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Quiet Pioneers: Black Women Public Librarians in the Segregated South

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Although public libraries existed in the U.S. before the Civil War, they did not become a common facet of urban life until the late nineteenth century. Between 1886 and 1919, entrepreneur and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie encouraged the construction of public libraries by giving building grants to more than 1,400 cities and towns in the U.S.¹ Despite the South's relatively low levels of educational achievement and literacy, southern cities such as Houston, Louisville, and Nashville launched successful campaigns for Carnegie dollars and erected elaborately ornamented, centrally located public libraries at the turn of the century. But when African American residents of those locales attempted to enter the new buildings—whose books, magazines, newspapers, and services were publicly funded by local taxes—they were barred. Consequently, African American community leaders attained their own Carnegie grants with which they built separate public library branches, staffed by African Americans to serve African Americans. In one of the many paradoxes apparent during the Jim Crow era, they thus created a new, if restricted, opportunity not only for those who wished to use the libraries but also for a few who wanted to work in them.²

The earliest black public librarians of the twentieth century are hardly remembered today. Although historians have produced an important body of work on racially segregated public schooling in the U.S. South, they have not studied the related institution of the segregated public library system. Until

recently, they also neglected the community- and institution-building activities of black women, including some who founded and maintained reading rooms and libraries. Historian Anne Firor Scott has spoken of the invisibility of black women's community service work, noting that even her own earlier efforts to recover the history of women's unpaid labor outside the home had focused on whites and thus had told only part of the story. When she began inspecting original documents, dissertations, and published articles and books on the topic, Scott found that black women's organizations had existed at least as long as white women's and that they had established literary societies, kindergartens, orphanages, hospitals, settlement houses, schools, and libraries.³ The works of scholars such as Darlene Clark Hine, Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, Paula Giddings, and Deborah Gray White, among others, have made visible black women who helped build their communities through voluntary labor in clubs and other organizations.⁴

But as historian Stephanie Shaw has shown, black women worked on behalf of their communities as paid professionals as well. Shaw has written about the lives of black women professionals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in her book *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*. Shaw asserts that parents and other caregivers brought their daughters up to become educated individuals devoted to working on behalf of their communities. The same dedication to uplifting the race that drove clubwomen was also apparent in the efforts of professional women employed as teachers, nurses, social workers, and librarians.⁵

Similarly, Suzanne Hildenbrand's anthology entitled *Reclaiming the American Library Past* includes essays on both Jean Blackwell Hutson and Dorothy Porter Wesley. Hutson worked in the 1930s in various capacities at the New York Public Library and began a long career at NYPL's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in 1948, serving as chief from 1972 till 1980. Wesley worked from 1930 to 1973 at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.⁶

The women represented in Shaw's book and in Hildenbrand's anthology also appear in reference sources such as *Black Women In America: An Historical Encyclopedia* and *Notable Black American Women*. In the latter work, Jessie Carney Smith has rescued a number of African American women librarians from obscurity, including Regina Anderson Andrews, Catherine Allen Latimer, and Augusta Baker, who worked at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem. Smith also documents the careers of educators in the field of library science such as Virginia Lacy Jones, Annette L. Phinazee, and Eliza Atkins Gleason.⁷

Much of this work has benefited from and expanded on earlier compilations edited by E.J. Josey, Ann Allen Shockley, and Annette Phinazee, which provided information about the individuals who embarked on careers in

academic, public, and special libraries during the Jim Crow era and who continued working in the changed circumstances that accompanied desegregation.⁸ The *Dictionary of American Library Biography* and its *Supplement* also offer entries on African American librarians.⁹ Such anthologies and reference sources are useful for indicating the breadth and scope of the work conducted by black librarians and for providing a foundation from which further research can proceed.

