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Making Voices Heard: Collecting and Sharing Oral Histories from Users of Segregated Libraries in the South (Presentation for the Oral History Association Annual Meeting, October 2017)

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MAKING VOICES HEARD: Collecting and Sharing Oral Histories from Users of Segregated Libraries in the South

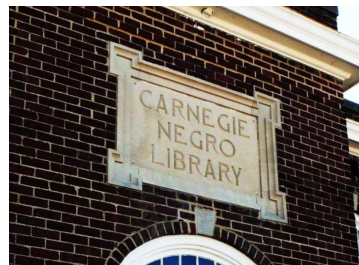


Matthew Griffis, Assistant Professor
School of Library and Information Science, The University of Southern Mississippi
October, 2017

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“Colored” Carnegie Libraries

- Atlanta, GA
- Evansville, IA
- Greensboro, NC
- Houston, TX
- Knoxville, TN
- Louisville, KY (x 2)
- Meridian, MS
- Mound Bayou, MS
- Nashville, TN
- New Orleans, LA
- Savannah, GA



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“Colored” Carnegie Libraries



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Research Objectives

- to document the history of all 12 segregated Carnegie libraries
- to investigate the role they played as places of learning and community-making
- to complete oral history interviews with former users and make these interviews publicly available

Deliverables

- project website
- completed oral history interviews (audio and transcripts)
- articles for BlackPast.org, journal articles
- monograph (with summary of findings)
- toolkit for practitioners

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Archival Methods

- archival research Y1:
  - Meridian, MS
  - Mound Bayou, MS
  - Louisville, KY
  - New Orleans, LA
  - Atlanta, GA
  - Savannah, GA



Oral Histories

- 30-40 minutes
- recollections of library and community
- 4 interviews completed (2 more pending)
- recruitment ongoing



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Recruitment

- leads/referrals
- info from past news articles
- community organizations
- project website (submission form)
- posters and fliers
- publicity: *Southern Miss Now*, *Meridian Star*, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, and *Library Journal*

Did you use the
Western or Eastern Branch Libraries
back in the 1950s or 1960s?



If **yes**, you can help **record the history** of these important public libraries.

The Western Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library, founded in 1905, was the first free public library for African-Americans in the United States. The Eastern Branch, which opened in 1914, served the Smoketown neighborhood until it closed in the mid-1970s.

I would like to locate individuals that visited these libraries back in the 1960s, 1950s, or even earlier, and preserve their memories for future generations to hear and read. The project is being funded with a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

If you can help with the project in any way, please contact me at 601-266-4228 or matthew.gillis@usm.edu. Your help is much appreciated.

Sincerely,
Dr. Matthew Gillis
Assistant Professor of
Library and Information Science
The University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive, #2146
Hattiesburg, MS 39402



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Online Archive





THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY PROJECT
Carnegie Libraries for African Americans 1908-1924

Oral History with Jerome Wilson
November 18, 2016

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Biography

Dr. Jerome Wilson was born in Meridian, Mississippi in 1942. He attended St. Joseph's Catholic School in Meridian from kindergarten to secondary school, whereupon he attended Olin College in New Orleans to earn a BA in Chemistry and Mathematics. Wilson later earned an MA in Immunology and Biochemistry from Cornell and, in 1963, earned his PhD in Epidemiology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He spent much of his career as a researcher and a research administrator in the pharmaceutical industry, later transitioning to academia when he helped set up the department of epidemiology at Howard University. Over the course of his career Wilson held appointments at the National Cancer Institute's Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, the Howard University Cancer Center and the Georgetown University School of Medicine, among others.

In later years Wilson took up historical research. In 2010 he and his co-author, Dr. Ethel Young (also a Meridian native) of Kean University, published *African American Children and Missionary Agents and Parents in Mississippi: Achievement Against Jim Crow Odds*, a book about their educational experiences at Meridian's St. Joseph's Catholic School.

