

Money Matters

How Community Spirit—and Dollars—Are Saving Savannah's Carnegies

By Lon Dickerson and Patricia Gloyd

Many of the venerated Carnegie libraries in the U.S. have been torn down or converted to other purposes. In Savannah, a city world renowned for its historic charm, splendid live oak trees, and magnificent structures, such disrespect would be downright sacrilegious. Even the nefarious General William Tecumseh Sherman spared the city from being torched when Union troops occupied it in 1864.

So it shouldn't surprise anyone that both of Savannah's Carnegie libraries are currently being restored to their original grandeur, despite the ongoing controversy surrounding the proposal to close four small outlets in the inner city and two small outlets elsewhere in the service area (see p. 22). Much as Savannahians revere the past, though, getting funds to transform these shrines into healthy, pulsating, relevant institutions has been an arduous task.

The three-county Chatham-Effingham-Liberty Regional Library's central library on Bull Street was decidedly shabby and irrelevant when trustees started debating its future almost a decade ago. A whites-only library until 1963, the prestigious, busy facility is predominantly used today by blacks, reflecting how Savannah's center of population has shifted.

Only three-quarters of a mile from the Bull Street Library, CEL's other

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Carnegie structure would seem to be redundant. Built in 1914 as a blacks-only library, it is merely 2,688 square feet large, has moisture-infiltration problems because it was built on a dry creek bed, and was closed in 1997 when years of neglect and shoddy maintenance culmi-

keep the main library at the Bull Street location. Although the commission doesn't have legal authority to enforce such decisions, the library board listened.

Much of the Bull Street Library's 1966 addition was torn down, and the 1916 Carnegie structure underwent \$8 million worth of thorough renovations and enlargements into a 66,000-square-foot facility designed by architects Malcolm Holzman of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates and Don Cogdell of the Savannah firm Cogdell and Mendrala Architects.

Although construction is due to be completed this month, officials have yet to slate its reopening date; continued fundraising efforts in the private sector have made them realize that revitalizing a library

takes much more than renovating its structure. When neighborhood activist Michael Terry joined the board in 1995, the budget included \$7 million for construction and furnishings, despite the board's request for \$11 million to do the job right. There were no funds for technology or the replacement of tattered and outdated library resources. Terry realized that he and his neighbors had won a hollow victory that would yield a hollow library.

Over the past two years Terry has helped the board secure an additional \$1 million from state and local government officials for construction, plus \$2 million for books and technology. He also spearheaded the formation of a library foundation that has raised \$1.3 million through private donations.

Thanks to their efforts, the facility's



Savannah's only example of Prairie School architecture, the once blacks-only Carnegie Library is a monument to its users' determination to better their chances.

nated in the collapse of part of the ceiling. A building analysis by Barnard and Associates, Architects, lists 15 structural, safety, and standard building code deficiencies plus 29 building maintenance and historic preservation problems and estimates it will cost \$500,000 to correct them.

Taking all these factors into consideration, the racially mixed library board voted unanimously in March 1990 to 1) change the Bull Street facility's status from main library to branch and build a new main closer to where a majority of the people live, as recommended years earlier by the metropolitan planning commission; and 2) revitalize the former blacks-only Carnegie Library.

The ensuing public debate was loud and protracted, until in April 1994 the Chatham County Commission voted to

\$3-million opening-day collection includes a broad spectrum of resources on African-American culture and literature. And the foundation is still scrambling to raise another \$1.2 million for technology to make it a cutting-edge operation. Trustees, in turn, are looking to secure another \$2 million for staff and daily operations.

Saving graces

With the difficulties inherent in restoring and sustaining the Bull Street Library, why would library supporters remain determined to rescue the small, rundown Carnegie Library only three-quarters of a mile away?