Southern Obscurity

Despite such important work, the southern black women who were the first to take up employment in public libraries early this century tend to remain the "most invisible of all." Yet they were working in racially segregated southern libraries before most libraries hired African American librarians and before most libraries in the South served African Americans. They created opportunities for themselves and their communities, but they have been forgotten for a number of reasons. First, their stories are difficult to reconstruct because much of the evidence of their lives and labors has not survived. Second, library literature has tended to emphasize the heroic nature of southern white librarians who were willing to extend library services to African Americans. Much less attention has focused on either the African American community activists (mostly men) who negotiated with white city officials and with Carnegie's representatives for separate buildings, collections, and staffs or the black librarians (mostly women) who staffed those buildings, built those collections, and provided those services as part of their daily duties.¹⁰

Spatial and temporal factors figure into the explanation as well. The earliest black public librarians had only high-school educations and library-based training. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, so did many practicing librarians. But in the early 1920s, the Williamson report on education for the evolving profession of librarianship emphasized the need to move training out of libraries and into institutions of higher learning.¹¹ More well-known black public librarians such as Charlemae Hill Rollins, Augusta Baker, Clara Stanton Jones, and Miriam Matthews were of the post-Williamson generation. They lived in places, even if only temporarily, where library education at the university level was available. Rollins was born in Mississippi, grew up in Oklahoma, but spent most of her adult life in Chicago, where she took courses in the graduate library school at the University of Chicago. A native of Baltimore, Baker earned a bachelor's degree in library science from the library school at Albany, New York. Originally from St. Louis, Jones earned a master's degree in library science from the University of Michigan in 1938. Matthews was born in Florida but grew up in Los Angeles; she completed the master's in library science at the University of Chicago in 1945.¹² The first southern college-based library training program to

admit African Americans did not open until 1925, when Hampton Institute in Virginia received a Carnegie Corporation grant in support of the effort.¹³

The women who staffed the Carnegie libraries for African Americans grew up in the South and stayed there, for the most part, working within the restrictions of Jim Crow throughout their careers. They worked quietly, in keeping with the expectations and attitudes of their milieu. Librarians elsewhere made their voices heard. For example, although both Baker and Rollins specialized in work with children, an often overlooked and undervalued area of librarianship, they, in a sense, saved themselves from obscurity. Both women were published authors as well as librarians and both spoke, wrote, and agitated about the need to rid children's literature of racial stereotypes. Both women also left a record of publications that testify to their existence and their accomplishments. Their employment in large, influential urban library systems furthered their visibility as others looked to New York (Baker) and Chicago (Rollins) for leadership. Similarly, Jones and Matthews worked for large urban libraries where they received promotions that recognized their managerial skills and cast them in roles where they represented their respective institutions regionally and nationally.

Although not associated with important research collections or massive urban systems, the African Americans who staffed the separate libraries founded by and for blacks in the first two decades of the twentieth century affected their communities and the individuals who used library collections and services. Recovering the stories of the earliest black public librarians, as far as the extant sources allow, can contribute to a more complete and complex history of public libraries in the United States. This article represents a beginning by introducing three southern black women—Rachel Davis Harris of Louisville, Bessie B. Osborne of Houston, and Marian Hadley of Nashville—who began their library careers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Their stories illuminate the difficulties and the triumphs they faced as professionals attempting to leverage their advantages in the disadvantageous system of racial segregation. Although somewhat isolated professionally by the novelty of their positions, they did not work alone. They had at least one other African-American library staff member and a host of interested schoolteachers to work with locally and they participated to varying degrees in a developing network of black librarians who helped each other learn new practices and procedures. A central node of that network was in Louisville, where the first separate public library branch building for African Americans constructed with Carnegie funding opened in 1908.

Rachel Davis Harris

It was not only Louisville's status as a "first" in library history that positioned

it as an important reference point for others interested in providing collections and services for African Americans; it was also its staff. Most prominent was Thomas Fountain Blue, a black YMCA secretary recruited to head Louisville Free Public Library's Western Colored Branch when it opened in rented space in 1905. Rachel Davis Harris joined him there as assistant librarian and the two worked together until his death in 1935. At that time, she succeeded him. There are records in the archives at the Western Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library related to both Blue and Harris, photographs of them in the University of Louisville and Kentucky Historical Society collections, and published articles by them. The existence of such primary and secondary sources points to the self-consciousness of Louisville's first black public librarians, who understood from the beginning that they were pioneers in creating a new municipal service for African Americans. Louisville was the recipient of a large Carnegie grant, enough to build a central library and eight branches. Because of the activism of local black leaders and the relatively benign attitudes of white city officials, two of those branches were designated for the exclusive use of African Americans. As Blue and Harris and their successors sought to make this new service ever larger and better, they were careful to save the records of their accomplishments and to publicize their achievements. The evidence indicates that over the course of Rachel Harris's 40-year-long career with the Louisville Free Public Library, she took on more and greater responsibilities and had an impact—not only on her community, but on southern librarianship generally.

