the literature differed on whether quiet integration or non-violent protest would most effectively bring racial equality to library services. At the same time, professionals continued to report on the inequality experienced by African Americans in segregated branches. By the 1970s, through the publications and professional activism of black librarians such as E. J. Josey, the profession would become outspoken critics of discrimination in library service.

### **Equal Access: Librarians Speak Out, 1980-2010**

Given the success of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the consequent development of ethnic history in the following decade, it is somewhat surprising that race and its impact on library services did not attract attention from library scholars until the late 1980s and 1990s. However, as this literature expanded, librarians and others began to study the history of library services to blacks from multiple perspectives.

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<sup>33</sup> E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley, eds., *Handbook of Black Librarianship* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc. 1977).

From the beginning of this period, the literature became more research based and scholarly as opposed to previous years when the vast majority of the material was of a professional and descriptive nature. One of the earliest scholarly treatments was Rosemary Ruhig DuMont's article, "Race in American Librarianship," published in 1986. DuMont, a professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Kent State University, chronicled the shift in the profession's attitude during the twentieth century regarding black access to information and integration. She made special mention of the American Library Association's lack of enthusiasm for integration and the irresolute manner in which it stumbled through the period of desegregation.<sup>34</sup>

Authors in the 1990s were particularly keen on recording the legacy of those who helped bring an end to discrimination in southern libraries. Historian Stephen Cresswell's 1996 article, "The Last Days of Jim Crow in Southern Libraries," for instance, explained several factors that helped expedite the end of segregation in public libraries in the South. A professor of history at West Virginia Wesleyan University and scholar of southern history, Cresswell highlighted the history of sit-ins in southern libraries and the ALA's "halting" steps toward ending segregation.<sup>35</sup> Cresswell concluded that organizations such as the NAACP were the most important factors in library integration, as they flexed economic muscle to force cities to desegregate.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rosemary DuMont, "Race in American Librarianship: Attitudes of the Library Profession," *The Journal of Library History* 21 (1986): 488-509.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Cresswell, "The Last Days of Jim Crow in Southern Libraries," *Libraries & Culture*, 31 (Fall & Summer 1996): 557.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 557-73.

Building on Cresswell's work, John Mark Tucker published *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship* in 1998. Edited by Tucker, the book contains fifteen essays arranged into three sections, 1) Legacies of Black Librarianship, 2) Chronicles from the Civil Rights Movement, and 3) Resources for Library Personnel. The essays, which include both personal narrative and scholarly analysis, emphasized that this volume was merely a first step in documentary the many "untold stories" in southern black library history.<sup>37</sup> One such story was presented by Klaus Musmann, Director of Library Services at Notre Dame University, in his essay, "The Ugly Side of Librarianship: Segregation in Library Services from 1900 to 1950." Musmann provides what he calls a "preliminary sketch" of the important developments in the history of library services to blacks in the period between the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling which found segregated schools unconstitutional. In chronicling the history of library segregation in the South, Musman concurred with Rosemary Ruhig DuMont's earlier findings that the ALA's leaders' aloof attitudes toward segregation did little to help repressed African Americans during the years of segregation.

The year 2000 saw the publication of the second edition of E. J. Josey's classic *Handbook of Black Librarianship*. This new edition covered many subtopics in its 832 pages, which was more than double the size of the first edition. The handbook began with an updated and more detailed timeline of black library history, spanning 1808

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<sup>37</sup> John Mark Tucker, ed., *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship* (Champaign: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998).

through 1998. Subsequent articles profiled black librarians and black library associations, chronicling their achievements and contributions to the profession. The handbook also served as a reference source, providing useful statistics and historical data of interest to those studying the evolution of black library services during the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

Over the past decade, the literature on black library services has expanded significantly and moved in new directions. For instance, John Donahue, James Heckman, and Petra Todd's 2002 article, "The Schooling of Southern Blacks: The Roles of Legal Activism and Private Philanthropy, 1910 -1960," considered the relationship between improvement in black schools and library services. Like Cresswell, these authors found that pressure from and litigation by organizations like the NAACP were key factors in advancing both education and library services for black communities.<sup>39</sup>

Another important contribution to the literature on southern librarianship is James V. Carmichael, Jr.'s 2005 article, "Southern Librarianship and the Culture of Resentment." Examining correspondence between northern and southern library leaders, Carmichael uncovered the tensions within the profession over library services to blacks. According to Carmichael, southern librarians resented the intrusion of library advocates, particularly ALA officials who were entirely from the North. Northern librarians, on the other hand, were trying to effect growth and change in the South, which they condemned

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<sup>38</sup> Josey and DeLoach, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*.

<sup>39</sup> John J. Donohue III, James J. Heckman, and Petra E. Todd, "The Schooling of Southern Blacks: The Roles of Legal Activism and Private Philanthropy, 1910 -1960," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 117 (2002): 225-68.

as backward and bigoted.<sup>40</sup> Carmichael argued that despite popular depictions of southerners as “segregationist dragons,” many white southerners, such as Anne Wallace and Tommie Dora Barker, did defy cultural norms and legal ordinances to further black access to libraries during the era of segregation.

Other authors have looked at segregated libraries as part of a wider pattern of segregation in southern education. For example, in his article, “Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation,” historian Michael Fultz drew salient parallels between the developments in the southern public school system and the growth of the region’s library system. Fultz notes that in “1916 there were only approximately sixty-four public black high schools in the entire South, and only fourteen or fifteen black public libraries.”<sup>41</sup> He goes on to document the steady increase in the number of both black high schools and segregated black public libraries over the next five decades due, in part, to philanthropic donations. In addition, municipal authorities often found it convenient to allow the local black high school library to serve as the public library for the African American community. Thus, black schools and libraries were inextricably linked and grew together through the first part of the twentieth century.

An important recent contribution to the literature on black libraries in the South is David M. Battles’s *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South or Leaving Behind the Plow*. This is the first monograph since Gleason’s 1941

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Fultz, “Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 41 (Summer 2006): 351.



seminal work, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library Service to Negroes in the South*, to chronicle the entire history of segregated libraries. Battles began his book by stating that though the history of civil rights in the twentieth century is well documented, the history of the African American struggle for access to public libraries has only been told in “a piecemeal fashion.”<sup>42</sup> Battles’s monograph sought to correct this historical neglect by chronicling the steady improvement in black access to books and libraries beginning in the 1820s through the 1960s. Battles’s narrative is particularly strong in portraying the impact of the civil rights movement on southern libraries, describing several library sit-ins and reminding readers that integration did not, in many cases, happen quietly.

### **Conclusion**

As this chapter demonstrates, the body of literature concerning the development of black library service in the South during the twentieth century paralleled civil rights progress, beginning with librarians’ first attempts to serve African Americans through segregated facilities. As it became evident that segregated facilities were inherently inferior, the literature chronicled the discussion of library services’ improvement and the drive for integration. Until the 1980s, the literature is composed of articles by library professionals not scholarly historical studies. Finally in the 1980s and 1990s historians and librarians began serious investigation, producing the first scholarly historical studies in the field. Despite this progress, the history of black libraries and librarianship is the

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<sup>42</sup> David M. Battles, *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South, or Leaving Behind the Plow* (Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), vii.

South remains an understudied topic, especially at the local level. This thesis seeks to redress this situation by taking an in-depth look at the origins, development, and eventual demise of one such library, the Benjamin Mays segregated branch library in Greenwood, South Carolina.

### **CHAPTER 3: LIBRARY SERVICES TO AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE SOUTH: 1870-1970**

Library development in the American South was slow and protracted. This chapter will explore the historical reasons for this problem, which were rooted in the South's dreary economic situation after the Civil War and the lack of advancement in public education. The appearance in the late nineteenth century of the public library in former Confederate states will be discussed, and the eventual opening of libraries for African Americans will be explored. The expansion of library services will be covered along with the increase in educational opportunities for African Americans desiring to become librarians. The work of pioneering black librarians in the South will be noted as well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the movement to integrate southern libraries, which brought an end to the history of segregation in American libraries.

The proper place to begin any investigation into racial inequality in the United States is with the introduction of slavery. During the colonial period, between 1660 and 1710, forced servitude of Africans became widely utilized.<sup>1</sup> This economic social system, which was based on white supremacy and exploited black labor, allowed the southern economy to prosper. As Michael Goldfield writes in *The Color of Politics*, "The economic wealth of the South and the country as a whole became dependent on the brutal

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<sup>1</sup>Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 40.

forced exploitation of Black labor.”<sup>2</sup> Buttressing this system of black slavery was, to quote W. E. B. Du Bois a “passionate belief in Negro inferiority.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the success of the southern agricultural economy perpetuated and nourished racial animosity.

Many believed that slavery would eventually die out as crops, such as rice, indigo, tobacco and sugar, became increasingly difficult to farm profitably. However, with the rise of slave-grown and harvested cotton in the late eighteenth century, the institution of slavery continued to be profitable and locked the South into a slave-based economy for almost another hundred years. To illustrate the exponential growth of the cotton industry, it should be noted that in 1791 just 9,000 bales of cotton were produced in the United States. However, after successful experimentation with new species of cotton and the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, production exploded. In 1800, 156,000 bales were produced. In 1833, production exceeded one million bales, and by 1860 production peaked at 4.86 million bales.<sup>4</sup> The South’s wealth during this period was inextricably tied to slavery so that states joining the Confederacy were willing to sacrifice anything to ensure its continuance, and they did as the country entered the Civil War in 1861.

The South was devastated by the Civil War. Indeed, 260,000 men, accounting for one-fifth of all adult white males in the confederate states, were killed. Many more were severely and often permanently injured. In 1865, Mississippi spent a shocking 20 percent

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>3</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of Race* (New York: Schocken Books, 1940), 129.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Weems Bruchey, *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), Table 3A.

of its total state budget on artificial arms and legs for war veterans.<sup>5</sup> Farms and cities were burned. Machinery was destroyed and animals lost. The physical infrastructure of the South had been swept away and the social order of the old plantation system turned upside down. Former slave owners were without labor to rebuild, and freedmen often were without the means to reestablish their lives in the new society. With very few exceptions, emancipated slaves were impoverished, generally illiterate, and unknowledgeable about the larger world around them. Their exact legal status was ambiguous and inconsistent, leading to uncertainty about their rights, including freedom of movement. Lack of education and inexperience with finances left blacks with few employment possibilities. Many, of course, fled to the North, but others stayed in what would become a modified plantation system, working as sharecroppers with a quality of life little improved from the days of slavery. On the farms and in the cities, African Americans eked out an existence and struggled to define their new relationship with white landowners.

It was in this atmosphere of social and economic upheaval that white southerners began enforcing the Black Codes described in Chapter One that reestablished some of the social control that whites had exerted over slaves prior to the Civil War. The Black Codes precipitated other *de jure* and *de facto* forms of segregation, and racial prejudice continued to infect the region well into the twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988), 125.

The period of rebuilding after the Civil War lasted for several generations. In fact, Eliza Atkins Gleason wrote in 1941 that “economically the South has never recovered.”<sup>6</sup> The same can be said of education. In many places in the antebellum South, teaching a slave to read or write was a punishable crime. Slaves could not legally possess a book. Whites felt that an educated slave was dangerous. If slaves were able to gather knowledge and communicate, they could revolt against their masters. This was the genesis of poor literacy rates for blacks in the post-Civil-War era. In 1890, a full generation after emancipation, more than 57 percent of blacks in the United States were still illiterate.<sup>7</sup> In 1900, one might be impressed by the statistics given by W. E. B. Du Bois to an Atlanta University conference that 9,068 African Americans were enrolled in thirty colleges. However, he noted that one-third of these individuals were studying on the primary level and half on the secondary level.<sup>8</sup> Black education needed time to catch up after so many generations of neglect.

Low education levels and high illiteracy rates among both blacks and whites in the South meant that the region did not have history of public libraries, as compared to the North. Indeed, there was no lasting public library service in the South prior to 1895, and, as a result, library service to blacks languished. As David Battles explains, “Whites were rarely amenable to building educational facilities for African Americans when they

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<sup>6</sup> Gleason, *The Southern Negro*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> “The Colored People’s Libraries of the South,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 32 (Summer 2001): 44.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Allan Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South From 1619 to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 173.

themselves did not have adequate facilities.”<sup>9</sup> However, by the late 1890s, the South was beginning to show signs of change. The economy was transitioning to a more industrial and less agricultural focus. Life was becoming more urban as people moved into the cities to find employment in emerging industries, such as textile mills and foundries. A new middle class was forming, which included members of the African American community. This upwardly mobile population had the means and desire to advocate for better education and social opportunities. This new, progressive climate was more favorable for the establishment of public libraries, and, by 1900, libraries slowly started to take hold in the “New South.”

### **Development of Public Libraries in the South**

Prior to the opening of the first public library in the South, many whites shared books in literary clubs or library societies. It is not surprising that in the hierarchical society of the 1700s and 1800s, books were not shared with the entire community, but rather kept in closed settings for specifically designated groups. These library societies charged dues as a means of generating funds. Typically, poor whites and blacks were excluded from these groups, even after the Civil War.

The first public libraries appeared in the United States in the early 1800s. Petersborough, New Hampshire, claims to have established the first public library in 1833, supported by a literary tax. The Boston Public Library, which opened in 1854, is the first library funded by a local government. There are disputes as to the first public

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<sup>9</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 20.

library in the southern states. According to David Battles, the South did not have its first publicly funded library until the 1890s when the Biloxi Public Library was founded in Harrison County, Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> However, the *Princeton Database of American Libraries Before 1876* lists three public libraries in Tennessee (Memphis, Dyersburg and Edgefield) in operation in the 1870s.<sup>11</sup> It is not necessary here to determine which facility was the first. It is sufficient to say that public libraries were few and far between in the nineteenth century South, even for white patrons. As the librarian of the Charleston Library Society put it in 1876, libraries were a “barren prospect.” “They are poorly supported,” he explained “are conducted on no general or fixed system, and are confined usually to large cities, while the smaller communities in these states are, for the most part, absolutely destitute of this most necessary means of education and refinement.”<sup>12</sup>

Library growth in the early 1900s continued to be slow. However, beginning in the 1920s, there were encouraging signs of library progress, including the establishment of the Southeastern Library Association (SLA). The SLA hoped to stimulate library growth through various public information campaigns, such as a conference the group sponsored at the University of North Carolina in April 1933. The conference focused on the need for improvement in southern libraries. Its proceedings were widely published and sparked interest in library advancement. The Association of Colleges and Secondary

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup> Princeton University. *American Libraries Before 1876*.  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~davpro/databases/index.html> (Accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Gleason, *The Southern Negro*, 11.



Schools of the Southern States also sought to improve libraries by adopting new school library standards which catalyzed tangible improvements in school library services. As a result of this professional activity during the 1920s and early 1930s, many subscription libraries were reorganized into public libraries as states and municipalities began allocating funding for their support.<sup>13</sup> In fact, 70 percent of all public libraries in the South were established after 1919.<sup>14</sup>

In 1930, the American Library Association took a keen interest in southern library growth by appointing a regional field agent, Tommie Dora Barker, and opening an office in Atlanta. Barker's goals were to survey current library services in the South, to advise existing libraries on avenues for improvement, and to support the creation of new libraries. In research conducted in 1935, Barker found that library services were still quite thin, and 66 percent of the population, or 21,894,514, were still without access to a public library. Of this number, 89 percent were rural residents. Barker saw improvement in the library situation, however. "One of the most promising trends," she wrote in a report to the ALA, was the development of a "system of libraries with state support."<sup>15</sup> Barker also recognized the economic impact of the Great Depression and its negative effect on library development. "Most important among the facts to be faced by local public libraries," she reported "have been the decline of local taxable resources especially in rural areas."