Until 1963 no other public library was open to blacks in Savannah; nor did black schools have libraries. So the Carnegie was where African Americans went, and the staff helped them shape their lives. Both Pulitzer Prize-winning author James Alan McPherson, who says the Carnegie Library was always called the "Colored Branch," and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas credit the librarians there with changing their lives. McPherson is sure that if the library had not been there, he probably would have drifted into the street culture as his cousin did. Thomas credits the librarians with instilling in him a love for learning and for exploring the whole world, recalling (as did others) how the imposed silence enabled them to focus on their homework. According to area resident John Law, a janitor would crack a buggy whip when the children got too loud.

Today, staff members are still anxious to help, but times have changed. "Unfortunately, integration and centralization have taken their negative tolls on a number of capacity-building entities in the African-American community," state Senator Diana Harvey Johnson of Savannah said. "This is but one." That's why she was anxious to secure state funds to, in her exact words, "restore and revitalize" the Carnegie Library as a useful entity for the black community.

The funds are now rolling in to do so. In 1998 library boosters secured a \$25,000 allocation from the state legislature. Then the library teamed up with the Historic Savannah Foundation to get \$15,000 from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. These funds are being used to replace the library's roof. And in March, the Georgia General Assembly added \$600,000 to the FY 1999 supplementary budget for the Carnegie Library. Influential officials who used the

library in its heyday have also been instrumental. Savannah Mayor Floyd Adams, who used that library as a child, pushed to make this funding one of the city's top legislative priorities. Although he is a freshman legislator, state representative Lester Jackson was also eager to fight for the funds. He says he be-



Community activist Helen Washington found a funding friend in Georgia State Representative Lester Jackson, who recalls using the library throughout his youth.

came addicted to reading because his mother made him spend three hours at the Carnegie Library each Saturday.

Neighborhood activist Helen Washington is very appreciative of their efforts. She says the renovation will provide a source of pride for the immediate community and a positive symbol of neighborhood rehabilitation. She and other community residents are already working with the library foundation to raise additional funds for furnishings, equipment, and library resources.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York provided funds to build black libraries at the turn of the century in Atlanta; Evansville, Indiana; Greensboro, North Carolina; Houston; Knoxville, Tennessee; Louisville, Kentucky; Meridian, Mississippi; Nashville, Tennessee; and New Orleans. Most have gone out of business. Even with a building renovation slated, that could still happen in Savannah. Returning this Carnegie Library to what it used to be or trying to make it compete with the glamorous and well-stocked Bull Street Library would be disastrous.

Helen Washington would love the Carnegie Library to rival the Atlanta library's famous Auburn Avenue Center (*AL*, Feb. 1996, p. 38-40) or Broward County, Florida's plans for its African American Research Library and Cultural Center (*AL*, Jan., p. 36-38), but understands that the library system isn't up to the task. Still, she has vowed to do everything in her power to ensure the library is relevant and heavily used.

For library board chair Jack Kaster, that translates into the Carnegie Library having a unique mission that draws people from all across the region. He doesn't particularly care whether the library's niche turns out to be African-American genealogy, career development, family or computer literacy, or something else—so long as the building doesn't become a musty museum.

Library board vice-chair Velma McKenzie agrees. "We have to listen to the community," she emphasizes, because "they won't come unless it's something they want."

The Chatham County Commission study group began holding a series of meetings February 26 to get residents' input. Then it will be up to the architect to accommodate those expressed needs in the building's interior design.

MORE MONEY MATTERS

Rare Book Makes History (Room)

The generosity of a library trustee's widow more than 30 years ago has led to a windfall for the Whitefish Bay (Wis.) Library, which accepted a \$35,000 bid from Marquette University Library on March 8 for its 1473 edition of St. Augustine's *City of God*. WBL Director Bernard Bellin told *American Libraries* the money (which was given to Marquette by an anonymous donor) will be used to add a local-history area to the new library facility currently being planned.

How did such a rare gem come to be in a small-town public library's collection in the first place? The widow of Sidney Fraser, a former trustee who served on the board in the 1940s, gave the illumi-