Born in Louisville in 1869, Rachel Davis was a 1885 high school graduate, which marked her as among the upper echelon of black Louisvillians. She worked as a teacher in the Louisville schools from 1885 to 1903. She married the Rev. E.G. Harris, who had moved to Louisville in 1893 to become pastor of the elite Plymouth Congregational Church, and the couple had one son. In the fall of 1905, Rachel Harris went to work at the new Western Colored Branch, which operated for three years in rented space until its own separate Carnegie building opened. She gravitated toward work with children, mainly because she found them more responsive to her outreach efforts than adults, and she began arranging weekly story hours. She established boys' and girls' clubs that met at the library and visited schools to promote use of the library. Harris also worked with schools to place collections supporting the curriculum in classrooms. Her earlier experience as a teacher made her knowledgeable about the need for such classroom collections and for an availability of reading material outside the classroom that could entertain as well as educate.¹⁴

Five years after beginning her career as a librarian, Harris declared the project of serving African American readers a success. Writing in the *Library Journal*, she acknowledged that whites and blacks in Louisville had wondered whether a public library branch for African Americans would be used enough to justify the expense. After recounting her various outreach efforts aimed at children and

young adults and noting that book circulations had risen from about 18,000 to 55,000 in five years, she concluded:

When we look back now at the time of our beginning we see that our fears were unfounded. Our people needed only an opportunity and encouragement. The success of the branch has exceeded the hope of the most sanguine of those interested in its organization, and we feel justly proud of the results attained.¹⁵

In September 1913 she became senior assistant in charge of the newly opened Eastern Colored Branch, also constructed with Carnegie money. A year later she was invited to give an address at the opening ceremonies for the Cherry Street Branch in Evansville, Indiana, that city's separate building and collection for African Americans. The *Southern Workman*, the magazine produced at Hampton Institute in Virginia, later published her speech with the title "The Advantages of Colored Branch Libraries." Harris told the crowd of whites and blacks in Evansville that library services for African Americans in Louisville were successful because of the support of the staff at the main library. The acquisitions librarian telephoned to ask about orders for the branch, the head of reference visited with helpful advice, the chief cataloger offered training, the children's librarian informed Harris of new developments in serving that special population, and the director of the library expressed his interest by visiting on a regular basis. Harris wrote, "When we started, the heads of the several departments vied with each other as to who could be the most helpful in our work."¹⁶

The speech—and the article it became—suggests one of the secrets behind Harris' success. She understood "how to talk to white folks," a key ability under the regime of racism.¹⁷ Harris was careful to express her gratefulness for the help given her by her white counterparts at the central library. Her rhetoric moved the spotlight away from her own accomplishments and shone it on the whites' supposedly superior experience and knowledge. Yet her message can be interpreted in another way, as a subtle suggestion to white librarians in Evansville to support rather than neglect services to African Americans.

Louisville Free Public Library began offering apprenticeship training for whites in 1909. The next year, the white librarians gave a series of lectures on various aspects of library work at the Western Branch. In 1912, Thomas Blue began conducting an apprenticeship training program for African American participants, including several who were preparing for work at the Western and Eastern Colored Branches. The next year, Houston and Evansville—both with Carnegie building grants for separate black branches—were among those sending apprentices to Louisville. Harris assisted Blue with the training course, as did some of the white librarians from the main library. By 1924, 37 individuals had served