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> DuMont, "Race in American Librarianship," 490.

<sup>15</sup> Barker, *A Report on Developments*, 94.

Although the Depression slowed the progress of library development in the South, by the early 1940s the library movement rebounded.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in 1942 Barker reported that, “Notable progress has been made in the broad field of library extension through the expansion of state agencies, state aid, the establishment of new county and regional libraries, demonstrations and experiments.”<sup>17</sup> Public library service would continue to grow during the economic boom after World War II and for the rest of the twentieth century.

### **Development of Public Library Services for Blacks**

Before 1900, most blacks in the South did not own books, nor were they permitted to use libraries or join book clubs. Thus, their early reading patterns were based on printed newspapers, pamphlets, letters and essays, rather than traditional forms of literature.<sup>18</sup> It is also necessary to broaden the definition of reading since such a large portion of the black population was illiterate. In this environment, reading was not necessarily an individual activity, but instead involved texts being read aloud among families, friends and church groups. It was through this oral tradition that the black population evolved into a literate society.<sup>19</sup> The lack of libraries in the South hindered the development of black literacy, as access to materials remained scarce for several

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> Barker, “Library Progress in the South,” 353.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13.

generations after the Civil War. However, this was not just a problem of the African American community.

Similar to the library movement in the South generally, libraries that served black patrons were very slow to appear and often met with harsh resistance. Historically, Mississippi has been among the southern states most resistant to integration and serves as the worst-case example of discrimination against African Americans in developing library services. Immediately following the Civil War, Mississippi began constructing schools for black children. However, in 1871 white farmers, upset that tax money was going to support schools for African Americans, went on a statewide rampage, burning black schools in eight counties. As a result, programs to build schools and develop libraries for blacks in Mississippi ended. Only through northern philanthropic contributions in the early 1900s did Mississippi see its first libraries that served black patrons. As late as 1950, only eight communities in Mississippi provided public library service to African Americans, accounting for only 19 percent of black citizens in the state.<sup>20</sup>

Other states, however, did experiment with developing library services for blacks, though on a limited scale. Because of the pervasive Jim Crow laws, most towns established segregated facilities or separate bookmobile services targeting black communities. One of the first segregated public library branches for blacks was opened in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1905. Four years earlier, the North Carolina state

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<sup>20</sup> Jama Lumumba and Ann Branton, "Historical Survey of Library Services to Blacks in Mississippi: 1866-1954," *Mississippi Libraries* 66 (Summer 2002): 37-40.

legislature passed a bill mandating library access for African Americans. The law was intended to apply to libraries throughout the state, and Charlotte was the first to respond. Called the Charlotte Public Library for Colored People or the Brevard Street Library for Negroes, this new library was not officially part of the public library system. Instead, it received a \$400 annual appropriation from the city for operating expenses, and books were procured through donations and cast-offs from the city's white library branches. In 1929, the library became an official part of the public library system and remained a segregated library for the black community until 1961.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, public library systems did not build separate black branches, but used bookmobiles and deposit stations to provide books to African Americans, particularly those living in rural areas. This type of service grew especially after the 1930s, statewide surveys revealed that rural citizens -- both black and white -- were grossly underserved. Bookmobile service was also segregated with different vehicles created to serve the black and white residents.<sup>22</sup> For example, in Clinton, Louisiana, the bookmobile for blacks was painted blue, while the vehicle for whites was painted red. In addition, black patrons' library cards were stamped "negro" to be certain that they would not check out a book from the white-only bookmobile.<sup>23</sup>

In some locales, the public library did allow black patrons to use the facility, though not on an equal basis with whites. A good example is provided by the public

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<sup>21</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

library in Jacksonville, Florida. Although ostensibly integrated, blacks could only enter the library through a back door in the basement, and they had to remain in a segregated basement area.<sup>24</sup> In Memphis, the main branch library was closed to African Americans except on “Black Thursday.” On that day of the week, blacks could visit the library, zoo, and museums. To prevent racial intermingling, on those days public institutions were closed to whites.<sup>25</sup> Shared library facilities, however, were rare. Indeed, a survey conducted in 1953 found that only thirty-nine southern public libraries were offering integrated services at that time.<sup>26</sup>

Why were libraries and bookmobiles segregated when logic would suggest that integrated facilities would be the best use of limited public funds? The general attitude that the races were best served in separate facilities persisted for many decades. As Rosemary DuMont points out, “It was not until the 1950s that integration of public library facilities was discussed in the library literature as a reasonable approach to provide library services to black patrons.”<sup>27</sup> According to Patterson Toby Graham, author of *Right to Read*, white community leaders were also operating within an ingrained system of paternalism combined with a deep commitment to segregation. “White library boards,” Graham argues, “evidenced a belief in the inherent intellectual inferiority of African Americans, but also in a responsibility to do something to help

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<sup>24</sup> “The Colored People’s Libraries of the South, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Cresswell, “The Last Days of Jim Crow,” 558.

<sup>26</sup> DuMont, “Race in American Librarianship,” 498.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

them.”<sup>28</sup> It was in this social/cultural milieu that segregated library services became the norm.

Because of southern whites’ conflicted commitment to supporting library services for blacks, segregated branches were markedly inferior to those created for whites. Black branch libraries were frequently located in buildings separate from the main city branch and lacked adequate books and funding. The black library branch in Greensboro, North Carolina, for example, was opened in 1924 on the campus of Bennett College. The facility was a spacious 9,000 square feet, but it contained only 150 books. The library also had no phone line until the librarian ran an extension line from her own home nearby.<sup>29</sup> In Durham, North Carolina, a black branch library was established in the basement of a church in 1914. The city began to fund the library in 1916, but left it in the church basement until 1940, forcing the librarian to operate with limited space and no public exposure.<sup>30</sup>

As limited as black branch libraries were, it should be noted that many large cities had no library facilities for African Americans in the 1930s at all. This included Dallas, Texas; Shreveport, Louisiana; Charleston, South Carolina; Raleigh, North Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; and Miami, Florida.<sup>31</sup> Black access to books in rural areas was

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<sup>28</sup> Patterson Toby Graham, *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama’s Public Libraries, 1900-1965* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>29</sup> “The Colored People’s Libraries of the South,” 44.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Shores. “Public Library Service to Negroes.” *Library Journal*, 55 (1930): 150-54.

particularly dismal, with 82 percent of the South's 8.6 million African Americans having no public library services as of 1938.<sup>32</sup> As Eliza Atkins Gleason, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. in library science, lamented in 1941, "Though considerable progress has been made...for Negroes in the South, the complete picture is still one of variation and inadequacy."<sup>33</sup>

### **Private Libraries Built by the Black Community**

Many African Americans responded to this discrimination and neglect by forming private libraries for the benefit of their community. As mentioned earlier, a black middle class was emerging in the early twentieth century. Socially mobile (within their own race), black leaders from churches, schools, businesses, and civic organizations worked together to establish libraries. Many of these libraries focused their services on children, since the black community was determined to improve educational opportunities for the next generation. As a result of their efforts, there was a dual library movement in black communities in the early 1900s, the development of tax-supported black branch public libraries and the creation of grassroots and privately funded libraries.

One of the first black community efforts to provide their own library services occurred in Atlanta as a protest against their being denied access to the city's Carnegie library, newly built in 1902. Spearheaded by W. E. B. Du Bois, a committee of prominent African Americans pleaded their case before the Atlanta Library Board, which flatly denied changing the policy prohibiting blacks use of the library. In response, the

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<sup>32</sup> "The Colored People's Libraries of the South," 44.

<sup>33</sup> Gleason, *The Southern Negro*, 29.

black academic community answered the need by opening the Atlanta University library to the general public. A private black college, Atlanta University was the city's only source of library service for African Americans for the next seventeen years.<sup>34</sup>

The experience in Atlanta was typical of the black community's response to discrimination in public library services. In communities throughout the South, especially those with an upwardly mobile, educated black middle class, leaders joined together to develop their own grassroots libraries. The history of the Union Street Branch Library, located in Montgomery, Alabama, provides a good example. Montgomery was one of the South's last major cities to provide public library services to blacks, so in 1947 the city's black religious leaders decided to take matters into their own hands. The Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association formed a steering committee to address the formation of a black library. The group was able to secure modest financial backing from the city, enabling them to pay for a librarian's salary and purchase a small number of books. The City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs donated space for the new library in their community center, and the rooms were renovated by a newly formed friends of the library group. After a lengthy search to locate a professionally trained black librarian, the ministers hired a recent graduate of the Atlanta University library school to manage their new facility. The new librarian quickly rejected the "junk" donations of books from the local library, which she considered "insufficient quality to circulate among her patrons."<sup>35</sup> She then contacted the Mississippi state library board,

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<sup>34</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Graham, *A Right to Read*, 59.



and the board assisted her in obtaining a more suitable collection of books in time for the library's opening. A true community effort, the Union Street Branch Library opened in 1948, finally giving Montgomery's African American community its first "public" library.<sup>36</sup>

A similar library building effort occurred in Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, about the same time. In this instance, the local African American Chamber of Commerce donated 65 percent of the funds needed to construct a new building for the black community's library which was previously housed inside the African American high school. According to Gloria Spooner, the "librarian had tirelessly sought gifts for the branch, and African American citizens donated shelves, furnishings, equipment and labor."<sup>37</sup> The community's efforts came to fruition with the opening of the new library in 1949.

In Savannah, Georgia, the local community also answered the call to provide library service. In 1907, African American businessmen started a fund-raising campaign and eventually established a small private library for the use of the local black citizens. Seven years later, in 1914, Savannah black leaders raised \$3,000 through grassroots campaigning to relocate the library to a Carnegie building.<sup>38</sup>

These are just a few examples of the ways in which the African American leadership sought to bring library services to their communities. While these grassroots

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 56-60.

<sup>37</sup> Gloria Spooner, "Establishment of African American Public Library Service in Louisiana," *Louisiana Libraries* 63 (Winter 2001): 23.

<sup>38</sup> Fultz, "Era of De Jure Segregation," 341.

efforts received little support from the white community, they did benefit from philanthropic efforts from the North.

### **Philanthropy and the Spread of Library Services for Blacks**

As previously stated, in many cases, black communities took it upon themselves to provide library services through grassroots fundraising and organization. But there was another source of advocacy and funding for southern black libraries, namely northern philanthropists whose largesse made possible both the expansion of black library services and the education of pioneering black library professionals.

Although Andrew Carnegie is best known for his library building program, his grants also improved services for blacks in a modest way. Carnegie funding was rarely used to build specifically African American libraries since Carnegie chose to leave such decisions to local officials. However, he did encourage support for blacks in the public library system.<sup>39</sup> For example, some communities used Carnegie funds to build Negro branches, such as in Houston, Texas. There, members of the African American middle class opened a community library within the local high school. The group then formed the Colored Carnegie Library Association specifically to lobby Carnegie for funds to improve their library. Their efforts were successful and Houston's Carnegie library for its black citizens opened in 1913.<sup>40</sup>

Less known are the significant contributions that the Carnegie Corporation made to historically black colleges and universities. The first Carnegie library on a black

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<sup>39</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

college campus was built at the Tuskegee Institute in 1900. As the Carnegie program expanded, more college libraries serving African Americans were funded. In 1904, Carnegie library buildings were erected at Alabama A&M, Atlanta University, Benedict College, Talladaga College and Wilberforce University. Later the philanthropist funded libraries at Cheyney State Teachers College, Livingstone College, Fisk University, Howard University, and Knoxville College. Even after the Carnegie Corporation ceased funding new library construction in 1917, it continued to give grants to black colleges for library upgrades until 1941.<sup>41</sup> These Carnegie-supported libraries were often, as in the case of Atlanta University, open to the public as well as the student body and served as the black community's public library when their access to the city's institution was denied.

Another northern philanthropist who supported the development of black library services was Julius Rosenwald. President and chairman of the Board for the Sears, Roebuck and Company, Rosenwald initiated a program to supply an allotment of 120 books to southern school libraries, including African American schools. In many places these school libraries served as the black community's public library.<sup>42</sup> Rosenwald also gave \$2,500 grants to forty-three black teacher colleges to, according to Michael Fultz, "hire a trained librarian, modernize their library facilities, and expand their collections."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Fultz, "Era of De Jure Segregation," 344.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

The Rosenwald Fund also donated money to southern public libraries to establish deposit stations for underserved blacks and white in rural areas of their communities.<sup>44</sup>

### **African Americans in the Library Profession**

The new libraries dedicated to serving black patrons were typically staffed by African American employees. In the early decades of the twentieth century, black librarians were unlikely to have any professional training. The lucky ones found a mentor who taught them in apprentice-style fashion. More often, African American libraries were staffed by volunteers who learned the work on the job. A small number of southern African Americans traveled north to earn library science degrees. Universities accepting black students included the University of Illinois, Syracuse University, Western Reserve University, Simmons College and Columbia University, and by 1937 at least fifty-nine black librarians had received professional degrees. Twenty-two of these were educated at Columbia University and fifteen at the University of Illinois.<sup>45</sup> However, it should be noted that many black library-science professionals faced a great deal of hardship not to mention racial discrimination in their attempts to obtain professional education. Mary Lee Tsuffis, for example, won a full scholarship to Iowa Wesleyan but found there were no dormitories for black students. She was given the choice of boarding with a janitor's family or sleeping in a converted storage room at the school.<sup>46</sup>

Although there was no university-based library science degree program in the South for many years, aspiring African American librarians did have one option. In

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Josey, *The Black Librarian in America*, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 240.

1910, pioneering African American librarian, Thomas Fountain Blue, founded the first library training program for blacks at the segregated branch library in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>47</sup> A minister by training, Blue was the first black library director, when he was hired to run Louisville's black branch in 1905. Knowing the lack of educational opportunities for his library staff, Blue started offering training classes in this library. In operation until 1929, Blue's library science program attracted black students from all over the country.<sup>48</sup>

In the 1920s, as more libraries serving African Americans opened across the South, the American Library Association and various philanthropic organizations recognized the need for a professional education program to address the growing demand for African American librarians. As Robert Martin and Orvin Shiflett explain, "Because of the structure of segregated society, one of the most crucial elements in providing library services to Blacks was providing an adequate number of trained Black librarians."<sup>49</sup> To address this growing need for black librarians, ALA partnered with Carnegie Corporation and the Rosenwald Foundation to establish such a school in the South.<sup>50</sup> Utilizing Carnegie funding, the ALA hired Louis Round Wilson to spearhead the campaign. Wilson, who was President of the Southeastern Library Association as

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<sup>47</sup> Allison M. Sutton, "Bridging the Gap in Early Library Education History for African Americans: The Negro Teacher-Librarian Training Program (1936-1939)," *The Journal of Negro Education* 74 (2005): 141.

<sup>48</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Sidney Martin and Orvin Lee Shiflett, "Hampton, Fisk and Atlanta: The Foundations, the American Library Association, and Library Education for Blacks, 1925-1941," *Libraries and Culture* 31 (Spring 1986): 300.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

well as director the University of North Carolina library, surveyed southern black colleges in search of the most appropriate location for the proposed black library school. After considering several black universities, Wilson selected Virginia's Hampton Institute. Wilson's choice, however, was controversial, since the Hampton Institute was a vocational college and not a four-year university. Many ALA members felt that the new library school should have been established in a university with a higher academic standing. Other library professionals were opposed to the creation of a segregated library school in principle, arguing that library science programs, like libraries, should open their doors to blacks.

