

Library Service for African Americans in Georgia: A Legacy of Learning and Leadership in Atlanta

by

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and

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Introduction

Very little has been written about the experience of library service to African Americans in Georgia. Dr. Casper Jordan, Dr. E.J. Josey, Mrs. Annie L. McPheeters and others provided key information about their own experiences; however, there is still a great deal more to discover. The purpose of this paper is to review briefly the legacy of library service to Blacks in Georgia, specifically Atlanta, from the early 1900s to the opening of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta in 1994.

Historical Overview

Historically, library service for Blacks in Georgia has traveled a long hard road from no library service before 1900, through separate

and unequal service, to our present equal service by law. During the early 1900s, contributing factors such as Southern racial attitudes, housing patterns of the Black population and the various forms of segregation played a major role in the availability of library service to Black Georgians. By the late 1920s, professional library organizations began to recognize the need to provide library service specifically for the Black population in the South. Municipal appropriations along with private funding made possible the development of library and library-related services for Blacks in the South, as well as in Georgia. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, libraries and facilities in many small Georgia towns and rural communities were nonexistent for Black and White citizens. The history of African Americans' access to Georgia public libraries was influenced by two factors—local and

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THIS PAPER IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THE LATE DAVID L. SEARCY, A FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, AND FINE LIBRARIAN WITH THE ATLANTA FULTON PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM AND AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE GEORGIA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION.

national efforts by African Americans and White supporters to establish local community libraries, and the availability of professionally-trained African American librarians who could identify and define the needs of the Black community.

Extending library services to African Americans in small towns and rural communities in Georgia was a laborious task. Libraries were established in these localities by the generous philanthropy of many Black and White individuals from the North and the South. For instance, during the 1930s 81 libraries for African Americans were established in small towns and rural areas throughout the South, including 55 in the state of Georgia. These libraries were known as Faith Cabins.¹ Materials such as buildings, books, furniture, equipment and supplies were solicited by individuals to help establish library services where none existed.

In Atlanta, library service for Blacks got its start through the influence and urging of many prominent African Americans, such as W.E.B. DuBois. In 1902, Dr. DuBois and others petitioned the Carnegie Library Board of Trustees for a library facility for Atlanta's Black citizens. Although the petition was denied, it illustrated the African American desire to use public library facilities. It would be nearly twenty years before the public library needs of African Americans in Atlanta would be met. Consequently, many Atlanta University students never had access to books other than their own textbooks or books borrowed from faculty or ministers.

During the early 1900s professional library organizations did not actively pursue expansion of library service to African Americans nor did they refuse service to Blacks who sought to use libraries in their vicinity. Generally, White librarians did the best they could within the social and political constraints of racial separation and limited library resources.

Atlanta University, a private African American institution, was the first to provide public library service to the Black community in 1903. Although its main clientele was its students, no one was denied use of the library.² The Atlanta University library was funded with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, and for seventeen years it was the only facility in Atlanta that welcomed African American patrons. Finally, in 1932, a new university library was dedicated to meet the academic needs of Atlanta University students, to provide training and educational opportunities for future librarians, and to instill an appreciation for books.³

While Miss Tommie Dora Barker of the Atlanta Carnegie Library confessed to having feelings of "*self reproach when Negro teachers, preachers, or other Negro citizens appealed for reference service*,"⁴ she recommended the building of a separate facility to serve Atlanta's Black population. In the 1919 library annual report, Miss Barker wrote of three urgent library needs. They were: (1) increased funding for books; (2) a "*substantial increase*" in library staff salaries; and (3) "*a lot on which to build a branch library for [N]egroes*."⁵

The Auburn Branch of the Carnegie Library opened in 1921 through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. It was the first branch for Atlanta's African American citizens. From 1921 to 1929, Mrs. Alice Dugged Cary served as the Library System's first nonprofessional African American librarian and branch head. The nucleus of the early reference collection at the Auburn Branch led to the establishment of the Negro History Collection of Non-circulating Books, which was formally named in 1934. This unique collection was created by the merger of the Auburn collection, an inheritance of 200 volumes obtained from the American Association for Adult Education, and materials from the Carnegie Corporation's Adult Education Project.

Seven years after the opening of the Auburn Branch Library, the Southeastern Library Association proclaimed that “*library service to Negroes should be a part of every public library program and that libraries supported by any city or county should be operated under one administrative head.*”⁶ This was old news for the state of Georgia because its public library system was well on its way to becoming a model for other states in the South.

The creation of the Auburn Branch Library for Black Atlantans represented a watershed in library administration and community service. From 1929 to 1959, the Auburn Branch developed under the stewardship of dedicated librarians such as Mrs. Mildred Gaines (1929-1932), Mrs. Anne Rucker Anderson (1932), Mrs. Mae Z. Marshall Shepard (1932-1936), Mrs. Annie L. McPheeters (1936-1940), Mrs. R. Leathers (1949-1957), and Mrs. Goldie Culpepper Johnson (1959-1960). In 1936, Mrs. Annie L. McPheeters was named branch head of the Auburn Branch and became the first African American professional librarian in the Atlanta Public Library System.