as apprentices. The majority were local women seeking employment at one of the two Colored Branches. But librarians in Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Houston, and Evansville also received their training from Blue and Harris.¹⁸ Both Bessie Osborne and Marian Hadley spent time learning their new field at Louisville. Before becoming the librarian at the Free Colored Library, a Carnegie branch of the Knoxville Public Library, Mary Miller spent two months in the free apprenticeship training program with her travel and living expenses paid by the board of trustees in Knoxville.¹⁹ Mattie Herd Roland participated in the apprenticeship training in 1917 before returning to Birmingham, Alabama, to become head of the Booker T. Washington Branch Library when it opened in 1918.²⁰ As Blue told attendees at the Work with Negroes Round Table meeting at the annual conference of the American Library Association in 1922, the apprenticeship program "caused our fame to spread abroad. Our work was not only accepted at home but it was recognized away from home."²¹

In preparing to teach their apprentices about book selection, Harris and Blue compiled lists of recommended acquisitions. By the early 1920s, they were fielding frequent inquiries on literature by and about blacks. In response, they collaborated on the publication of a pamphlet with the title *Some Books and Pamphlets, Music, Magazines, and Newspapers by Negro Writers, Composers and Editors in the Colored Department of the Louisville Free Public Library*.²²

As her reputation grew beyond the confines of Louisville, Harris began to serve as a resource person for other black librarians hired to open new branches, including one in Georgetown, Kentucky.²³ In 1921, she spent two months at Roanoke, Virginia, organizing a library there. Two years later she was involved in establishing the Dunbar Branch of the Lynchburg (Virginia) Public Library. The branch was not in a separate building but in the high school for African American students. There, Harris, no doubt, met Anne Spencer, who worked as the librarian from 1923 to 1945. In 1918 Spencer had met James Weldon Johnson when he traveled to Lynchburg to help set up a chapter of the NAACP. During the heightened interest in African American culture that characterized the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Johnson helped find publishing outlets for Spencer's poetry. Other Harlem Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay visited her home in Lynchburg, which Jessie Carney Smith has described as "the black equivalent of Gertrude Stein's famous salon in Paris in the 1920s."²⁴

Despite Rachel Harris's travels on behalf of public libraries elsewhere, she continued to expand the collections and services available in her hometown. She worked closely with schools throughout Louisville and Jefferson County, setting up, by 1923, 58 classroom collections in 30 school buildings.²⁵

In the summer of 1930, Harris lectured on children's services at the Library Institute for Negro Librarians held at the Morehouse-Spelman Sum-

mer School in Atlanta. In attendance were 34 librarians from 12 southern states. Later that year, she traveled to the Negro Library Conference at Fisk University in Nashville.²⁶

In 1935, Thomas Blue died and Harris became head of what was by then the Colored Division of the Louisville Free Public Library. Harris worked with members of a Louisville-area community known as Parkland to establish a sub-branch situated in rented quarters in a private residence and later moved to a storefront. In 1954, this library was replaced by a full branch in the new Cotter Homes Project, named after Harris in recognition of her outreach efforts to Louisville's African American readers.²⁷ Harris retired in 1942. A tribute to her, written at that time, recalled her as "a dignified, sweet, and gentle-looking woman...a pioneer children's librarian, gracious and kind to children but never condescending."²⁸ Long after her retirement, Harris remained a stalwart supporter of library services. In 1956 a local newspaper featured a picture of her with some children in the library's summer reading program she had promoted.²⁹

Bessie Osborne

Louisville was a border city with a reputation as one of the better southern locales for urban blacks. Houston had a similar reputation.³⁰ The development of the public library in Houston somewhat paralleled that of Louisville. Houston received Carnegie funding for a central library, open only to whites, and local black activists convinced the city to fund a separate branch located in the black high school. They then secured Carnegie funding for a separate building, which opened in 1913. These local activists also maneuvered for independent governance by a black board of trustees, shifting the institution's status from a branch to a separate library. In 1909, when the city opened the branch in the high school, Emma Myers, wife of a post office clerk, was hired at a monthly salary of \$25. Two years later, in 1911, Myers asked for a salary increase but was turned down and later that year she resigned to move to California. Taking her place on a temporary basis was Pauline Lewis, a prominent attorney's wife and a leader in the Texas and National Federations of Colored Women's Clubs.³¹