Despite these criticisms, both the Rosenwald Fund and Carnegie Corporation donated a great deal of money to establish the black library school, and the Hampton Institute program opened in 1925. Both organizations continued to make annual donations as well – the Carnegie Corporation contributing \$12,500 and the Rosenwald Fund \$5,500– as the Hampton Institute could only contribute \$2,450 each year to maintain the school.<sup>51</sup> In addition to its financial difficulties, the library school also had a difficult time recruiting faculty as there were so few black, degreed librarians. However, unlike other black colleges in the South, the Hampton Institute employed white staff. The program was able to hire a white director, Florence Curtis Rising, and a number of white faculty members to cover the courses. The Hampton Institute library school lasted until 1939, when the Rosenwald and Carnegie grants ended. In its fourteen years of existence, the Hampton program left a positive impact on African American libraries,

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

graduating 183 black librarians who were prepared to administer the burgeoning black libraries.<sup>52</sup>

The library school at the Hampton Institute was succeeded by the Atlanta University library school which opened in 1941. Under the direction of Eliza Atkins Gleason, the first black to earn a Ph.D. in library science, Atlanta University's program served the black library community for six decades.<sup>53</sup> During that time the program maintained a focus on graduating leaders in librarianship and carefully mentored its students.<sup>54</sup> According to Dean Virginia Lacy Jones, by 1970 the Atlanta program had graduated 909 librarians employed in thirty-six states, 92 percent of whom were African American.<sup>55</sup> Regrettably, Atlanta University closed its School of Library and Information Science in 2003 as a cost saving measure.<sup>56</sup>

While the Hampton Institute and Atlanta University operated formal library science schools for African Americans, there was another option available for working adults interested in pursuing professional education. The Negro Teacher-Librarian Training Program was a summer program administered at four traditionally black colleges: Atlanta University in Georgia, Hampton Institute in Virginia, Fisk University in Tennessee, and Prairie View A&M College in Texas. The program enabled African

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<sup>52</sup> Sutton, "Bridging the Gap," 138.

<sup>53</sup> Martin and Shiflett, "Hampton, Fisk and Atlanta," 319.

<sup>54</sup> Josey, *The Black Librarian in America*, 33-35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Norman Oder, "Clark Atlanta University to Close 62 Year Old LIS Program," 5 November 2003, <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA332551.html> (accessed May 24, 2011)

American teachers to take from six to twelve credit hours of library courses during the summer. Operating from 1936 through 1939, the Negro-Teacher Library Training Program was completed by 279 teachers enabling them, over the course of several summers, to become certified school librarians.<sup>57</sup>

As library education became available to blacks in the early 1900s, a significant group of African American library leaders emerged. These librarians broke down barriers, reached out to marginalized people, and set high standards for professional activity and scholarship. Perhaps most important among these pioneering black librarians was the previously mentioned Thomas Fountain Blue. The son of slaves, Blue graduated from the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in 1888.<sup>58</sup> As class valedictorian, Blue urged his fellow graduates, “Let our every movement be characterized by unity of aim, unity of purpose and unity of act; then and not until then will the dark cloud of ignorance, superstition, and intemperance disperse, and education, intelligence, and virtue spread over our land.”<sup>59</sup> Blue embodied this sentiment in his professional work, believing that libraries were vital to the advancement of the African American community. Blue became the first black head of a library branch in 1905 and held his position at Louisville Public Library for thirty years. His management and training became a model for black branches across the country. He was an active member of the

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<sup>57</sup> Sutton, “Bridging the Gap,” 147.

<sup>58</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 33.



ALA and is believed to have been the first African American to speak at an ALA conference, which took place in Detroit in 1922.<sup>60</sup>

Several pioneering African American librarians achieved prominence as educational leaders. As noted above, Eliza Atkins Gleason was the first African American to earn a library science Ph.D., receiving her doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1940. A native of North Carolina, Gleason's dissertation, "The Southern Negro and the Public Library," was profiled in Chapter Two and continues to be a valuable resource for southern and black library history today. The second African American to earn a Ph.D. in library science was Virginia Lacy Jones. She also earned her degree from the University of Chicago. Jones's 1941 dissertation, "The Problems of Negro High School Libraries in Selected Southern Cities," influenced the development of southern school libraries in the following decades. In addition to graduating from the University of Chicago, both Gleason and Jones served as Dean of Atlanta of University's School of Library Service, Gleason from 1941 to 1945 and Jones from 1945 to 1981. In this role, both librarians played a significant role in the development of southern black librarianship.

As black librarians gained a foothold in both libraries and library science education, they became more active in professional associations. For many decades, however, blacks were denied membership in southern library associations, with only the

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<sup>60</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 29.

Virginia Library Association accepting black members well into the 1940s.<sup>61</sup> In some southern states, including Florida, North Carolina, and Texas, black librarians responded by forming their own segregated professional associations. Elsewhere, such as in Kentucky, Mississippi, and South Carolina, black librarians joined segregated black teachers' associations. The civil rights movement brought an end to this pervasive discrimination within the profession, and African Americans increasingly became involved mainstream library organizations, often assuming leadership roles. Indeed, during the 1960s the library associations in Missouri and West Virginia elected African American presidents. The American Library Association elected its first black president, Clara S. Jones in 1964. Two decades later, the national association would install its second black president, E. J. Josey, the most influential voice in black librarianship since Thomas Fountain Blue.

Elonnie Junius Josey's career serves as an illustration of the increasing opportunities available to black librarians and their radicalization in the 1960s and 1970s. A Virginia native, Josey completed his undergraduate degree at Howard University in 1949. Josey proceeded to earn master's degrees in both history and library science. His career began in the 1950s and progressed during the civil rights era during which he became a leading voice for minority rights. Josey's first professional position was library director at Delaware State College, and from 1959-1966 Josey served as librarian and associate professor of history and social science at Savannah State College. He also held

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<sup>61</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 33.

positions at the New York State Education Department, New York State Library, Columbia University Library, New York Public Library and the Philadelphia Free Library, ending his career as a professor at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Information Science.

It was during his time at Savannah State College that Josey became involved in the civil rights movement, when he provided leadership and support to college students protesting segregated public facilities in the city of Savannah. According to Josey, his experience in the Savannah protest movement motivated him to do "battle with the American Library Association."<sup>62</sup> Josey's first campaign against the ALA occurred in 1964 when he vigorously protested the ALA's decision to honor a program of the Mississippi Library Association as part of its National Library Week program.<sup>63</sup> This recognition of Mississippi's librarians infuriated Josey, given the recent murder of civil rights workers there and the fact that the library association had withdrawn from the ALA rather than allow black librarians to join the organization. In response to ALA's proposed award, Josey authored a resolution forbidding the ALA to recognize any state association denying membership to black librarians. As a result of this resolution, the last four segregated state library associations opened their doors to black professionals.

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<sup>62</sup> Josey, *The Black Librarian in America*, 309-10.

<sup>63</sup> Steven R. Harris, "Civil Rights and the Louisiana Library Association: Stumbling Toward Integration," *Libraries and Culture* 38 (Fall 2003): 340.

Shortly thereafter, Josey became the first African American admitted into the Georgia Library Association, an organization that had denied him membership a decade earlier.<sup>64</sup>

Over the next twenty-five years, Josey continued to be the chief spokesperson for civil rights within the profession. He founded the ALA's Black Caucus in 1970 to create a "stronger voice for black librarians in the Association."<sup>65</sup> He was also active in the ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table and served on and chaired important boards and committees, including the Freedom to Read Foundation and the ALA Pay Equity Committee. In 1980, the ALA gave Josey its prestigious Joseph W. Lippincott Award, which honors the most distinguished service to the library profession. In the ALA's tribute to the civil rights pioneer, it lauded him as a "champion of the rights and needs of minorities and the underprivileged everywhere" and "a major force in eradicating racial discrimination" in both libraries and librarianship.<sup>66</sup>

### **Integration**

While Josey and his colleagues worked to integrate libraries and librarianship at the national and state levels, individual librarians and local residents struggled to end racial discrimination in libraries in towns and cities throughout the South. In some communities, the library underwent "quiet integration," as rules prohibiting blacks were ignored and then abolished and blacks gradually began using the public facilities.

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<sup>64</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Josey, *The Black Librarian in America*, 318.

<sup>66</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 13.

Municipalities also began to see the economic waste in maintaining separate libraries and thus began to close separate black branches.

Elsewhere, however, public libraries were the site of major protests, as black demonstrators staged sit-ins and demanded equal service. One of the earliest sit-ins was in 1939 at a white-only library in Alexandria, Virginia. This protest was not successful in integrating the city's main library. Rather than admitting blacks to the main library, the city, instead, built a segregated library branch for the African American community. During the 1940s and early 1950s, however, several black communities successfully pressured their cities to desegregate the public library. This was the case in Richmond, Virginia, Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Little Rock, Arkansas. After the 1953 *Brown vs. the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and some highly publicized sit-ins to protest continued segregation, library-based sit-ins became more common.

Libraries may not have been major objectives for civil rights activists, but they were important symbolic targets. Often located in central downtown locations, city libraries represented more than just access to books; they were a stepping stone to educational opportunity and individual and community advancement.<sup>67</sup> Thus, in the two years following the 1960 Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in, library protests were staged in many cities and towns throughout the South namely: Memphis, Tennessee; Petersburg, Virginia; Danville, Virginia; Jackson, Mississippi; Anniston, Alabama and Lenoir, North Carolina. In Petersburg, Virginia, for example, the president of the local

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<sup>67</sup> Fultz, "Era of De Jure Segregation," 348.

NAACP chapter, along with thirteen high-school and college students, entered the white-only section of the public library in March 1960. When the protesters refused to leave, they were arrested and later convicted of trespassing. Although the library remained closed for several months following the protest and trial, it eventually reopened as an integrated facility. According to the local newspaper, the library's transition to an integrated facility was smooth. "Black registration was fairly high, and no conflicts with white patrons occurred."<sup>68</sup>

Some protests were small scale individual acts of courage such as a white librarian who resigned from his job in 1962 when he was told he was not allowed to check out books to African Americans.<sup>69</sup> Other librarians took an opposite approach and attempted to prevent mandated integration. For example, when a federal court ordered the Montgomery, Alabama, library to open services to blacks in 1960, the librarians did as they were told, but they removed all tables from the library to prevent blacks and whites from sitting together.<sup>70</sup>

In Danville, Virginia, the NAACP took a legal avenue to integration and sued the city in federal court in May 1960. The NAACP won the case but, in an act of defiance, the city of Danville closed the library rather than allowing it to be integrated. As in Montgomery, officials resolved the situation by removing all chairs and tables from the library. Patrons were encouraged to check out their books and leave immediately thus

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<sup>68</sup> Cresswell, "The Last Days of Jim Crow," 558-59.

<sup>69</sup> "The Colored People's Libraries of the South," 44.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

preventing blacks and whites from sitting together in a shared facility. This tactic would become known as “vertical integration.” Another feature of Danville’s vertical integration was a new four-page library card application form. The form required applicants to provide two personal references and two business references, as well as a \$2.50 fee. These requirements had the intended result of excluding many African American residents.<sup>71</sup> Despite its resistance to integration, the Danville library slowly put its furniture back in place and accepted integration. The process, however, was far from smooth.

In the Deep South state of Mississippi, a library sit-in took a more violent turn. The state’s first sit-in occurred in March 1961, when protesters staged a protest at the Jackson Public Library. Dubbed a “read-in” by the media, nine black college students entered the all-white library and announced that they needed research materials not available at the black branch. The librarians had them arrested and charged with breach of peace. Unable to pay their bond of five hundred dollars each, the nine protesters spent the night in jail. That night other black students staged a march to the jail, which was broken up by the local police using tear gas, billy clubs and dogs. During the trial the next day, a large crowd gathered and again the police moved in with billy clubs and dogs. Several students were clubbed and one was bitten by a police dog. The courts refused to rule on the case or come up with a meaningful resolution.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Cresswell, “The Last Days of Jim Crow,” 559.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

The most violent incident during a library protest happened in another Deep South state, Alabama. In September 1963, two young black ministers informed city and library officials that they would visit the library and apply for borrowing privileges. Upon reaching the library, the men found an angry mob of twenty-five white men waiting for them. The crowd beat the men to the ground with fists, sticks and chains. The ministers escaped with their lives, and the following day city officials escorted one of them to the library to be registered as a borrower. Soon, a steady stream of African Americans were using the library as a fully integrated facility.<sup>73</sup>

As dramatic as library protests and sit-ins were in publicizing discrimination in southern libraries, key to permanent change was Congress's passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in July 1964, the bill denied individual states the legal authority to enforce segregationist policies. The new statute also stipulated that institutions that discriminated against individuals based on race would be denied federal funds. As a result, the Civil Rights Act accelerated the rate of desegregation of southern libraries, for, as Steve Harris has pointed out, librarians were "quick to recognize that the new law had tremendous impact on all kinds of public institutions."<sup>74</sup> Thus, by 1965, the need for library protests had come to an end. In June of that year blacks in Bessemer, Alabama, planned a civil rights campaign that included a library sit-in, but whites quietly acquiesced. When the blacks entered the white-only library and asked to apply for a library card, they were matter-of-factly registered and

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 562.

<sup>74</sup> Harris, "Civil Rights and the Louisiana Library," 340.



given borrowing privileges.<sup>75</sup> Thereafter, library integration was an orderly, undramatic process, a transition that was long overdue.

### **Conclusion**

African American libraries in the South experienced both a birth and death in the 1900s. As the century opened so too did some of the first segregated libraries which served black communities throughout the Jim Crow years. These libraries came in various forms, ranging from privately funded one-room school libraries to city-managed segregated branches of the public library system. The black libraries were typically second-rate, never on par with library services enjoyed by whites; however, they played a vital role as a black community center and in promoting and increasing literacy and education among African American residents. The growth of black library services also made possible career opportunities for black library professionals, many of whom made important contributions to their communities and the library profession as a whole. However, the civil rights movement and the accompanying growth in ethnic pride brought an end to segregation and the need for blacks to create and sustain separate libraries. Now irrelevant, black branch libraries slowly closed during the 1960s and early 1970s, becoming simply reminders of past race relations.

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<sup>75</sup>Cresswell, "The Last Days of Jim Crow," 563.

## **CHAPTER 4: HISTORY OF LIBRARY SERVICES IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND THE RACIAL DIVIDE, 1700-1970**

The site of the first public library in the New World, South Carolina's library history had a promising start. However, the idea did not take hold, and private libraries became the standard for the next two centuries. The Civil War was devastating for South Carolina, and its poor postwar economy meant that library growth was slow or non-existent. Finally, as the economy regained traction in the early 1900s, the first tax-supported libraries appeared in the state. Initially, these libraries served only white patrons, though as the century progressed more library services became available to African Americans. Philanthropy from the North played an important role in advancing library services in South Carolina, particularly for blacks. During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration was also a catalyst for library development, which included improved services for blacks. Where tax-supported public libraries were not available to African Americans, black communities often took it upon themselves to start their own grassroots libraries. Eventually, though, the civil rights movement repudiated segregation, and in the 1970s separate libraries for blacks ceased to exist.

### **South Carolina's First Libraries: 1700-1900**

In 1698, South Carolina boasted the first "publick" library in the colonies. Located in Charles Towne, the library was established by English Episcopalian minister, Dr. Thomas Bray. Appointed in 1696, Reverend Bray was the Bishop of London's official representative in the American colonies. Although Bray had never been to the

new world before his appointment, he was concerned that American clergy were without educational opportunities and often too poor to purchase books.<sup>1</sup> Before leaving for his new post, Bray, with the support of his bishop in England, organized the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, through which he began a fund-raising campaign to build libraries in the colonies. Obtaining substantial contributions from English aristocrats, wealthy business owners, clergy and religious society members,<sup>2</sup> by the time Bray sailed for his post in the colonies, his organization had secured sufficient funding to create fourteen libraries.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these libraries was built in Charles Town, South Carolina. Based on 250 finely bound volumes sent from England in 1698, the library's stated purpose, as expressed in a thank-you letter from the South Carolina General Assembly, was "to encourage Religion and Learning amongst us."<sup>4</sup> At first, the colonial government appropriated money to purchase additional books and maintain the library. However, this initial zeal was short-lived, and within a few years the General Assembly discontinued the library's funding. Bray's group also stopped donating books after 1701, and as the books became worn and tattered, their use declined. Eventually, the library closed due to lack of support. So although South Carolina had the first publicly funded library in the

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<sup>1</sup> South Carolina State Library, *America's First Public Library: The Provincial Library at Charles-Town in Carolina 1698* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina State Library, 1970), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

South, the concept never took hold. It would be almost two centuries before the next public library movement would occur.