In his youth, Wilson lived within walking distance of Meridian's "colored library" on 13th Street. This oral history interview, conducted on 18 November 2016, focuses on Wilson's recollections of that library and his memories of Meridian in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Jerome Wilson on November 18th, 2016. I'm in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in my office at the University. Dr. Wilson is Rockville, Maryland. We are, of course, conducting this interview over the phone. And this is an oral history interview for the Roots of Community Project.

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Project Website

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A SHOWCASE OF SCHOLARSHIP, RESEARCH, AND CREATIVITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN

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THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY
Segregated Carnegie Libraries as Spaces for Learning and Community-Making in Pre-Civil Rights America, 1908-65

Lead Investigator:
Dr. Matthew Griffis, Assistant Professor
School of Library and Information Science, University of Southern Mississippi
P: 601.296.4229, E: matthew.griffis@usm.edu

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Grant # RE-31-16-0044-16).



Users at a "colored library," 1925. Jackson Davis Collection of African American Educational Photographs, University of Virginia Special Collections, MSS-3072.

Project Overview

The Roots of Community project examines the history of the twelve segregated Carnegie libraries (or "Carnegie Negro libraries," as they were called then), a group of public libraries that opened between 1900 and 1925 and were an official extension of Andrew Carnegie's (and later the Carnegie Corporation of New York's) well-known library building program. These libraries opened in Atlanta, GA; Greensboro, NC; Houston, TX; Knoxville, TN; Louisville, KY (2 libraries); Meridian, MS; Mound Bayou, MS; Nashville, TN; New Orleans, LA; and Savannah, GA. Only one segregated Carnegie library opened in a northern community: Evansville, IA. For as many as six decades these libraries served as learning spaces for

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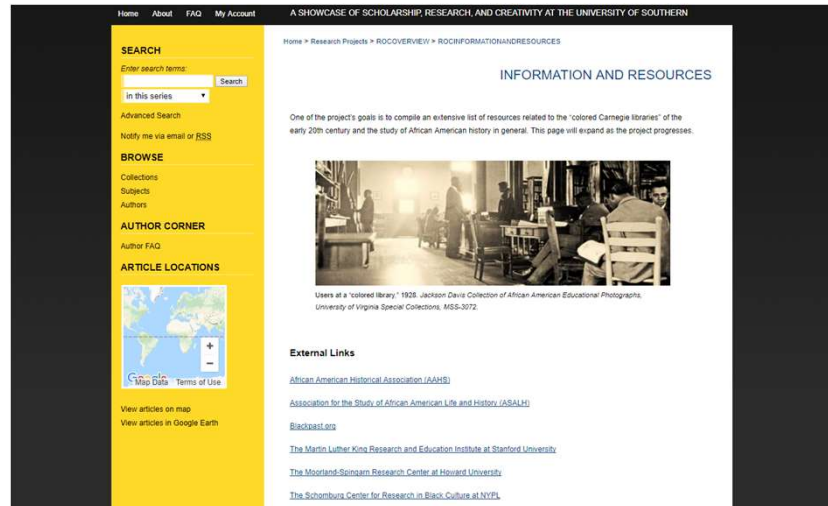
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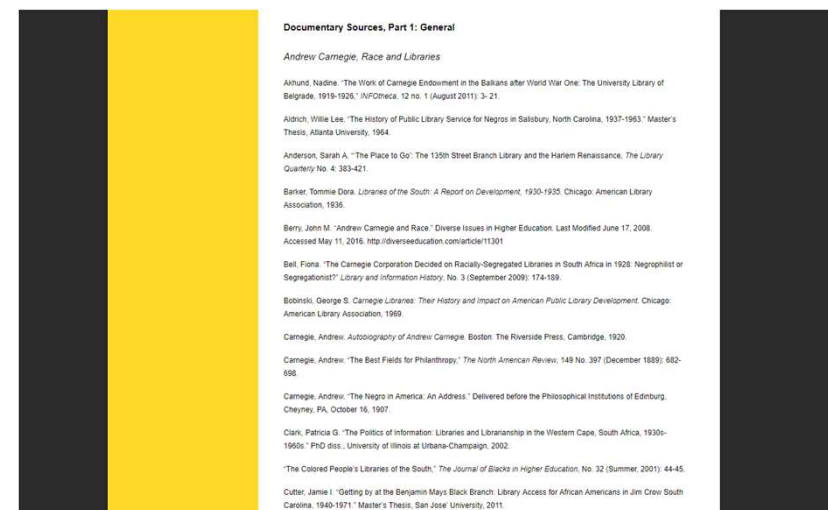
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LIBRARY PROFILES