Although a least one black branch board member thought Lewis neglected her library work, Lewis was among three finalists for the permanent position as librarian. Application for the position included a written examination consisting of five items, such as: "Name three great English novelists and three famous American Poets and give a brief appreciation of one of them." Candidates were also asked: "How would you make the library of most service to the public?" Lewis, who had attended Houston's public schools for nine years but had not graduated from high school, replied that she would publicize the library through the churches

and newspapers. Another candidate, Pinkie Yates Henderson, who had attended Spelman Seminary, wrote that she would “try to secure the best books by the best authors” and “influence all of the race to aid in the support of the library.” The third candidate, Anna Edwards, a high school graduate who was married and had five children, indicated that she would strive to position the library as a social center and thereby make “the masses of the people feel that it is their institution.” The library did not hire any of these three, instead writing to Myers in California asking her to return to her former position; she chose to stay where she was.³²

Ernest Ollington Smith, head of the black branch’s board of trustees, secured the employment of Bessie Osborne as branch librarian. Although he indicated she was a college graduate and a teacher, a *Houston Chronicle* article about the library reported only that she had graduated from the local Colored High School.³³ Whatever other qualifications she possessed, Osborne was young and single, and those were qualities that her employers found promising. She had no family responsibilities to distract her from her paid employment and she would be flexible and adaptable.³⁴

To prepare for her new duties, Osborne underwent the apprenticeship training organized and operated out of the Western Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. She apparently found Louisville hospitable, noting in a letter to board member Smith that, whenever she visited the main (white) library, she was “treated royally.”³⁵ The white director of the main library in Houston, Julia Ideson, exchanged letters about Osborne’s progress through the training program with her counterpart in Louisville, white library director George Settle. In both of his letters to Ideson, Settle was reassuring about Osborne. He reported that she was competent, if a bit slow, and that, with supervision, she would improve once on the job.³⁶ Intent on improving her knowledge, Osborne took a leave from the Colored Library a few years later, in 1917, to travel to Berkeley where she studied the library system and took courses at the University of California.³⁷

The Crisis, under the leadership of editor W.E.B. DuBois, announced the establishment of the Carnegie library for African Americans in Houston, running a full-page photograph of the crowded opening-day ceremonies.³⁸ Charles F. Smith, a teacher, reported on the library’s activities in a *Houston Post* article commemorating the first anniversary of the Carnegie branch opening. He asserted that many of the almost 2,000 registered borrowers were “working girls and boys.”³⁹ Smith noted that the main problem with the library was its insufficient funding from the city of Houston. The library’s board of trustees concurred in that assessment and held a benefit picnic to raise additional funds. But Osborne reported that subsequent efforts to raise funds by holding picnics yielded no appreciable revenue.⁴⁰

Periodic reports of library activities and budgets offer some information about Osborne’s duties. When the library was still housed at the high school,

visitors to the reading room totaled 226 in March 1910 and 270 in November of that year. Once the new Carnegie building opened in April 1913, the number of visitors increased. Osborne reported a total of 1,904 visitors to the reading room in April and 1,000 in May. By 1916, the budget shows she had to have both the lawn mower and restroom repaired. She paid monthly for telephone service and bought coal to keep the library warm in winter. She placed subscriptions for black-owned newspapers including the *Texas Freeman*, the *New York Age*, and the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*. In all, in 1916, Osborne expended about \$770 on books and periodicals from an allotment of \$2,400 from city coffers. That year she was still earning her 1913 starting salary of \$50 a month.⁴¹

When the new Carnegie building opened in 1913, the branch separated administratively from the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library and operated under the direction of an all-black board of trustees. But in 1921, it once again became a branch of the newly renamed Houston Public Library when Julia Ideson, the white chief librarian, secured the reorganization in conjunction with a budget increase and plans for additional growth.⁴² Bessie Osborne stopped reporting to a board of trustees made up of African American community leaders and came under the supervision of Ideson. Later that year, in October, correspondence between Osborne and Ideson indicates that Osborne again had gone to Berkeley, where she was resting under a doctor's care as a result of "years of affliction."⁴³