Before the 1900s, private collections were the typical means of sharing books in the state. Known as “subscription libraries” or “library societies”, these early institutions were formed by dues-paying members who were allowed access to the books.

Membership in subscription libraries was available to local elites who had the financial resources to pay the society’s fees. Indeed, often membership was by invitation only.

One of the earliest examples of a South Carolina subscription library was the Charleston Library Society founded in 1748. Comprised of the town’s elites, including nine merchants, two lawyers, a schoolmaster, a physician, two planters, and a wig-maker, the original members sought to “avail themselves of the latest publications from Great Britain.”<sup>5</sup> Initially, the society’s “librarian” housed the collection in his own residence. Then, in 1755, the library was moved to a more permanent location in the free school. It moved several times thereafter, first to a space above a liquor store, then to the statehouse, and eventually to rooms in a bank. In 1914, the library finally took up residence in a dedicated library space on King Street where it continues to exist today.

The Charleston Library Society not only served as a private library, it was also active in promoting education. In the 1770s, for example, the society acted as benefactor for the establishment of a college, which is now the College of Charleston. The society was interested in natural history as well, and to that end purchased scientific instruments

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<sup>5</sup> Charleston Library Society, “Our History,” [http://charlestonlibrarysociety.org/Our\\_history.html](http://charlestonlibrarysociety.org/Our_history.html) (Accessed July 25, 2011).

to study the flora and fauna of the region. The society's natural history collection became the foundation of the Charleston Museum, the oldest museum in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Wealthy planters in the Georgetown area established a similar organization in the 1740s called the Winyah Indigo Society. Like the Charlestown Library Society, the Winyah Indigo Society established a school in 1757. In setting up its library, the society purchased books, newspapers, and gazettes from London. It also obtained print materials from major metropolitan areas in the colonies, such as Boston, New York, Richmond, and Savannah. The library was housed in Winyah Indigo Society Hall until the Civil War, when Union troops occupied the building. Although many books were lost or damaged during the occupation, the few that remain have been restored and preserved. They are now housed in the Georgetown County Library.<sup>7</sup>

Many other South Carolina towns similarly benefited from local library societies in the early 1800s. A library society was incorporated in Georgetown in 1800, for example, while Columbia and Camden started their library societies in 1805, Winnsboro in 1806, and Beaufort and Newberry in 1807. Over the next decades, twenty-nine additional library societies were established across the state.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, during the Civil War, many of these private libraries were burned or confiscated as rebel property. For example, the Union Army confiscated the Beaufort

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<sup>6</sup> National Park Service, "Charleston Library Society," Charleston's Historic, Religious and Community Buildings, <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/charleston/cls.htm> (Accessed July 25, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> University of South Carolina, "Georgetown and the Winyah Indigo Society," Village to State, <http://www.libsci.sc.edu/histories/vts/vts03.html> (Accessed July 25, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Frayser, *The Libraries of South Carolina* (Clemson, SC: Clemson College, 1933), 17.

Library Society's collection with the intention of selling the books at auction in New York. Public outcry, however, forestalled this plan, and the library's materials were instead stored in the Smithsonian Institution. Ironically, the collection was still destroyed, due to an accidental fire on January 24, 1865, that caused serious damage to the Smithsonian.<sup>9</sup>

Most damage to South Carolina's early libraries occurred during General William T. Sherman's infamous March to the Sea, which affected South Carolina in January and February 1865. The Union Army's strategy was to demoralize the civilian population as it annihilated the Confederacy's military assets. To this end, Union soldiers not only burned all public buildings, they burned private dwellings as well. The destruction also was vindictive. As South Carolina journalist David Conyngham reported, "There can be no denial of the assertion that the feeling among the troops was one of extreme bitterness toward the people of South Carolina."<sup>10</sup>

Since most library holdings were in private hands, many books were destroyed by the fires or looted by soldiers. In Barnwell, for instance, every public building was burned, and many private residences were reduced to a brick chimney and smoldering ashes. Union troops pitched tents in the front yard of A. P. Aldrich's home and helped themselves to whatever they liked in the house. This included books in Mrs. Aldrich's library, which were never recovered.<sup>11</sup> The home of Barnwell novelist, William

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<sup>9</sup> "Burning of the Smithsonian Institute," *Harper's Weekly*, 11 February 1865.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Wheeler, *Sherman's March* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, 1978), 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-70.

Gillmore Simms, also burned, and among his losses was a large personal library. As Simms wrote to a friend in 1871, “The library was burnt and all those treasures went heavenward on wings of fire.”<sup>12</sup>

Sherman’s troops were equally destructive in the state capital. According to historian Richard Wheeler, Sherman ordered his men to burn Columbia’s “public buildings, railroad property, manufacturing and machine shops but spare the libraries, asylums and private dwellings.”<sup>13</sup> However, the soldiers did not follow orders, and they burned buildings without regard to their military purpose. Emma LeConte and her mother witnessed Union troops burn the College of Columbia, including the library.<sup>14</sup> The building “seemed framed by the gushing flames and smoke,” LeConte wrote in her diary, “while through the windows gleamed the liquid fire.”<sup>15</sup> Harriott Ravenel, another Columbia resident, watched as soldiers set books on fire to use as kindling to ignite houses.<sup>16</sup> Officially, it was recorded that three-quarters of Columbia was destroyed, including 1,386 private homes, stores and other buildings.<sup>17</sup> Although there is no way to quantify the loss to libraries, one must assume that most books in the capital city were burned or stolen.

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<sup>12</sup> William B. Hesseltine and Larry Gara, “Sherman Burns the Libraries,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 55 (July 1954): 141.

<sup>13</sup> Wheeler, *Sherman’s March*, 190.

<sup>14</sup> Burke Davis, *Sherman’s March: The First Full Length Narrative of General William T. Sherman’s Devastating March Through Georgia and the Carolina’s* (New York: Random House, 1980), 180.

<sup>15</sup> John Barrett, *Sherman’s March Through the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 82.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Sherman’s March*, 180.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

Like Columbia, Charleston residents also lost a great deal of private property. The home of Bishop Gadsden, for example, was burned, destroying all of his books and papers. The city's theological library was also burned, along with its many priceless historical pamphlets.<sup>18</sup> Charleston writer and journalist Paul H. Hayne had his library stolen by Sherman's troops. As he wrote to a friend in 1871,

If my grandfather's rather massive English plate adorns the side board of some Ohio *returier*, why, who can blame him for carrying out the maxim, "let the spoils go to the victors," since old books, pamphlets etc possess a definite value, the soldier of fortune would be an ass, indeed to leave them behind, if he got the chance of appropriating such things.<sup>19</sup>

Many small towns in the Union Army's path suffered the same fate as Columbia and Charleston. Wealthy residents of Charleston had used a small village named Cheraw to hide their valuables, thinking that the town had no military value. According to noted Civil War historian Burke Davis, this included "the furnishings, books, paintings and statuary accumulated by Charleston's wealthy families for generations."<sup>20</sup> When the Union soldiers found this treasure trove, Cheraw suffered the same fate as Charleston. Included in the destruction was a local private library known as the Cheraw Lyceum. According to former state librarian Estellene Walker, at the start of the war the Cheraw Library was "in a flourishing condition with 1,258 volumes in its collection."<sup>21</sup> She then describes what happened:

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<sup>18</sup> Hesseltine and Gara, "Sherman Burns the Libraries," 140.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, *Sherman's March* 202.

<sup>21</sup> Estellene P. Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work: The Public Library in South Carolina, 1698-1980* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina State Library, 1981), 1.



Before burning the building, Sherman's Army ransacked the library for reading material and carried away many of the books, scattering them along the road on their march towards Fayetteville. Many books were rescued and saved for the Lyceum Library when it could be resumed. The library was reestablished after the war, but with money for neither books nor personnel it faded away.<sup>22</sup>

Although no statistics exist regarding the totality of library destruction during the Civil War, a great many books were lost in a state that was already lacking in printed resources. Thus, South Carolina began the reconstruction period with practically no libraries and no money to begin public or private library development. Like the rest of the South, library growth was a slow and protracted process. In fact, it was not until 1898 that the state's first public library was established in Marion. The history of public libraries in South Carolina, then, really only commences in the 1900s.

#### **Public Library Development and Philanthropy: 1900-1940**

Although South Carolina's municipalities lacked resources to organize and fund public libraries, their residents still valued education and books. As a result, many civic organizations, especially local women's clubs, took the lead in establishing, funding and running the town's library. Northern philanthropists and the Works Progress Administration also boosted South Carolina's libraries in the early part of the twentieth century. One philanthropist, Willie Lee Buffington, made a special contribution to libraries serving African Americans.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

### *Women's Clubs and South Carolina's Libraries*

Beginning at the turn of the century, many women's clubs assumed responsibility for developing the state's first public libraries. These libraries were open to the public but were not publicly funded. In Beaufort, for example, the local library, as mentioned previously, had been confiscated by the Union Army and then lost in a fire at the Smithsonian. It was a women's group, the Clover Club, which re-established the city's library in 1902. Initially located in several small temporary facilities, in 1911 the Clover Club organized a fund-raising campaign for a permanent building. The women's group continued to fund Beaufort's library until 1918, when it was turned over to the city. The city erected a new building, and the Beaufort Township Library opened with 2,000 books donated by the Clover Club.<sup>23</sup>

Beaufort's Clover Club was typical of the numerous women's groups that founded and supported libraries throughout the state. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, spurred library development in Anderson in 1900. In McCormick County, it was the local Council of Farm Women that worked tirelessly to bring library service to that rural area. In Easley, four women's clubs sponsored the town's first library: the Easley Women's Club, the Easley Garden Club, the Child Study Club, and the Civic League. Initially, consisting of two bookcases in a store on Main Street, the women's clubs' library project eventually evolved into the Pickens County Library.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Women's clubs were also instrumental in developing South Carolina's traveling libraries, which was a popular means of bringing books to rural populations. A good example is the County Council of Farm Women in Aiken, who procured book donations to create a traveling library for their region. Begun in 1935, this new idea for rural library service was enthusiastically received. In three months, the women made a formal recommendation to the state's library commission, which, in turn, appropriated funds for a permanent bookmobile service for their region.<sup>25</sup>

Women's clubs were not only involved in developing library services for their own communities, they also played an important role in library development at the state level. The South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, for instance, helped establish the South Carolina Library Association in 1915, which acted as an advocacy group that gave a voice to South Carolina's library movement. The women's federation also sponsored legislation in 1929 that established the State Library Board. As no state funds were provided, women's clubs raised \$5,000 to hire a state library field agent. Between 1930 and 1932, this agent conducted a survey of South Carolina libraries for the State Library Board to use in planning for the state's library development. The timing, however, was unfortunate. The deepening depression forced the state to disband its State Library Board and library development stalled.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the Great Depression brought an end to further development of the libraries that South Carolina's women's clubs worked so hard to establish. These libraries might

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup> Frayser, *The Libraries of South Carolina*, 21.

have completely languished save for outside agencies and private philanthropists who continued the work of developing library services for the state.

*Andrew Carnegie Library Grants*

Many libraries sponsored by South Carolina's women clubs became permanent institutions as a result the library grant program sponsored by Andrew Carnegie. These Carnegie grants, which ranged from \$5,000 to \$18,700, came with the stipulation that the town also commit significant resources, most notably donating land for the building and instituting a library tax to sustain the library's funding. A good example of how the Carnegie program worked can be seen in Spartanburg, where the Ladies Library Association applied for a grant in 1903. Awarded \$15,000 for the building of a new library, Spartanburg was required to purchase a suitable lot for the building and guarantee at least \$1,500 in annual tax revenues be allocated for library maintenance. The building was dedicated and opened to the public on January 15, 1906, and its tax support continued, as promised, through the lean years of the Great Depression.<sup>27</sup>

The city of Sumter applied for a Carnegie grant in 1915. The proposal was made by a joint commission consisting of the city council, mayor, and City Board of Education. They had already procured a lot and proposed to contribute \$1,000 per year to maintain the library. According to the town's proposal, books would be donated by the city's Civic League. The application was approved, and Carnegie donated \$10,000 for the

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*, 46.

erection of a building.<sup>28</sup> The new Sumter Carnegie Public Library opened in 1917 and served the community until 1968.<sup>29</sup>

Between 1905 and 1916, sixteen cities or towns in South Carolina applied to the Carnegie Corporation for similar grants to construct new public library buildings. Fourteen grants were awarded, and thirteen Carnegie libraries were erected.<sup>30</sup> Grants were given to Anderson, Beaufort, Camden, Charleston, Darlington, Gaffney, Greenwood, Honea Path, Kingstree, Latta, Marion, Spartanburg, Sumter, and Union.<sup>31</sup> After 1916, however, the Carnegie Corporation ended its library grant program, forcing South Carolinians to look elsewhere for library philanthropy.

#### *Julius Rosenwald Library Grants*

The Julius Rosenwald Fund (described in the previous chapter) served South Carolina especially well in promoting libraries. Influenced by the work of Booker T. Washington, Rosenfeld initially sponsored the building of schools, and, by 1925, his fund had assisted in the construction of 190 schools in South Carolina alone.<sup>32</sup> Although school construction was at the heart of Rosenwald's program, the fund's managers recognized that counties could not provide money for the schools' educational materials. To address this problem, the Rosenwald Fund, after 1927, began to earmark portions of

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<sup>28</sup> Ruth J. Edens, "A Substantial and Attractive Building: The Carnegie Public Library, Sumter, South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 94 (January 1993), 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*.

<sup>31</sup> Edens, "A Substantial and Attractive Building," 35.

<sup>32</sup> "The Rosenwald Rural Schools for Negroes," *School and Society* 21 (1925): 677.

its contributions to create and supply books for school libraries. Rosenwald-funded libraries were available to both white and black schools in poor, rural areas. When selecting materials for the latter, the fund carefully chose books with positive accounts of African Americans.<sup>33</sup>

Rosenwald philanthropy also benefitted South Carolina's public libraries. The bulk of this funding went to the two most populous areas of the state, Charleston and Richland counties, which includes the state capital, Columbia. While Rosenwald did not allocate grants for African American library branches specifically, he did require that libraries receiving grants serve black and white patrons on an equal basis. Charleston, for instance, received an \$80,000 Rosenwald grant in 1930. As a result of Rosenwald's policy, the city used some of its funds to convert a private black library into a branch of Charleston's public library system.<sup>34</sup>

Although Rosenwald's nondiscrimination rules were not always observed in practice, other libraries also began to fund services to African Americans, at least in some form. The Richland County Library System, for example, received a \$75,000 Rosenwald grant in 1930. By 1936, the library system had built a black branch library in Columbia and instituted a bookmobile service to deliver books to black schools and deposit stations

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<sup>33</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Expanding Grant Opportunities," Rosenwald Schools, <http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/rosenwald-schools/history/expanding-grant-opportunities.html> (Accessed August 20, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Dan R. Lee, "From Segregation to Integration: Library Services for Blacks in South Carolina, 1923-1962," in *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship*, ed. John Mark Tucker (Champaign: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998), 96.

in the county's rural areas. While this was significant progress, African Americans of Richland County were still not served on an equal basis. Indeed, statistics from that time period show that in rural areas blacks had access to .58 books per person as compared to 2.3 books per person for whites.<sup>35</sup>

Despite continuing inequalities in library services, the Rosenwald Fund had a unique impact on South Carolina's libraries due to its concern for African Americans. Their large library grants sparked a new conversation in library board meetings to discuss means by which to serve South Carolina's black population. In many cases, it is likely that such a discussion had never occurred before.