Users at the Western Colored Branch Library in Louisville, KY, ca. 1927-36. Caulfield & Shook Collection, University of Louisville Archives and Special Collections, ULPA CS 091520, 079245, and 142354.

Auburn Branch Library, Atlanta, Georgia (1921-59)

The Auburn Branch Library was a segregated branch of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta (now the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System). Opened in 1921, it was the first free public library in Atlanta for African Americans and one of twelve segregated public libraries in the south funded by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Formerly located at 333 Auburn Avenue, the Auburn Branch closed in 1959. Among its notable former users was civic and political leader John Wesley Dobbs (1862-1991).

The Auburn Branch's story began almost twenty years before the library opened. When the Carnegie Library of Atlanta (CLA) was established in 1902 with a \$125,000 grant from Andrew Carnegie, it did not allow black users. Representatives from Atlanta's African American community, including Atlanta University professor W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963), demanded that the CLA provide access to blacks. DuBois questioned the legality of using tax money from blacks (who represented about a third of Atlanta's population at the time) to support a whites-only public library. The CLA's trustees not only refused to provide access, they also denied DuBois's request for black representation on their board. They proposed opening a separate library for blacks instead. But after receiving an offer of \$10,000 from Carnegie in 1904 for a "colored" branch, neither the city nor the CLA advanced the project.

Atlanta's black citizens nevertheless continued lobbying for a black public library. When Tommie Dora Barker (1888-1978) became Librarian of the CLA in 1916, she took up the cause and eventually secured \$25,000 from the Carnegie

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LIBRARY PROFILES



The Western Colored Branch Library of Louisville, KY. Carnegie building opened in 1905.

Western Colored Branch Library, Louisville, Kentucky (1905-35)

The Western Colored Branch operates today as the Western Library, an integrated branch of the Louisville Free Public Library system. Though no longer segregated, it remains in its Carnegie building of 1905 and serves a predominantly African American neighborhood. The library also maintains extensive special collections dedicated to African American studies and the history of Louisville's black community. Among the Western Colored Branch's former users is Houston A. Baker, the distinguished scholar of African American studies.

Resources: Cheryl Knott Malone, "Louisville Free Public Library's Racially Segregated Branches, 1905-35," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 93.2 (Spring 1995); Cheryl Knott, *Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015); Joshua D. Farrington, "Western Colored Branch Library (Louisville)," *The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

Eastern Colored Branch Library, Louisville, Kentucky (1914-75)

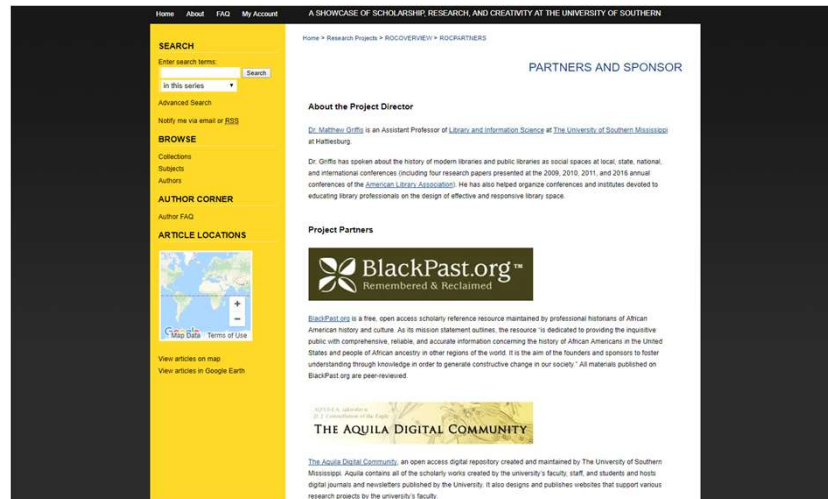
The Eastern Colored Branch was a segregated public library located at 600 Lampton Street in Louisville, Kentucky. Opened in 1914, it was the second of the city's "colored" libraries and served Louisville's east end. The Western Colored Branch, which opened in 1905, was the first free public library in the United States for African Americans. Both branches were among the twelve segregated public libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie's library program of the early century. The Eastern Branch closed in 1975.