Osborne was back on the job in December, reporting that she had registered 160 new borrowers that month. Almost a year later, she noted that 215 children from 5 schools had attended the library story hour scheduled during Book Week. In her report for 1922, Osborne indicated that she and her assistant had visited the schools and held story hours to interest children in using the library. She also reported that more than 200 meetings of clubs and organizations in the community had been held in the library's assembly hall and that 146 people had visited an exhibit of hand embroidery. She also established a Boys Radio Club and a reading club for girls 12 to 16.⁴⁴

In 1924, Osborne was back in Berkeley, but apparently for summer study at the University of California rather than for her health.⁴⁵

By the mid-1920s, Ideson and Osborne's relationship moved beyond that of employer-employee. As respected leaders of their respective constituencies in Houston, both engaged in community activities, including those aimed at improving city services for black residents and more generally at improving race relations. Both became members of the Houston chapter of the Texas Commission on Inter-racial Cooperation, founded in 1920. Both attended the annual meeting of the TIC held in Houston in late 1926. Although the white women's contingent of the TIC was not particularly proactive, the members did respond to issues raised by the African American members and thus helped ensure stability, but not equity, in race relations.⁴⁶

In 1929, Osborne donated money in support of a research project on the status of African Americans in Houston. The organizers of the project arranged for Jesse O. Thomas, southern field director for the National Urban League in Atlanta, to conduct a survey, with questionnaires going to firms with significant numbers of black employees and to welfare organizations. The white male members of the TIC endorsed the survey in a letter intended to encourage white business owners and charity workers to participate. Included in Thomas's 107-page report of his findings was a five-page section on the Colored Branch Library which began:

The Negroes of Houston are fortunate in having one of the best trained and most energetic librarians in the whole country. Undoubtedly largely as a result of her ability and personality, she gets a recognition from and by all the Central Library officials that isn't usually accorded Negro librarians in this section. She is a member of the Branch Staff and sits in council with the officials at all staff meetings as a head of a department.⁴⁷

Thomas provided a brief history of the branch library and information from its annual report for 1928. The library had 9,250 books and 3,340 registered borrowers by the end of the year, as well as a budget of \$4,000. Circulation of juvenile books totaled 41,884 that year, compared to 27,870 for adult books. Fiction accounted for 63 percent of juvenile and 37 percent of adult circulation. Osborne and her assistant, Florence A. Bandy, organized activities for children throughout the year, including 12 story hours, observance of "Good Book Week," and a summer reading program.

Although Thomas relied heavily on information provided by Osborne, he also gathered data from other black Houstonians regarding the library. He reported a widespread belief that the city discriminated against the branch and that certain books were banned from that branch. He recommended that Osborne publicize the fact that library policies allowed a book to be purchased if requested by six residents of the city (30 in cases of a controversial book). Osborne remained at the library only a few more years, leaving her employment upon her marriage early in 1933.⁴⁸

Marian Hadley

Despite the presence of Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and other educational and cultural institutions in Nashville, the city, itself, had a reputation for being more hostile to blacks than either Louisville or Houston.⁴⁹ The main Carnegie library erected just after the turn of the century was open to whites only, and it took more than a decade for black activists in Nashville to secure a Carnegie grant and complete construction on a branch for African Americans. It opened early in 1916 with Marian Hadley in charge. Thirty five people had applied for the librarian and assistant librarian positions. After

discussion with the all-white library board of trustees, white library director Margaret Kercheval decided to interview three. Although the board agreed with her that the one hired as librarian should enroll in the free apprenticeship training program at Louisville, they disagreed with her recommendation that the train fare and board of \$50 for the two-month period be paid by the library. Instead, they made as a condition of employment the applicant's willingness to go to Louisville for training and to pay her own way.⁵⁰

With unanimous approval from the board, Kercheval hired Marian Hadley, gave her two weeks of basic instruction, and then sent her to Louisville for training throughout November and December of 1915. In her absence, Kercheval hired Hattie Louise Watkins as Hadley's assistant.⁵¹