#### *Works Progress Administration's Library Projects*

Another catalyst for library growth in South Carolina during the Depression was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Seeking to create work for unemployed Americans across the country, one of many WPA projects aimed at providing jobs in South Carolina was a library building program. These library projects were sorely needed, for, as Robert Gorman writes, when the WPA began its library projects in 1935, South Carolina's libraries were among the worst in the nation.<sup>36</sup>

Since the state's library board had disbanded in the early 1930s, WPA coordinators visited each county to determine its interest in establishing or expanding library service. If sufficient interest was found, a contract was drawn up outlining each

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Robert M. Gorman, "Blazing the Way: The WPA Library Service Demonstration Project in South Carolina," *Libraries & Culture* 32 (Fall 1997): 427.

party's responsibilities. The WPA paid for personnel and some books, while the county provided a suitable facility, equipment, and additional materials. The contract was normally planned for one year, after which the county would take over full funding and administration of the new or improved library.

Bookmobiles were the backbone of the WPA's program to bring library service to the rural areas.<sup>37</sup> Here again, the counties and the WPA jointly funded the vehicles which brought books to people without access to the county's public library facilities. Bookmobiles left books at deposit stations in schools, community centers, grocery stores, gas stations, and other easily accessible public areas. By 1937, twenty-three WPA bookmobiles were in operation, making deposits at 1,200 locations.<sup>38</sup>

The WPA also made some progress in developing library services for African Americans, though, as Robert Gorman states, "Racism and the desire to avoid conflict over racial issues predetermined that the project would not accomplish as much in this area."<sup>39</sup> The WPA did not fund separate black branches, nor did it require public libraries to integrate. Given the existing social climate, bookmobiles were the most effective means of bringing library service into the African American community. The first WPA-sponsored bookmobile service for blacks in South Carolina began in Greenville County in 1937, and a second WPA bookmobile was added in Calhoun

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 450.



County the following year. In its first two years of operation, the WPA reported that its twenty-three bookmobiles circulated 158,528 books to 5,819 African Americans.<sup>40</sup>

The WPA also attempted to improve libraries within black schools, which often served as public libraries for the entire community. By 1939, the WPA was supporting twenty-nine African American libraries, mostly housed in segregated schools.<sup>41</sup>

Typically, the WPA would donate 10,000 books to the school libraries it sponsored, as well as train local residents to work in them. This had the dual benefit of reducing the school librarians' workloads and providing employment for the community. Also, by having non-teachers run the libraries, the WPA hoped to reduce the psychological barrier faced by adults in visiting a library located within a school.<sup>42</sup>

The WPA sponsored a number of other projects that benefited the state's libraries. For example, the WPA initiated a statewide school cataloging project to help school libraries meet new accreditation standards. The WPA also hired professional librarians to travel to different counties and provide training to individuals already working in libraries. WPA librarians also prepared manuals on library procedure, book repair, and book selection to standardize and professionalize library management and operations.<sup>43</sup>

Like many of the Works Progress Administration projects, its library programs were less than perfect. They were quickly conceived and intended to put people to work not to improve libraries per se. There were also serious inequalities when it came to developing services for African Americans, particularly in providing access to books. In

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 445.

1938, the WPA book stock consisted of 252,387 volumes available to whites and 32,238 available to blacks.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the WPA did establish new libraries in nine counties, and through its bookmobiles brought books to thousands of rural South Carolinians, white and black. In addition, the WPA trained many library workers and helped to professionalize library operations before it ceased operations in South Carolina in 1943. Without the WPA's support and leadership, library services in South Carolina would certainly not have expanded as quickly as they did in the 1930s and 1940s.

#### *Willie Lee Buffington's Faith Cabin Libraries*

Although the Julius Rosenwald and WPA projects improved library services for African Americans only as a small part of their wider efforts, there was one philanthropist, Willie Lee Buffington, who focused exclusively on bringing books to black communities. Buffington was a white textile worker and philanthropist from Saluda, South Carolina, who used his organizational skills to promote and coordinate library-building programs for black communities. Buffington had been inspired by his life-long friend, a black school teacher named Euriah Simpkins, who, in 1931, had built a school for African American children using Rosenwald funds. At the opening of Simpkins's school, Buffington was struck by the lack of books for the children to use. To ameliorate this situation, Buffington wrote letters to religious organizations requesting donations, and within a few months he received one thousand books from a black church

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

in New York. Simpkins's schoolhouse lacked space to house so many books, so Buffington met with community leaders who determined that a log cabin would be built to house the school's new library. Using donated materials and volunteer labor, the eighteen-by-twenty-two-foot structure was completed in 1932. As a local woman explained, "We didn't have money, all we had was faith." Thus the term faith cabin library was coined, and a grassroots movement began.<sup>45</sup>

Inspired by his success in Saluda, Buffington identified other black communities in need of libraries. He wrote articles in *Reader's Digest*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Southern Workman*, *Guideposts*, *Kiwanis Magazine*, and *Library Journal*, among many others. The articles described the dismal state of black library services in South Carolina and urged readers to send money and book donations. Buffington was featured on New York radio shows, such as the "Cavalcade of America" and the "Westinghouse Story Teller." With just one of these appearances, he could garner enough books to fill an entire library. Buffington also spoke at churches and college campuses, securing even more cash and book donations for his faith cabin libraries.<sup>46</sup>

Although faith cabin libraries were initially intended for children, one of Buffington's requirements for his library grants was that the books be made available to the entire community. As Buffington explained, "When the people of a community join together to put over a project like erecting or helping erect a building for books, they

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<sup>45</sup> Lee, "Faith Cabin Libraries," 172.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

have a feeling that it belongs to us -- not just something someone wanted us to have.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the libraries were true community efforts, made possible through individual and collective effort.

As with the first faith cabin library, locally donated materials and labor were used to build the structures. Most were log cabins, and the maintenance of the buildings fell to the local community. Faith cabin libraries were built near black schools for the convenience of local children. It was also expected that the school’s teachers would manage the library since there was no funding to hire a dedicated librarian.

While Buffington’s tireless efforts had a significant impact on information access for African Americans, his faith cabin libraries did have limitations. Buffington himself admitted that many of the donated books were unsuitable cast-offs.<sup>48</sup> The libraries also posed problems for adults, since they often operated in conjunction with the local school.<sup>49</sup> Not only was library open limited hours, the teachers had to make library service a second priority since they had classroom duties to fulfill.

Despite these shortcomings, the faith cabin library movement had an extremely positive impact on the communities it served. Ultimately, Buffington helped organize the construction and management of 107 libraries in South Carolina and Georgia. Throughout the 1950s, these libraries provided some of the first library access for African Americans in both states. In South Carolina, faith cabin libraries operated Ridge Spring,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>49</sup> Gleason, *The Southern Negro*, 136.

Seneca, Edgefield, Lexington, Belton, Easley, Saluda, Trenton, Pendleton and elsewhere. However, as public libraries integrated in the 1960s and 1970s, the usefulness of the faith cabin libraries waned, and they were slowly closed. Just one faith cabin structure remains in South Carolina today; it is located in Pendleton.

### **The Growth of Segregated Public Libraries: 1920s-1950s**

As covered in the preceding section, South Carolina was well into the twentieth century before any significant number of public libraries was established. However, these libraries were highly segregated, denying African Americans in the community access to their books and services. In fact, a study conducted in 1939 revealed that only 15 percent of the black population had access to any type of library service, while in 1941, only five libraries in the state allowed blacks to use their facilities: Beaufort City, Greenville City, Charleston County, Richland County and Greenville County.<sup>50</sup> Although these regions include the state's three most populous areas, until the 1940s the great majority of the African Americans were simply without library service.

The first library to exclusively serve blacks in South Carolina was established in Greenville County in 1923. The library was funded by a wealthy textile mill owner, Thomas F. Parker, who believed in “the profound educational and broadening influence that an adequate free, public library, wisely conducted, can exercise in our community.”<sup>51</sup> Parker was instrumental in founding the Greenville Public Library in 1921. He then spent the next two years guiding a “strenuous campaign” to fund a second library to serve

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 77, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*, 29.

the African American community.<sup>52</sup> Considered quite progressive for the time, Greenville's segregated library had the largest budget of any black library in the Carolinas.<sup>53</sup> In 1952, the black branch library expanded into a new facility which served the community until the 1960s when the Greenville library system was fully integrated.

A second publicly funded black branch library was established in Charleston. Opening in 1931, this library grew out of a private black library operated by Susan Dart Butler. The daughter of a prominent African American minister, Butler used her father's personal collection to create a reading room for the black community in 1927. The city took over the library after receiving a grant from the Carnegie Corporation that included the stipulation that funds be used to support library service to the African American population.<sup>54</sup>

Thus began the custom of public library systems developing separate libraries for the African American community. These segregated libraries existed in South Carolina well into the 1960s and, in some cases, even in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, no one source exists that fully details the number of African American branches created during the Jim Crow era. Estellene Walker's 1981 book, *So Good and Necessary a Work*, which is considered the authoritative work on South Carolina library history, mentions the

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<sup>52</sup> Lee, "From Segregation to Integration," 95.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Ethel Evangeline Martin Bolden, "Susan Dart Butler: Pioneer Librarian" (Master's thesis Atlanta University, 1959), 14-15.

existence of only eight publicly funded black branch libraries in the 1940s and 1950s: Greenville, Beaufort, Columbia, Charleston, Gaffney, Chester County, Lancaster County, and Sumter County.<sup>55</sup> Yet, contrary to Walker's claims, WPA records indicate that there were twenty-nine black branches as early as 1943. Moreover, in a letter Walker wrote to Willie Buffington in 1947, she describes bookmobile service to blacks in a number of communities, including Anderson, Pickens, Greenville, Cherokee, Lancaster, Richland and Orangeburg counties. Walker's letter also notes that there were black branch libraries in seven counties: York, Spartanburg, Greenwood, Aiken, Kershaw, Florence, and Charleston.<sup>56</sup> Finally, a survey conducted by the South Carolina State Library in 1952 found that twenty-six cities or counties had branch libraries serving African Americans, including four branches in the city of Charleston alone.<sup>57</sup> So the record is unclear and, at times, contradictory as to exactly how many library facilities were open to African Americans through the years.

Although the total number of black branch public libraries is unknown, general details about their operations does exist. Segregated libraries were typically set up in small buildings some distance away from the main library, often near black neighborhoods. The libraries in Greenville provide illustration of the relationship between the main library and its black branch:

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<sup>55</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*.

<sup>56</sup> Estellene Walker to Willie Buffington, 15 November 1947, Negro Library Service Files (NLSF), South Carolina State Library, Columbia, SC. Walker served as Executive Secretary of the State Library Board from 1946 through 1969. She then served as State Librarian until she retired in 1979.

<sup>57</sup> "Public Libraries Serving Negroes," Typescript. 1951-52. Negro Library Service Files (NLSF), South Carolina State Library, Columbia, SC.

One, located on Main Street, was reserved for use by the white citizens of Greenville. The other, smaller library, on McBee Avenue, was the library's "Negro" branch. African Americans could request that books available in the Main Street library be sent to McBee Avenue, but they were not allowed to set foot in the white library. In theory the libraries were separate but equal, but contemporary accounts show otherwise -- for example, the McBee Avenue library subscribed to many fewer newspapers and magazines than the Main Street library.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to having inferior collections and services, black branch libraries were often housed in facilities that were not designed for use as a library. Such was the case of the black branch library established in the state capital. Having received a Rosenwald grant in 1936, Columbia was required to provide library services to local blacks. The city met this requirement by setting up a black branch library in a former Methodist church.<sup>59</sup> The segregated library established in Beaufort in 1932 was also situated in former church. Once used by a Presbyterian congregation, the church was a traditional one-room structure with a steeple and rows of high arched windows. The library there would serve the African American community until 1965.<sup>60</sup>

Another library that existed for many years in a building not designed for a library was the black branch provided by the City of Charleston. As noted above, in 1927 Susan Dart Butler had opened a private African American library in her father's home. The city of Charleston took over this library in 1931, renting the existing space for one dollar per

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<sup>58</sup> Greenville County Library System, "Integration of the Greenville Library," <http://libguides.greenvillelibrary.org/content.php?pid=166433&sid=1403112> (Accessed July 20, 2011)

<sup>59</sup> Richland County Public Library, "Wheatley Branch," <http://www.richland.lib.sc.us/wheatley/home> (Accessed July 20, 2011)

<sup>60</sup> Beaufort County Library, "Public Library History of Beaufort County, SC," <http://www.beaufortcountylibrary.org/htdocs-sirsi/history.htm> (Accessed August 10, 2011).



year. It was at this point that the Dart library became an official a branch of the city library system.<sup>61</sup> According to Ethel Martin-Bolden,

Two tables and approximately 12 folding chairs were all of the furniture Mrs. Butler had in the reading room with the exception of the built-in book shelves. This room was open from 5:00 to 8:00 P.M. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays with Mrs. Butler serving as librarian. The patrons were high-school students, for the most part. They would come to look up material on their English assignments or someone's biography.... During the period of Mrs. Butler's service, 1931 to 1957, conditions were not ideal, but she made the most of what she had. The library and staff have been commended for the place they have held in the Charleston community in spite of serious handicaps, chief of which, and most crippling was the lack of a proper building. According to information given in the Ricketts' Survey in 1946 the physical plant was very inadequate. The structure which was not designed in the first place for a library was not considered suitable for a library building and it was not fire proof.<sup>62</sup>

Sadly, precious little documentary evidence remains that describes the staff, collections, hours and other details regarding how these public black branch libraries served their communities. However, it seems clear that the facilities were smaller and inferior to the branches utilized by white patrons. Funding was also certainly lower at the black branches, so one can assume that the collections, staffing and hours were also less than ideal.

To address the shortcomings of Negro branches, some public libraries allowed African Americans to request that books from the main library be sent to the branch location. The aforementioned McBee Negro Branch in Greenville had such a lending arrangement with the main library branch. However, the borrowing process might take

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<sup>61</sup> Martin-Bolden, "Susan Dart Butler: Pioneer Librarian," 15.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

several weeks, and it didn't included reference books, putting black students at a decided disadvantage in doing their school work.<sup>63</sup>

Many African Americans, however, were not satisfied with the black branch public library system and began establishing privately funded libraries for their communities. As with branch libraries, a complete record of these private libraries has not been preserved, but the information that does exist shows that community leaders and teachers, in particular, were at the forefront of this movement to bring library materials and services to African American population.

The first independent black library was organized in 1839 by the Bonneau Literary Society, which was made of Charleston's black elite. Called the Bonneau Library, its purpose, according to an early document, was to assist members in their "literary progress" and to improve their "mental faculties."<sup>64</sup> The library served as a community center as well. The Bonneau Library was exceptional, though, for only the cosmopolitan port city of Charleston boasted a free black middle class with sufficient resources to maintain a reading room in the antebellum period.