The force behind the Western and Eastern Colored Branches was Albert E. Mezezek (1862-1963), an African American educator who in 1902 protested the Louisville Free Public Library's exclusion of African Americans from its libraries. The library board, which had obtained \$450,000 from Andrew Carnegie for a main library and eight branches, agreed in 1905

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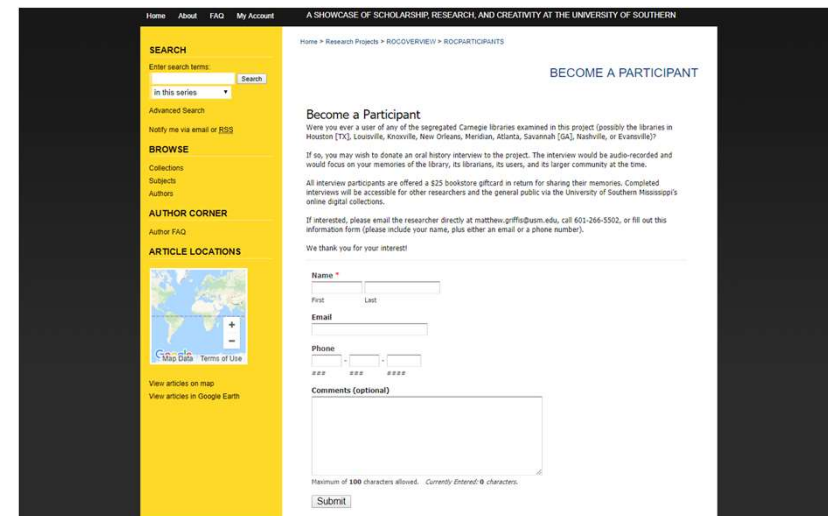
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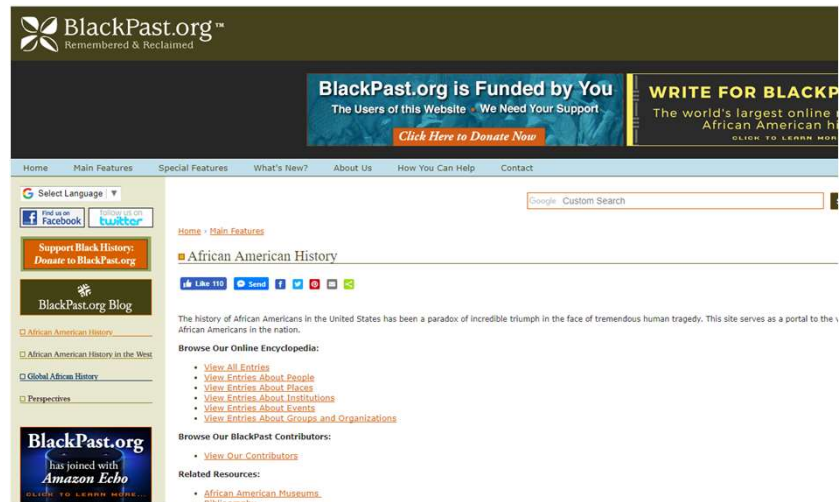
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BlackPast.org



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Contact

Feel free to contact me at matthew.griffis@usm.edu.

Acknowledgement

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The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.



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Slides 2 and 12:

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Slide 11:

Caufield and Shook Collection, University of Louisville Libraries.