A brochure designed to publicize the library and its policies encouraged use of the building, the collections it housed, and the services its staff rendered. The brochure reassured readers that: "The Librarian has been trained in the work and is qualified for the position. She will be found intelligent, sympathetic and prepared to meet cordially any and all patrons of the Library. She is ready to answer questions; give information about books, and be helpful in any and every way."⁵²

The branch celebrated its first anniversary with a formal observance toward the end of February 1917. In her speech at the celebration, Margaret Kercheval praised the work of librarian Hadley and her assistant Watkins. Kercheval reported "26,999 Negro men, women and children had enjoyed the books in the library," apparently referring to a door count rather than the number of distinct individuals who visited. Among the members of Nashville's black elite who attended the festivities were church pastors, business owners, and university professors.⁵³

Despite the early enthusiasm, the Negro Public Library failed to thrive. Hired at \$60 a month, Hadley was still earning the same amount three years later when she resigned her position at the library to work for the new Blue Triangle League of the Young Women's Christian Association.⁵⁴ Assistant Hattie Watkins took her place.⁵⁵ Kercheval herself submitted her resignation in June of 1920, because of ill health. Rather than hire or promote another trained librarian for her position, the board decided to appoint its president, white newspaperman Gideon Baskette. He told the board that "the Negro Library was not proving to be a success," noting a monthly circulation of about 240 at the branch, compared to 9,000 volumes at the Main Library and about 2,500 at the North and East Branches. He rejected requests from the branch's three staff members for pay increases, and six months later the board eliminated the assistant's position. The board used that salary savings to help fund a \$5-a-month increase for the one black and thirteen white librarians working in the system.⁵⁶

When Watkins resigned upon her marriage in the spring of 1921, Hadley returned to her former position, but this time at a salary of \$70 a month. In

1922 she submitted to the *Library Journal* a photograph and brief text on an innovation in children's services at the Negro Public Library. Noting that black children seldom saw images of themselves, she reported that the library staff had begun to take snapshots of the story hours and of visitors to the children's room. They then exhibited the snapshots along with additional pictures of other youngsters during Children's Book Week. She wrote, "...we find our children always interested in looking at negro pictures and especially pictures of negro children—almost an unknown quantity in their text books.... In recognizing familiar faces the children see the possibilities of their group."⁵⁷ Two years later she left the library's employment and disappeared from its records.

Conclusion

Harris, Osborne, and Hadley took their places in segregated libraries, and in so doing they worked on behalf of their communities. They supported their library users' interest in reading and in learning, and they considered their efforts essential to uplifting the race. Unlike many educated, community-service-oriented black women at the turn of the century, they chose not to teach but to guide. They did not help individuals learn to read; instead, they supported individuals' reading for recreation and for education. Their work with children in particular indicated their own understanding that theirs was a long-term project whose benefits would accrue slowly over time.

As African American women born, raised, and educated in the South, Harris, Osborne, and Hadley understood the barriers that constrained them. They worked within those constraints and accomplished what they could in spite of them. Unlike most African Americans in the early twentieth century, they all had high-school diplomas. They received specialized vocational training to prepare them for library work. Their high-school educations and professional positions placed them among the African American elite in the localities where they lived and worked. Although not as educated as the black librarians with college degrees whose careers began in the 1920s, Harris, Osborne, and Hadley nevertheless found high-status positions that gave them some influence within the communities they served.

Their presence at the founding of twentieth century public library collections and services for African Americans suggests the need to rethink the portrayal of the American public library of the past and the historical development of librarianship as a profession for women. Their presence also suggests that public library history is not only about the leaders who gained national reputations. It is also about those who led at the local level. And it is at the local level where public libraries have their greatest impact.

Notes

1. George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1969), 3, 13.
2. Cheryl Knott Malone, "Accommodating Access: 'Colored' Carnegie Libraries, 1905-1925." Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1996; Malone, "Louisville Free Public Library's Racially Segregated Branches, 1905-35" *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 93:2 (Spring 1995): 159-179; and Malone, "Autonomy and Accommodation: Houston's Colored Carnegie Library, 1907-1922" *Libraries & Culture* 34 (Spring 1999): 95-112.
3. Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990), 3-22; see also Scott's *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
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