After the Civil War, however, more African Americans were affluent enough to establish private libraries for mutual improvement, and did so in a number of

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<sup>63</sup> Greenville County Library System, "Integration of the Greenville Library," <http://libguides.greenvillelibrary.org/content.php?pid=166433&sid=1403112> (Accessed July 20, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> University of South Carolina, "Bonneau Library Society," *Adventures in Faith*, <http://www.libsci.sc.edu/histories/aif/aif02.html> (Accessed September 10, 2011).

communities.<sup>65</sup> In 1949, Orangeburg's Sunlight Club, an African American women's charitable organization, ran a community center which included a children's library and a section devoted to works by black authors. In the 1950s, a local African American teacher, Ruth Alexander, opened a tiny library in Clinton. The library building, which was approximately fifteen-square feet in size, served as the black community's library until the 1960s, as no other library in Clinton accepted black patrons.<sup>66</sup> The previously mentioned faith cabin libraries were a significant part of this grassroots library movement, accounting for 107 privately funded and organized libraries in South Carolina and Georgia.<sup>67</sup>

In the face of general neglect and exclusion, then, black communities created their own private libraries which were important to their communities. However, after the civil rights movement and subsequent library integration, these private libraries fell into disuse when more adequate facilities became available. Unfortunately, the historical record for these independent libraries in South Carolina is almost nonexistent, and, as a result, most have simply been forgotten except by the generation that used them.

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<sup>65</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Young Dendy, interview by Jamie Cutter, 1 October 2009, Young Dendy Collection, transcript, Presbyterian College Archives, Clinton SC.

<sup>67</sup> Greenville Cultural Exchange Center, "Fountain Inn Colored High School, 1948-1953," Greenville, SC Historical Schools List, <http://sciway3.net/greenville-historical-schools/SCIwayFountainInn.htm> (Accessed July 30, 2011).

## **Desegregation of South Carolina's Libraries: 1960s-1970s**

The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* provided the legal basis for the desegregation of South Carolina's libraries in the 1960s. Even the most staunchly conservative areas of the state slowly began to integrate, sometimes quietly and other times amid protest and violence.

The first library system to integrate – at least in writing – was the Richland County Library System located in Columbia, which opened its doors to blacks in 1952.<sup>68</sup> The social norms of the period still did not allow for the mixing of the races in public places, so it is unlikely that blacks and whites were actually using the library space together at this early date. In fact, in 1960, Columbia was the site of a protest against the segregation of the city's public facilities, including the library. Thus, it can be assumed that library's integration was more policy than reality.

More commonly, South Carolina public libraries desegregated only under pressure. The sixties were a time of civil disobedience in opposition to social injustice, and this often took the form of sit-ins at segregated public libraries. In Greenville, for example, there was a series of peaceful protests at the public library in March and July of 1960, which included four sit-ins by groups of seven to twenty high-school and college students accompanied, in one case, by a Baptist minister. Although the students' sit-ins did not immediately produce the desired results, later that same year some of the students,

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<sup>68</sup> Estelle Walker to Eric Moon, 3 January 1964, Negro Library Service Files (NLSF), South Carolina State Library, Columbia, SC.

in conjunction with the NAACP, filed a lawsuit against the Greenville Library stating that they had been denied access based solely on their race. In response, city officials closed the library's main branch for seventeen days to prevent integration. The mayor warned that if these groups were "allowed to continue their self-centered purposes," the city would similarly close "all schools, parks, swimming pools, and other facilities."<sup>69</sup> In September, a federal court judge dismissed the suit calling it "moot." In rendering his decision, the judge argued that since the library was closed, discrimination did not exist. The judge, however, left the door open for more litigation: "This does not forestall the rights of citizens to bring actions against the county library if it is practicing segregation."<sup>70</sup>

The county's scheme to forestall integration by closing the library was ultimately not successful. The library's closure prompted public complaints, with some individuals demanding tax rebates in response to the lack of library services. When the city reopened the library several weeks later, it was as an integrated facility, though with one stipulation. For fear that blacks and whites of the opposite sex would intermingle, the library's tables were labeled male and female.<sup>71</sup> Beyond that, the reopening of the integrated library happened quietly, with, as a reporter on the scene described it,

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<sup>69</sup> R. Walker, "White and Negro Libraries Closed," *The News* (Greenville, SC), September 3, 1960.

<sup>70</sup> J. Crocker, "Judge Dismisses Library Suit Here," *The News* (Greenville, SC), September 14, 1960.

<sup>71</sup> "Sexes Divided in City Library," *The News* (Greenville, SC), September 22, 1960.

“business as usual.” “Everything was quiet,” he noted, “and no stares were exchanged.”<sup>72</sup>

Similar incidents occurred elsewhere in South Carolina as blacks and their supporters fought for equal access to public facilities. In Sumter, for instance, twenty-three black college students entered the public library and peacefully requested to borrow a book. The library staff automatically directed them to the local black branch. When they refused to leave, the police were called. Nineteen of the students were arrested and charged with breach of peace. They were fined \$100 or thirty days in jail.<sup>73</sup> Though the protest took place in 1961, the library did not integrate until 1963.<sup>74</sup>

Although library sit-ins were not immediately successful in Greenville and Sumter, two library protests did achieve their goals. The first was in Darlington in 1960, where fourteen black students entered the segregated main branch and asked to apply for borrowing privileges. The students were given library cards, and the library was integrated from that point forward.<sup>75</sup> The second successful protest occurred in Florence in 1962. Here a peaceful student sit-in prompted the library board and city officials to quietly, yet immediately, integrate the main branch.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> “Business as Usual at the Library,” *The News* (Greenville, SC), September 20, 1960.

<sup>73</sup> “19 Negro Students are Convicted Here,” *Daily Item* (Sumter, SC), March 10, 1961.

<sup>74</sup> Walker, *So Good and Necessary a Work*, 48.

<sup>75</sup> “14 Negroes Given Cards at Darlington Library,” *The News* (Greenville, SC), May 7, 1960.

<sup>76</sup> “The Bowler Library: A Forgotten Heritage for Many Years,” *Florence Morning News* (Florence, SC), May 19, 1986.

Articles about these protests were published in local newspapers, and word spread quickly throughout the state. As a result of the public and media pressure, South Carolina libraries began to quietly open their main branches to African Americans. The Greenville protest, in particular, convinced other librarians to take action before sit-ins caused controversy or violence in their own hometowns. In 1963, the State Library Board's field agent wrote, "Pickens, Laurens and Greenwood are all giving service to Negroes in the main libraries now. Pickens voted to do so more than a year ago following the disturbance in Greenville."<sup>77</sup>

As a result of the protest movements of the 1960s, South Carolina libraries gradually, if grudgingly, integrated. Yet in many areas such as Greenwood, blacks felt more comfortable in the segregated facilities and continued to use these separate libraries for several years.<sup>78</sup> In some cases black branches were located in black neighborhoods and were simply more convenient for African American residents to use than traveling to another branch. Eventually, however, black branches fell into disuse and were eliminated completely in the early 1970s.

In conclusion, South Carolina's library history began propitiously with the establishment of North America's first public library in 1698. But the religious-based library was short-lived, and the development of public library service would not begin until the early twentieth century. The driving force behind library construction in the

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<sup>77</sup> Lee, "From Segregation to Integration," 106.

<sup>78</sup> Prudence Taylor, "Grace Byrd-Benjamin Mays Library" e-mail message to Jamie Cutter, April 19, 2011.

early 1900s came from philanthropic and governmental programs, which provided much-needed funding, especially in impoverished areas. Most of these new and improved libraries served white patrons only, through a few developed separate branches for African American residents. Where black branches weren't established, the black community itself would create a private library for the educational betterment of the population. It would not be until the civil rights movement of the 1960s that public library services were made available to African Americans, making black branches obsolete.

Very little documentary evidence remains regarding individual black libraries, either public or private. There are also no secondary sources that profile South Carolina's African American libraries so little is known of their services, staffing and patrons. To fully document the history of these institutions, a great deal of research still needs to be conducted. The following chapter will provide the first in-depth study of one of South Carolina's most enduring black branches, Greenwood's Benjamin Mays Library.



## **CHAPTER 5: LET US READ: BENJAMIN MAYS LIBRARY HISTORY, 1940-1971**

Though many generalizations can be made about the history of library segregation in the South, and in South Carolina in particular, each public library that existed under Jim Crow has a unique story to tell of its origins, activities, contributions, and eventual decline. The stories of individual segregated libraries are worth recording, preserving, and sharing as they provide a window into the history of twentieth-century America, revealing the interesting and important nuances missing from general state and regional histories. This chapter chronicles the history of one such library, the Benjamin Mays Library in Greenwood, South Carolina.

Researching the local history of segregated libraries poses an interesting challenge due to lack of sources. The history of the Benjamin Mays Library was especially difficult to uncover since primary source documents were almost non-existent. The Greenwood County Library Board meeting minutes date back to only 1967. Prior to that, there is no extant written record of the library's general business. A scant number of pamphlets and newspaper articles were found that helped piece together the history of the Mays Library. The most important documents were annual reports and various statistical records written by the librarian and a handful of articles from the local newspaper that made mention of the branch. Beyond primary source documents, oral history is the only remaining source. Unfortunately, the most important figure in the library's history, Mrs. Grace Byrd, has passed away. Mrs. Wynetta Miller, another librarian from a very early period in the

library's history, was interviewed and the information she gave was very insightful. Other potential interviewees, however, were very reluctant to speak about the library or its integration. The Jim Crow era seems to be a period many would rather not remember.

### **Overview of Greenwood County History**

Greenwood, South Carolina's, history can be traced back to 1823 when a local planter, John McGehee, built a summer home and called it "Green Wood." The home was located in a secluded spot near the village of Woodville, which eventually took on the name of Greenwood as well. The quiet life of the area changed in 1852 with the construction the Greenville-and-Columbia rail line, which ran directly through the agriculturally rich area. A depot was built in Greenwood and businesses blossomed. In 1857, the town of Greenwood was officially incorporated.<sup>1</sup> Greenwood County was formed in 1897.

Greenwood County was spared the destruction caused in other areas by the Civil War, and after the war it enjoyed an economic boom fueled by the growing textile industry. The town of Greenwood boasted of two highly profitable textile mills, the Grendel Mill established in 1896 and the Greenwood Cotton Mill founded in 1897. The Grendel Mill, later renamed Abney Mills, was particularly successful. At its peak in the 1950s, it operated twenty-seven plants in three states with headquarters in Greenwood. Thus, textile mills became the lifeblood of Greenwood in the early twentieth century. Many local residents benefited from mills by buying stocks. The economic opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin L. Cann, "Greenwood," in *South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 401.

also attracted nearby farmers, who flocked to the town seeking work. Before the automobile, mill workers walked to their factory jobs, so in mill towns like Greenwood the mill owners often provided housing -- simple cottages, usually hundreds of them, identical and in neat rows -- within walking distance of the factory. Mill life became all encompassing, with the mill owners also providing schools, churches, banks, company stores, and recreation for the employees. Although sociologists and historians would later criticize mill villages as “paternalistic,” they helped a generation of poor whites achieve a higher standard of living and improved educational opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

Mill village life, with its new sense of community and prosperity, however, was not usually available to the African American population. This group became exceedingly marginalized in South Carolina’s early industrial period. A few mills initially hired black workers, but according to South Carolina historian Louis Wright, “The experiment did not work out.” As Wright explains, “The mill owners claimed that blacks were unreliable and inept; the white workers objected to their company and their competition.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the African American population benefitted only peripherally from the economic growth in the region. Instead, blacks worked at low paying jobs in town or continued to work as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, often laboring on small plots of land provided to them by the Freedmen’s Bureau after the Civil War. Although many blacks migrated north, at the turn of the century the majority that remained continued farming cotton in areas near town such as “the Promised Land.” In fact, in 1899, long

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<sup>2</sup> Louis B. Wright, *South Carolina: A Bicentennial History* (New York: American Association for State and Local History, 1976), 199.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

after the Civil War had ended, Greenwood County's farmers were still tending seventy thousand acres planted in cotton.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the atmosphere in Greenwood at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is worth noting that race relations were not without a violent past. In 1898, during a tragedy known as the "Phoenix Riot," seven black men and one white man were killed by mob violence. The incident began on Election Day when black voters were turned away from the town's polling area. The white Republican political activist, Thomas Tolbert, asked the disenfranchised blacks to sign a statement that he intended to use in a lawsuit.<sup>5</sup> Local whites milling around the country store being used as the polling station became agitated and attacked the black men with their fists. After one of the white men was fatally shot, the African Americans fled the scene. On the next day, a mob of several hundred whites brought five African American men to a church and shot them. A sixth black was later ambushed and shot to death as well. Yet this violence did not end here. On the following day, the white mob dragged a seventh victim to the church where he, too, was murdered. After this bloody event, so many blacks fled the town that the Greenwood area experienced an agricultural labor shortage that persisted

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<sup>4</sup> Greenwood County Historical Society, *Reflections of Greenwood County through 1955* (Greenwood: The Museum, 2004), 97.

<sup>5</sup> Damon L. Fordham, *Voices of Black South Carolina* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 123-24.

for several seasons. As a local historian explains, “The psychological, political and economic scars...were years in healing.”<sup>6</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, Greenwood continued to grow. The town’s population in 1910 was 6,614. By 1940, it had doubled to 13,018, and then jumped to 19,809 by 1944 as people continued to flock to Greenwood to work in its mills.<sup>7</sup> Textile and agricultural production began to decline in the 1950s, though the city still prospered. The economy diversified, as manufacturing came to the region, bringing chemical plants, pharmaceuticals, foundries, and other industries.<sup>8</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century, the African American community of Greenwood also prospered, as black business expanded in the area around Rush Avenue. With the development of a black middle class, Greenwood’s African American community established churches and social institutions, frequented black-owned businesses, and sent their children to segregated schools. It was in this era of increasing prosperity yet persisting discrimination and segregation that a library came to exist in Greenwood for the use of its African American residents.

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Watson, *Greenwood County Sketches* (Greenwood, SC: The Attic Press, 1970), 119-21.

<sup>7</sup> Greenwood County Historical Society, *Reflections of Greenwood County through 1955* (Greenwood: The Museum, 2004), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin L. Cann, “Greenwood County,” in *South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 402-403.

### **Greenwood's First Libraries: 1901-1940**

During Greenwood's period of industrial growth, its first libraries were established. As mentioned previously, library history in the South often begins with library societies that offered subscription services to a closed membership. Greenwood is no exception. In 1901, the Greenwood Library Association was founded and a subscription library service inaugurated.<sup>9</sup> The same group that initiated the library society later worked with the Carnegie Foundation to secure a grant of \$12,500 to build a true public library in 1916. Shortly thereafter, a public library opened in Greenwood, but African Americans were not included until 1940.<sup>10</sup>

Like much of the South, Greenwood did not provide a publicly funded library for African Americans until many decades into the twentieth century. During this same time, at least two generations of black children had been born into a free society and literacy among them was on the rise. Parents hoped for better educational opportunities for their children, while civic groups sought to make more books available to the community at large.

Greenwood's African American library history began in 1940 when the Women's Auxiliary of the First Presbyterian Church, a white only congregation at the time, placed a small deposit of fifty books in the library of Brewer High School, a segregated school

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<sup>9</sup> "Library Observes City's Centennial by Starting Large New Building," *Index Journal* (Greenwood, SC), September 14, 1957.

<sup>10</sup> "Library Greenwood History." TMs Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1940(?).

in the black community.<sup>11</sup> The donation consisted of fiction books, as well as an encyclopedia set and several other reference sources. Intended to serve the entire neighborhood, the library was “open to all negroes at hours that are convenient.”<sup>12</sup>

At some point in time, perhaps even as early 1940 or 1943, this fledgling library was named in honor of Dr. Benjamin Mays, a prominent black educator who served as President of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967. A native of Greenwood, Mays had risen to prominence from humble roots. His father could barely read and his mother was completely illiterate, though she encouraged her son to do well in the small, segregated school he attended in Greenwood.<sup>13</sup> Born in 1894, Dr. Mays had witnessed the Phoenix Riots that divided the town in 1898. In fact, Mays recalled that the angry mob had confronted his father and him as they rode on horseback. Pointing a gun at the elder man’s head, the white men had forced Mays’s father to bow and salute them.<sup>14</sup> Mays never forgot the incident, claiming that for many years he hated his home state. As an educator, Mays would become a leader in the civil rights movement, inspiring many young activists, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with whom he became lifelong friends.<sup>15</sup> A few years before his death in 1984, Mays spoke publicly of his childhood recollections, stating that he no longer harbored any animosity toward the community.