Through the nurturing efforts of these individuals, the Atlanta Fulton County Library system has come to possess a fine collection of materials that chronicles the history of Blacks throughout the United States. The commitment of these early Black librarians to the Black community and the library profession challenged the common assumption that Blacks made no significant contribution to the cultural development of this nation.

During the 1930s, public libraries reached out to make libraries more relevant to adult populations by offering adult education programs and service to special adult populations, such as Grady Hospital patients and the visually impaired. In 1940, the Atlanta Association for the Blind was established at the Auburn Branch. Its mission was to train the Black blind

in a rehabilitation center in Gainesville.⁷

The growing desire of African Americans for library service led to a cooperative arrangement between the Atlanta Public Library and the Tenants Committee of the University Homes Housing Project. The tenants appealed for a reading room to be located in the housing project. They wanted the Auburn Branch to loan 100 books each month. After months of negotiations, the University Homes Reading Room was established in 1941 under the supervision of the Auburn Branch librarian. One year later it was designated a branch of the Atlanta Public Library with services and resources free and accessible to all African American citizens.

The origin of this branch is unique because it was created out of the desire of the citizens who resided in this new westside community. For 21 years the small Reading Room in the University Homes Branch offered a variety of resources and services to a community of more than 30,000 African Americans. This small branch had one of the highest circulation and registration rates per capita of any library in the Atlanta system.⁸ The branch closed in 1962 due to its proximity to the new West Hunter Branch, which opened in 1949.

The West Hunter Branch was the third public library for African Americans in Atlanta. It was one of the three branches built from the 1946 bond issue passed by the Atlanta City Council. Its construction increased the visibility of public library service for Blacks in Atlanta. The branch was a welcome addition to the growing Black population in the west side. Many affluent and intellectual Black citizens resided there, and the branch was strategically placed near Atlanta University. Students of all academic levels utilized the collection, and special educational programs were held in the West Hunter branch for the enlightenment of all library patrons.

Library director, Miss Fannie D. Hinton, wrote that, "*the West Hunter Branch is a most welcome addition to our branch family and to the already established branches for our colored citizens. The increase of Negro population in Atlanta's west side, due to growth of the many educational institutions located there, has made an enlargement of library services to Negroes in the area imperative...*"⁹

Although these branches operated with limited resources and minimal funds, the Auburn Branch, the University Homes Reading Room, and the West Hunter Branch played an important role in helping to educate and inform all citizens in the communities in which they served. The branches' library programs included book club talks, art exhibitions, young adult leadership training groups, parent and teen discussion groups, and a story hour for children on the radio. In-house extension services were provided for the shut-in and for voter registration.

The phenomenal growth of library service to the Atlanta Black communities led to the reorganization of the entire Atlanta Public Library System in 1949. This was a first in Georgia and the second reorganization of its kind in the southeastern region.¹⁰ The new Library Service Department continued to expand service to African Americans in Atlanta well into the 1960s.

The opening of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in 1994 serves as a fitting monument to the legacy of leadership and professional commitment of early librarians in Georgia. The collection established by Mrs. Alice Dugged Cary and her successors over seventy years ago in the Auburn Carnegie Branch is now a part of the African American archives housed at the Auburn Avenue Research Library. This valuable collection is available for librarians and other scholars to examine and enjoy well into the 21st century.

Endnotes

1 Virginia Lacy Jones, "A Genuine Effort to Seek Truth," *Library Journal* Vol.88, No. 22 (December 15, 1963) 4703.

2 Annie L. McPheeters, *Library Service in Black and White* (Metuchen, NJ:The Scarecrow Press, 1988) 94.

3 "Meeting Negro Library Need," *Christian Science Monitor* (April 30, 1932) np.

4 "Three Urgent Needs of Carnegie Library Outlined In Report of Librarian," *Atlanta Journal* (December 14, 1919) 9.

5 *ibid*, 9.

6 Southeastern Library Association, *Library Service to Negroes* (Tennessee: SLA, 1928) inside front cover.

7 Annie L. McPheeters, *Library Service in Black and White* (Metuchen, NJ:The Scarecrow Press, 1988) 37.

8 *ibid*, 51.

9 *ibid*, 52.

10 V.W. Hodges, "Old Library System Revamped; Becomes Library Service Dept.," *Atlanta Daily World* Vol.22, No. 74 (November 1, 1949) 1.

The logo for ala.org features the text "ala.org" in a large, lowercase, serif font. A black rectangular button with the word "Join" in white, sans-serif font is positioned diagonally over the top right portion of the "a" and the first period of "org".