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<sup>11</sup> “Library Observes City’s Centennial by Starting Large New Building,” *Index Journal* (Greenwood, South Carolina), September 14, 1957.

<sup>12</sup> “Library Greenwood History.” TMs Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1940(?).

<sup>13</sup> Fordham, *Voices of Black South Carolina*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-26.

<sup>15</sup> Orville Vernon Burton and Matthew Cheney, “Mays, Benjamin Elijah,” in *South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 601-602.

“I love my South Carolinians,” he declared suggesting the incredible changes in race relations that had happened in his lifetime.<sup>16</sup> Although it is not know exactly when the Benjamin Mays Library was given its name, it is clear why the honor was bestowed on this native son.

Originally housed the local black high school, a teacher, Mrs. Louise Miller Parker, served as part-time librarian of the small library. She opened the library to the community on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, as well as for six hours on Saturdays. She also developed an adult reading program, giving certificates to individuals who read twelve books. Despite Parker’s efforts, this plan of opening the school library for public use was not ideal, and the arrangement lasted only three years. In 1943, the library was transferred to a new, more suitable location where the entire African American community would feel more comfortable visiting the facility.

### **Founding of the Benjamin Mays Library: 1940s**

Hoping to improve access to books by removing the barriers and stigma associated with adults using a school library, Louise Parker sought a new facility to house the tiny black library. Locals were eager to help, and when the Percival-Tompkins Funeral Home donated space for the library, community members transferred the books from the high school to these new rooms located on Waller Avenue. Consisting of approximately two shelves of books and the use of a small office for the librarian,

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<sup>16</sup> Fordham, *Voices of Black South Carolina*, 130.



Greenwood's new black "public" library officially opened on November 16, 1943.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs. Parker continued to serve as librarian, opening the library several hours each week for patrons, mostly children, to check out books.

Mrs. Parker stayed at the Benjamin Mays Library for several more years until she decided to marry in the mid 1940s. Feeling that she could no longer manage the responsibilities of librarian and new wife, she asked her sister-in-law, Wynetta Miller, to assume her library duties. A local special education teacher and graduate of Spellman College, Miller did not have training as a librarian, but she had volunteered in her college library and was eager to help at the Mays branch. Miller accepted her sister-in-law's invitation and became the Benjamin Mays Library's second librarian.

In 1948, Miller oversaw the library's move to a new and larger space in the black Rush Street area. One of the town's two black doctors, Isaiah M. Tompkins, donated a room in his office complex that was much larger than the library's original quarters.<sup>18</sup> This would become the Mays library's permanent location until it was closed in 1971. Greenwood resident, Belinda Dorn Turner, described the small library and its new location: "You entered the library by a walkway that was down the side of the building. It was not very large, just enough room for a few tables, sitting area and what would be called the circulation desk."<sup>19</sup> During the 1940s, the library was open weekdays from

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<sup>17</sup> "Library Observes City's Centennial by Starting Large New Building," *Index Journal* (Greenwood, South Carolina, September 14, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> Belinda Dorn Turner, "Grace Byrd-Benjamin Mays Branch Library," e-mail message to Jamie Cutter, November 11, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

3:30 to 5:00 and on Saturdays from 12:30 to 6:00. This schedule remained fairly constant during Miller's administration, though the hours were extended slightly. Now with more space, Miller was able to expand the library's collection. As children remained the library's primary users, most of the books – which were usually withdrawn books from the white public library's collection – were children's and young adult fiction. To build the library's clientele further Miller conducted story hours which she advertised through the local black churches. As appreciated as the collection was, it did not have adequate adult or reference materials to provide the type of library the community really needed.<sup>20</sup>

Wynetta Miller continued as librarian until 1949, when family and other work commitments made employment at the library too demanding. She was replaced by Mrs. Grace Byrd, who had substituted in the library during Miller's absences. Byrd would serve as the Mays librarian for the next two decades, leaving only when the library closed in 1971.<sup>21</sup>

As blacks were not allowed use of Greenwood's public library, the Benjamin Mays library provided the only library services for the local African American community. Greenwood County librarian, Winona Walker, admitted as much in a January 22, 1949, letter she wrote to Lois Barbare of the South Carolina State Library Board: "We are giving no service in the county to negroes as yet,"<sup>22</sup> she conceded, but

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<sup>20</sup> Wynetta Miller, Interview by Jamie Cutter. 9 March 2011. Author's collection McCormick, SC.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, Winona to Lois Barbare. 22 January 1949. LS. Negro Library Service Files (NLSF), South Carolina State Library, Columbia, SC.

went on to describe plans to extend library services soon. As she concluded: “We do need to create an interest in reading among the Negroes.”<sup>23</sup> Mays librarian Grace Byrd would play a major role in this expansion.

### **Mrs. Grace Byrd and the Expansion of Library Services in the 1950s**

In approximately January 1949, Grace Byrd was hired as the library’s first full-time librarian, and she devoted herself completely to developing and improving the Mays branch. At this point it appears that the Greenwood County Library Board began its support of library services to the African Americans of the town in earnest. For the first time, the city was paying for a full-time librarian who was able to expand services greatly. Prior to 1949, however, the county’s role in funding the Mays Library is unclear. Existing records do show that the main library provided the Mays library with used books. It is also likely that the public library paid the salary for a part-time librarian, though it is not known when this began. It is also possible that the county paid a token amount for rent to Dr. Tompkins for use of his office space, but, again, there is no firm record of this. Thus, it is impossible to pinpoint an exact date when the Mays Library became an official part of the Greenwood County Library System and fully funded by tax payer dollars. What is clear, however, is that with the hiring of Grace Byrd in 1949 the county began to take seriously the need for a library to service the African American community.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

As a result of this infusion of new resources, the Mays Library blossomed. Because of its central location in the heart of Greenwood's black business district, the library became a gathering place for the community. Situated near a busy barber shop and popular tailor, the area near the library on Rush Avenue, popularly called "The Avenue," became a place where "colored folk hung out and socialized," to quote a former library patron.<sup>24</sup> As one Greenwood resident described it, "The weekend was always lively because many of the patrons had worked all week and that [the library and nearby businesses] was their recreation."<sup>25</sup>

Scattered library records provide ample evidence of the central role Mrs. Byrd played in transforming the Mays black branch library into a vital community center. These reports reveal that providing books and services for local children remained one of her top priorities. One of her most popular and important programs was the library's annual summer reading club. Based on elaborate themes and games, the reading club attracted many children every year. In 1957, for example, 91 children participated in the summer reading program, and 63 received honorary certificates for reading the required number of books.<sup>26</sup> In 1963, 126 children were involved in the reading program, with 103 awarded certificates. Indeed, Byrd's summer reading program was so successful that it attracted positive comment from librarians at Greenwood's main library.

"Incidentally," one undated library report observed, "some of our most eager beaver little

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<sup>24</sup> Turner, "Grace Byrd-Benjamin Mays Branch Library."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library Annual Report, 1957" D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1957. Handwritten.

summer readers are to be found among the negro children who do not have the counter-attractions of summer camps and home television sets to entertain them during vacation time.”<sup>27</sup>

Byrd also developed activities for adults. Most notable was the Adult Readers Club, which she established in 1957. Byrd also organized two “book lovers clubs” for young readers, and in the 1960s the Negro Women’s Book Club. In addition to giving Saturday morning story hours for the children, Byrd also gave numerous book talks to adult groups throughout the year.<sup>28</sup>

Much of Bryd’s success in developing the black community’s interest in reading was due to her creative ideas to attract patrons of all ages to the library. For instance, in 1957, she designed “the Wheel of Fortune” game in which patrons spun a roulette-style wheel and read the book listed in the square where the pointer stopped. Byrd wrote in that year’s annual report that the roulette game “encouraged the readers to read a wider variety of books than they ordinarily would have chosen.” She also mentioned that her program had “achieved national acclaim,” though specific details were not provided.<sup>29</sup> The same report describes another game involving children. In this program, she hid

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<sup>27</sup> “Library Greenwood History.” TMs Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1940(?).

<sup>28</sup> “Public Library,” *Quills*, December 15, 1957.

<sup>29</sup> “Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library Annual Report, 1957” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1957. Handwritten.

pictures of rabbits and eggs within the pages of books and awarded prizes to the children who found the most.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to her plans to expand library services at the Mays branch library, Byrd was also committed to reaching out to blacks living in the rural areas of the county. In fact, within two years of becoming librarian, she established a bookmobile service that eventually visited deposit stations in at least forty-one locations.<sup>31</sup> As with the collections offered at the in-town branch library, the bookmobile focused on children's books as well. However, Byrd was not unmindful of the growing interest in reading among adults, and she developed five stations exclusively for adults.<sup>32</sup> Also, as Byrd stated in one of her annual reports, "Selected materials (pamphlets, books, pictures, posters, jackets, periodicals, poems) were provided [to adults], upon request, for special events and particular units."<sup>33</sup> Each morning Byrd visited the deposit stations to handle circulation, bringing a fresh supply of books about once a month. Greenwood's main branch library had a dedicated bookmobile truck for making deliveries to white patrons since 1937. Mrs. Byrd, on the other hand, used her own car to maintain the deposit stations serving the black community. The county did, however, pay for her gas.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Byrd, Grace. "Annual Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library, July 1956." D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1956. Handwritten.

<sup>32</sup> "Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library Annual Report, 1957."

<sup>33</sup> Byrd, Grace. "Annual Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library, July 1956."

<sup>34</sup> "Quarterly Report October-December 1951." TMs. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. October 1952.

The Mays library bookmobile service was a stunning success, as shown by circulation statistics compiled in its inaugural year. According to the county library board's third quarter report for 1951, Byrd, driving her own car, had personally circulated 6,551 books to black schools in the county's rural areas. By comparison, the county's official bookmobile, which had been in service for fourteen years, delivered 6,626 books to white schools. "She circulated only 75 volumes less than the bookmobile circulated to the white children of the county," the report exclaimed, "although they [the white bookmobile] follow long established routes and routines."<sup>35</sup> Byrd's bookmobile service quickly became one of the May's library's most significant contributions to Greenwood County's black community, reaching hundreds of people, mostly children, who, for generations, had been deprived of books.

Clearly Grace Byrd was an energetic, innovative librarian committed to expanding the library's place in Greenwood's African American community. This was apparent in a 1958 interview she gave to the local newspaper. Asked to describe her work, the paper reported:

Mrs. Grace Byrd, the branch librarian, described for us a typical Tuesday. From 9:30 to 12:00 she visits rural schools in her own car and circulates books much as the bookmobile does. Two of the schools she visits on Tuesdays are Promised Land and Hodges. From 2 to 6 she keeps the Rush Street branch library open. It is generally rather quiet from 2 to 3 and she checks shelves, makes and arranges displays or works on posters for the library, the recreation center and for women's reading clubs, checks borrowers' cards and sends overdue notices. At about 3:15 the rush on Rush Street begins when the school children start coming. Boys and girls with term papers on U.S. history, each one with a different topic assigned, come in to get materials, adults browse for magazines and fiction and a few

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

school children pick books to read just for fun. One or two children probably have special assignments for nature books, science or geography. Sometimes they have to make speeches at school and need orations or poems for the occasion. From 5:30 to closing time, the crowd dwindles, and then Mrs. Byrd counts the day's circulation, changes her dater stamp, collects suitable books for her next automobile trip and locks her door for another day.<sup>36</sup>

Grace Byrd's achievements at the Benjamin Mays Library are all the more notable given that the library never moved from its donated quarters in Dr. Tompkins's office. Yet despite this constricted space and minimal financial support from the Greenwood County Library System, Byrd was able to build and sustain innovative and popular library programs and services for the county's African American community. She built the library's collections considerably, so that by the time the library closed in 1971 over 5,000 books were on the shelves, ten times the collection's original size.<sup>37</sup> It is also important to note that, save for an occasional volunteer, Byrd was the library's only staff member for the entire period spanning 1949 to 1971. Yet through hard work and perseverance, Grace Byrd's library provided Greenwood's black residents with not just books, but a community center and the promise of a better future.

### **The Decline and Closure of the Benjamin Mays Branch in the 1960s and 1970s**

In the early 1960s, the Benjamin Mays Library was still busily serving the local community. As one former patron, who frequented the library at least once or twice a week as a ten or eleven-year-old child, recalled:

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<sup>36</sup> "Librarians Spend Day at Varied Tasks." *Index Journal* (Greenwood, South Carolina), March 14, 1958.



The Mays Library was a place where black children could visit and be welcomed by a librarian who instilled values and the importance of getting an education. The library was always clean and quiet and Mrs. Byrd always helpful. The library had many books but no comparison to the other library where whites only attended. The library received books that were no longer in circulation at the white library. Few new resources were available in the Mays Library.... As I can recall [the library had] newspapers, magazines and other resource books, history, science, literacy works, fiction, non-fiction, encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.<sup>38</sup>

By 1969, however, circulation at the African American branch had significantly declined, attracting the attention of the Greenwood County Library Board. To address the situation, the board considered the “possibility of moving the branch to the new Child Care Center in the Brewer complex as a children’s branch.”<sup>39</sup> At the October 1969 meeting, the board approved the motion to move the library and a plan was put in place to secure the new space.<sup>40</sup> Apparently the plan was never implanted, for at the April 1970 board meeting the librarian reported that no progress had been made in finding a new site for the library.<sup>41</sup> At that point the plan to relocate the Mays Library was dropped.

During the intervening months, circulation at the black library branch continued to decline. In October 1970, patrons checked out only 11.8 books per day. November’s rates were 11.7 books per day, and by December circulation at the branch was down to 8

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<sup>38</sup> Belinda Dorn Turner, Interview by Jamie Cutter. 22 August 2011. Author’s collection McCormick, SC.

<sup>39</sup> “Quarterly Board Meeting Greenwood City and County Public Library, October 8, 1969.” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1969. Typewritten.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Quarterly Board Meeting Greenwood City and County Public Library,” April 9, 1970. D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1970. Typewritten.

books per day. As circulation dropped, Librarian Byrd reduced the library's hours. By the end of 1970, the library was open only four and a half hours per day.

By October 1970, the library board began serious deliberations about closing the city's black library branch. At that month's library board meeting, the county librarian, Mary McCord, "expressed the opinion that this branch, two blocks from the main library, is not used enough to justify its existence. She cited the room's 'dismal' appearance, and lack of parking as further drawbacks."<sup>42</sup> The librarian's notes from that meeting also state that the black library branch was "a stone's throw away from this building. Most of the children come here anyway." The librarian stated that even Mrs. Byrd felt that the small library had "little value in the system now because it is used so little." These handwritten notes also indicate that the subject the Mays Library closure was "to be considered later."<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, it seems that closing the library was a difficult decision for the board. Despite reservations, on January 14, 1971, the Greenwood County Library Board under the direction of chairman, Dr. L. A. Schneider, voted to close the Benjamin Mays Branch Library. According to the meeting minutes, "The board considered the status of the Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library and decided that it is no longer used enough to justify

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<sup>42</sup> "Greenwood City and County Public Library Quarterly Board Meeting, October 15, 1970," D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1970. Typewritten.

<sup>43</sup> "Librarian's Report to the Board of Trustees of the Greenwood County Library," D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. October 15, 1970. Typewritten and handwritten.

maintaining it.”<sup>44</sup> The minutes also indicate “that certain records of historical value will be preserved in the children’s room at the County Library and Dr. Schneider suggested that a portrait of Dr. Mays be included among these mementos.”<sup>45</sup> It seems that the board was a bit nostalgic about closing of the library. It also appears that board members desired to proceed with the closure in a respectful manner.

What had happened to make the library’s usage drop so drastically? It seems that in Greenwood, library services had been quietly integrating for several years, and the Benjamin Mays Library gradually became irrelevant as African American patrons found their way to the more spacious and better equipped main branch. Unfortunately, no records exist showing when the library’s policy was changed to allow black residents access to the main Greenwood library. As in other cities and towns, integration was a gradual process, not the result of any protest or sit-in to mark the occasion. The extant board meeting minutes date back only to 1967, which postdates the time when African Americans began using the main library. In fact, from the outset, the board meeting minutes comment upon black patrons using the main branch. For example, the April 1967 board meeting notes state, “The Benjamin Mays Library remains mostly a children’s library since many patrons, (teen-agers and adults), are coming to the City and County Library.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, at the April 1969 board meeting, the librarian’s report confirmed that “teenagers and adults are coming to the Greenwood City and County

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<sup>44</sup> “Greenwood County Public Library Board of Trustees Meeting, January 8, 1971,” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1971. Typewritten.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Greenwood City and County Public Library Quarterly Board Meeting, April 13, 1967,” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1967. Typewritten.

Library but children are going to the Benjamin Mays Branch.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it can only be concluded that the Greenwood library was integrated before 1967, though no exact date can be established.

One reason why the library board waited over a year before voting to close the underutilized Mays branch was their concern for the much beloved Mrs. Byrd, the Benjamin Mays branch librarian for twenty-three years. As Prudence Taylor, the current Greenwood County Library Director, explained: “The primary concern in the African-American community was that Mrs. Byrd would not have a job if the library closed.”<sup>48</sup> However, at the time of the May’s library’s closing, the main branch librarian, Mary McCord, recommended that Byrd be employed there. As McCord commented at the October 1970 board meeting, “Mrs. Byrd is a pleasant, capable person who would be useful half-time at the circulation desk in addition to her half-time duties in the technical processing dept.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, Mrs. Byrd did move to the main branch after the Mays library closed. She worked there until December 31, 1976.<sup>50</sup>

As a result of the library’s closure and Byrd’s transfer to the main branch, the Mays Library’s African American reading clubs were dissolved and merged with the equivalent clubs at the main branch, though the extent of black participation in white

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<sup>47</sup> “Quarterly Board Meeting Greenwood City and County Public Library, April 10, 1969.” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. 1969. Typewritten.

<sup>48</sup> Prudence Taylor, “Grace Byrd-Benjamin Mays Library.”

<sup>49</sup> “Librarian’s Report to the Board of Trustees of the Greenwood County Library,” D. Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library. October 15, 1970. Typewritten and handwritten.

<sup>50</sup> “Mrs. Byrd to Retire at Library.” *Index Journal* (Greenwood, SC), December 29, 1976.

clubs is unknown. The bookmobile service that Mrs. Byrd diligently created and maintained was also merged with the main branch bookmobile service. Again, it is unknown if the same level of service was maintained. Did library service to the African American community decline in some ways as a result of integration? This question remains unanswered. Library records from the late 1960s and early 1970s suggest that integration, however quiet, was not an entirely positive experience for black library users. In fact, according to the current library director, Prudence Taylor, the main branch librarian told board members that she needed Mrs. Byrd desperately at the main library to help members of the African-American community feel comfortable in the formerly segregated facility. Taylor went on to say that during this transition period, the library staff and the board were working “constantly to encourage library use in the African American community.”<sup>51</sup> She also credited Mrs. Byrd with helping to bring the races together in Greenwood’s Public Library. “She was very visible at the library,” Taylor explained, “and Mrs. McCord [the main branch librarian] told me that her presence did much to make Greenwood's African-American community feel welcome.”<sup>52</sup>

Though Greenwood’s librarians sought to make everyone comfortable in the library, black patrons continued to experience racial tensions. One local African American resident recalled visiting the main branch library in 1969 during her weekend visits home from college:

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<sup>51</sup> Prudence Taylor, "Grace Byrd-Benjamin Mays Library."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

I graduated in 1968 from Brewer High School and desegregation was taking place. I probably was a freshman in college when I visited the public library during weekends when I was home. You were watched very closely when you visited for fear of stealing. To touch something we touched was felt to be unclean. You could not give something to a white person. You had to put it down and they would pick it up. Fearing that if your hand touched theirs, you were unclean. You always had to say, “yes ma’am, no ma’am” and never go out a door before a white person. Young people now don’t have a clue and think the society in which we live has always been what they are experiencing.<sup>53</sup>

Quiet integration, then, would be a slow and perhaps painful process as the black community assumed its rightful place in the Greenwood Public Library. Yet, the Mays black branch library had served its purpose, introducing a generation of black children to the pleasures of books and reading. Although many would miss the community library, it had become irrelevant. As Dr. Benjamin Mays commented on hearing of the library’s closing, “It seems wise to me that you are closing the Benjamin E. Mays Branch Library since so few are using it and the new one is so much more adequate.”<sup>54</sup>

The quiet integration of the main branch library in Greenwood in the late 1960s meant access to better materials for Greenwood’s African American population. Perhaps, most importantly, black school children would have an equal chance of finding adequate research materials for school projects, improving their educational experience and opportunities. The adults and teens who braved continuing racial tensions also benefitted from access to the main library’s services and materials, such as the student quoted above who used the public library for her college assignments. However, integration did not come without a cost. For with the closure of the Benjamin Mays Branch Library,

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<sup>53</sup> Turner, Interview by Jamie Cutter.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, Atlanta, to Dr. L.A. Schneider, Greenwood, 25 January 1971, Vertical File, Greenwood, South Carolina County Library.

Greenwood's black residents lost a vital community center dedicated exclusively to their benefit and needs. Nonetheless, the time for integration of the library was overdue and with it the African American community found better access to information in a setting that truly served the public, the entire public.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Research into the history of library development in the American South for whites as well as for blacks shows that it was a slow and protracted process. The causes of this were rooted in the South's weak economy following the Civil War and the lack of advancement in public education. This meant even southern whites had little access to libraries in the period between 1865 and 1900, while black access to libraries was virtually nonexistent. As David Battles explains, "Whites were rarely amenable to building educational facilities for African Americans when they themselves did not have adequate facilities."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, after 1900, the South did see the birth of library services for both black and white communities, though these facilities would remain segregated until the late 1960s and 1970s.

The libraries that served African Americans came in various forms, ranging from privately funded one-room school libraries to city-managed segregated branches of the public library system. Black libraries were typically second-rate, never on par with library services enjoyed by whites; however, they served as vital and valued community centers and played an essential role in promoting and increasing literacy and education among African American residents. The growth in black library services also made possible career opportunities for black library professionals, many of whom made important contributions to their communities and the library profession as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Battles, *History of Public Library Access*, 20.



However, the civil rights movement, and the accompanying growth in ethnic pride, brought an end to segregation and the need for blacks to create and sustain separate libraries.

In South Carolina, private libraries became the standard for sharing literature and information in the 1700s and 1800s. The Civil War was devastating for the state and its private libraries, and its poor postwar economy meant that library growth was slow or nonexistent. As the economy regained traction in the early 1900s, the first tax-supported libraries appeared in the state. The real driving force behind library construction in the early 1900s came from philanthropic and governmental programs, which provided much-needed funding, especially in impoverished rural areas. With precious few exceptions, the libraries that opened in South Carolina in the first part of the twentieth century served only white patrons, though as the century progressed more library services became available to African Americans. Where tax-supported public libraries were not available to African Americans, black communities often initiated grassroots movements to open their own neighborhood libraries. Eventually, though, the civil rights movement repudiated segregation, and by the 1970s separate libraries for blacks ceased to exist. Writing the history of these libraries is difficult since very little documentary evidence remains regarding the individual black libraries, either public or private, in South Carolina. There are no secondary sources that profile the state's African American libraries, so little is known of their services, staffing and patrons. To fully document the history of these institutions, a great deal of research still needs to be conducted.

It is important to record the history of segregated libraries as part of the story of the Jim Crow era. In a recent discussion of the American Library Association's Library History Round Table, Wayne Wigand, one of library science's most eminent historians, wrote, "I'd also like to see a history written of the desegregation of every single public library that once operated under the principles of Jim Crow. Each story in each library is different. That would be worthwhile project for a couple hundred historians."<sup>2</sup> It is a worthwhile effort because public memory is selective and will chose to suppress unpleasant experiences, such as segregation. The memories of the Jim Crow era are important to capture since many southerners, both white and black, would simply rather forget the past.

This thesis on the history of the Benjamin Mays Library in Greenwood, South Carolina, is just one small contribution to what needs to be a larger effort to document the history of segregated black libraries at the local level. The patrons who utilized these libraries and the staff that worked in them are getting older and their memories should be captured as soon as possible. These first-person experiences are vitally important to this history since documentary evidence is likely to be incomplete, if it exists at all. Historians can place the history of these local libraries into the larger context of Jim Crowism and integration so that we might have a better understanding of an era which is still felt acutely today. It is in recognizing and understanding this past that we can learn

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Wiegand, "LRT Discussion" e-mail message to LHRT Membership, August 19, 2011.

more about the evolution of race relations in the United States and continue to strive for equal rights in all areas of American society.

## APPENDIX A

### AFRICAN AMERICAN LIBRARY HISTORY CHRONOLOGY

c. **1660-1865**-Racial slavery was used as the major source of labor in the South.

**1863**-Emancipation Proclamation declares that all slaves in Confederate states are freed.

**1865**-The Confederate states are defeated in the United States Civil War. Slavery is effectively ended.

**1890**- According to reports, 57 percent of African Americans in the United States were still illiterate.

**1890s**-The southern economy began the transition away from an agriculture-based economy to a more urban and industrial economy, known as the “New South.”

**1896**-The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of state-mandated segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

**1900**-Andrew Carnegie funded construction of the Tuskegee Institute Library.

Edward C. Williams, a graduate of New York State Library School, became the first professionally trained, degreed black librarian.

**1903**- Cossitt Library in Memphis, Tennessee, an African American library opened in a local public school.

**1904-** Andrew Carnegie funded construction of five libraries an historically black colleges and universities.

**1905-**Charlotte Public Library opened an independent African American library in North Carolina.

The Louisville Free Public Library established the first true tax-payer-funded public library in the United States exclusively for African Americans under the librarianship of Thomas Fountain Blue.

**1910-**Seeing a need for trained librarians, the Louisville Free Public Library opened a training facility for prospective black librarians.

**1913-** William F. Yust described the status of library service for black Americans for the first time in a professional publication.

**1917-**Andrew Carnegie ceased funding for new library construction projects.

**1921-**The American Library Association established the Work with Negroes Round Table.

**1923-**Virginia Procter Powell Florence graduated from the Carnegie Institute of Technology as the first professionally trained female black librarian.

**1925-**The Hampton Institute Library School was established.

**1927-**A Carnegie funded librarian conference at the Hampton institute prompts Julius Rosenwald to contribute funds for library training for African Americans in the South.

**1936-1939**-The Negro Teacher-Librarian Training Program provided professional training and college credits for 279 black librarians.

**1939**-The Hampton Institute Library School closed.

**1940s**-According to reports, only 7.7 percent of rural blacks had access to any type of library services including bookmobile service.

**1940**-Eliza Atkins Gleason graduated from the University of Chicago as the first African American to be awarded a Ph.D. in library science. Her influential dissertation was titled *“The Southern Negro and the Public Library”*.

**1941**-The Atlanta University School of Library Science opened with Eliza Atkins Gleason as dean.

The Carnegie Foundation made several grants to historically black colleges and university libraries for upgrades.

**1943**-Virginia Lacy Jones was the second African American to graduate with a Ph.D. in library science. Her dissertation was titled *“The Problems of Negro High School Libraries in Selected Southern Cities.”*

**1953**-Only thirty-nine public libraries in the South offer integrated services.

**1954**-The Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

**1957**-Charlemae Rollins became the first black president of the children's services division of the American Library Association.

**1960**-Alma Jacobs was elected president of the Montana Library Association.

A federal court ordered the Montgomery, Alabama, library to open services to blacks; the library did as it was mandated, but all tables were removed from the library to prevent blacks and whites from sitting together.

The Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in prompted years of peaceful protest against segregation.

In Danville, Virginia, the local NAACP sued in federal court to integrate the public library.

**1961**-Albert P. Marshall was elected president of the Missouri Library Association.

Nine students in Jackson, Mississippi, staged the first sit-in in the state's history. Dubbed a "read-in" by the media, the students were arrested and jailed after peacefully attempting to use the public library facility.

**1962**-A white librarian in Plaquemine, Louisiana, quit his position in protest after being told he cannot check out materials to blacks.

**1963**-Two black ministers peacefully attempted to use the public library in Anniston, Alabama, but were beaten by a white mob.

**1964-** E. J. Josey protested the American Library Association's decision to honor a program of the Mississippi Library Association, a chapter which had withdrawn from the ALA in order to uphold its support of separate library facilities for black and white patrons.

**1965-** E. J. Josey was elected the first black member of the Georgia Library Association.

**1969-** Hannah Atkins was elected president of the southwestern chapter of the American Association of Law Librarians.

**1970-** E. J. Josey established the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

**1976-** Clara Jones was elected the first black president of the American Library Association.

**1984-** E. J. Josey inaugurated as the second African American president of the American Library Association.

**1993-** Hardy Franklin elected as the third African American president of the American Library Association.



## **APPENDIX B**

### **TIMELINE OF THE BENJAMIN MAYS LIBRARY**

**15 June 1940-** The Benjamin Mays Library was established in the Brewer High school to serve the local African American community with Louise Miller as the librarian.

**16 November 1943-** The Benjamin Mays Library was moved to the office of the Percival Funeral Home. Mrs. Wynetta Cummings was employed as librarian during this period.

**1948-** The Benjamin Mays Branch was moved to a space in Dr. I. M. Tompkins medical office.

**January 1949-** Wynetta Cummings resigned as librarian and hired Grace Byrd as her replacement. Grace Byrd was the first and only full- time librarian of the Mays branch.

**22 January 1949-** Greenwood County librarian Winona Walker admitted to South Carolina State Library Board that Greenwood is giving no service to African Americans in the county.

**1951-** Using her own car, librarian Grace Byrd began bookmobile service to Greenwood County's African Americans.

**1957-** Grace Byrd provided successful summer reading program with 91 children participating.

**1957-** Grace Byrd established the Adult Readers Club and designed games to encourage reading.

**1960s-** Mays branch clubs included two young adult book lovers clubs and a Negro Women's Book Club.

**1963-** Grace Byrd provided successful summer reading program with 126 children participating.

**13 April 1967-** Greenwood Library Board meeting notes acknowledged that African American adults and teenagers had started using the main branch library.

**8 October 1969-** Greenwood Library Board acknowledged that circulation at the Mays branch dropped significantly. The board discussed moving the branch to a better location and making it exclusively a children's library.

**1970-** During her tenure, Grace Byrd had increased the library's collection from just two shelves in 1949 to 5,000 volumes.

**9 April 1970-** Greenwood Library Board dropped the idea of moving the Mays branch.

**15 October 1970-** Greenwood Library Board began serious discussion of closing the Mays branch.

**14 January 1971-** Library board voted to close the Mays branch.

**February 1971-** The Benjamin Mays Branch was permanently closed.

**31 December 1976-** Grace Byrd retired after 27 years of library service.

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