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Buildings and Books: Segregated Libraries as Places for Community-Making, Interaction and Learning in the Age of Jim Crow (Presentation for the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing Annual Conference, June 2017)

Matthew R. Griffis

University of Southern Mississippi, matthew.griffis@usm.edu

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BUILDINGS AND BOOKS

Segregated Carnegie Libraries as Places for Community-Making,
Interaction, and Learning in the Age of Jim Crow



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

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Carnegie libraries and race



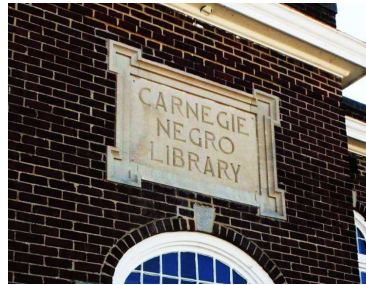
Booker T. Washington and Andrew Carnegie (both at center) at Tuskegee Institute, ca. 1906.

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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



“Carnegie Negro Library”, Greensboro, NC

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“Colored Carnegie Libraries”



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Research objectives

- to investigate the role they played as places of learning and community
 - *How did these libraries fit into the broader framework of personal, cultural and educational support?*



Methods

- archival research
- oral history interviews with former users
 - 30-40 min. each
 - transcripts and audio to be available online



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African Americans and place

"[B]lack southerners were ... the product of neighborhoods, well-defined geographic spaces that were bound together by family ties, work patterns and political alliances, as well as by the peculiarities of the built and natural environments. In such places, men and women knew one another and knew one another's kin and near kin, their religious affiliations, [and] their political ties.... Intimacy made for belonging."

"More than an attachment to landscape, the concept of *place* spoke to relationships, often deeply personal, and the institutions that emerged from those relationships.... The church, Masonic Hall, beauty parlor, barbershop, storefront, and even the street corner and stoop were just as significant to the African American experience as the slave coffle and the Chicken Bone Special, for they were points of sociability where bonds of trust and collaboration were established and maintained."

- Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America* (2010), pp. 25-30.

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African Americans and community

Importance of:

- family and family life
- religion and spiritual life
 - churches and preachers
- education (formal and informal)
 - emergence of black literature
- community organizations and institutions
 - churches, YMCAs, fraternal orders, women's clubs, etc.



New Orleans's Dryades Street, one of the south's "Negro main streets."

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Library organization and governance



Opening ceremonies at the "Colored Carnegie Library" of Houston, TX.

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Library architecture



Main (white) Carnegie libraries in Houston, TX (left) and New Orleans, LA (right).

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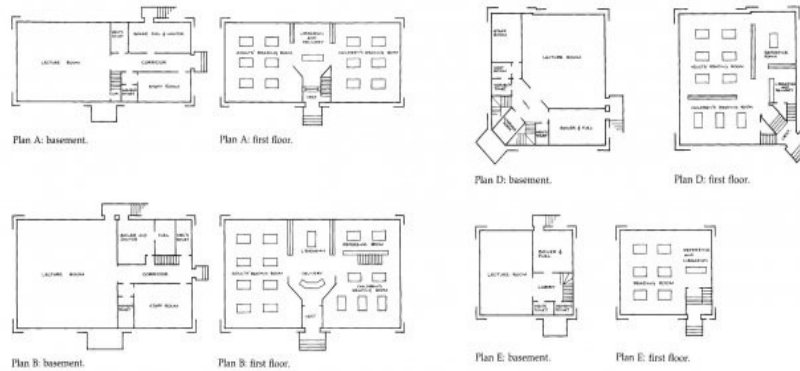
Library architecture



13th Street branch library ("colored Carnegie library") of Meridian, MS.

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Library architecture



Model plans from the Carnegie program's *Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings*.

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Library architecture



Louisville, KY (Western Branch)



Louisville, KY (Eastern Branch)



Savannah, GA



Atlanta, GA

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The library in the neighborhood

"On my frequent hikes to the Western Branch, I crossed indisputably black territory, encountering a rich diversity of sounds, colors, structures, broken and smooth sidewalks, dereliction, poverty and excess, stylish hustlers and down-at-the-heels beggars."

- Houston Baker, Louisville (taken from *I Don't Hate the South*, 2007).



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Educational support and uplift



Reading room at the East Henry Street Library, Savannah.

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Educational support and uplift

"My [elementary school] class would walk to the Carnegie Library each week for a visit. We were greeted by the librarian, then proceeded downstairs for storytime or to watch a filmstrip. Afterwards we went upstairs and selected books.... It was a favorite part of the school week for me, and these visits helped begin my lifelong love of books."

- Rosemary McGee, Savannah

"My parents couldn't afford encyclopedias or lots of books. So I spent a lot of time [at the library] reading. And often, especially when I lived within two blocks, I stayed there until the library closed."

- Jerome Wilson, Meridian

"I utilized [the library] more in the summer because my mother always had a little reading list for me, and so I would go to the library. And of course, Mrs. Mathis [the librarian] would assist me in books that I should be reading."

- Maxine Turner, Meridian

"I used to run to the library to flip through the pages and dream. I remember [the magazines]. And I said, 'One day, I'm going to be able to read this, be sophisticated enough to deal with these kinds of things.'"

- Clarence Thomas, Savannah (taken from *Clarence Thomas: A Biography*, 2001)

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Community meeting space



Assembly in lecture room at the Western Colored Branch Library, Louisville.

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Community meeting space



Douglas Debating Society at the Western Colored Branch Library, Louisville.



Children arriving for storytime at the 13th Street Library, Meridian.

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Supporting public schools



Bolivar Country Training School class at the Mound Bayou Carnegie Library.

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Black literature and library collections



Display at Auburn Branch, Atlanta.

"I was curious about the slaves and how that all came about. And of course, initially, at 9 years old, I didn't fully understand. And it was [the librarian] Ms. Mathis who helped expand and give me a better understanding. In fact, I learned more about African American history—or at least, back then, "Negro history"—in that library."

- Jerome Wilson, Meridian

"[It was] good to know about your ancestors, because you've heard so many negative things about black folk and now you have it in writing of people who've accomplished things. I think it's great for people to know about the contributions blacks have made."

- Ms. Futch, Savannah

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Librarians and community



Thomas Fountain Blue (center), Western Colored Library, Louisville.



Annie McPheeters of the Auburn Branch Library, Atlanta.

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Librarians and community

"They seemed to know everything about the books in the library—and correlatively, to know everything about *me*. I just felt that they knew who I was, who my parents were."

- Houston Baker, Louisville



Children's programming at the Auburn Branch, Atlanta.

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Reading at the library as refuge

"[In 1955], when Emmet Till was so brutally murdered, I passed through a white neighborhood on my way home. And there were *National Geographic* and *Life* magazines on the trash, and I stopped to pick some of them up. The white woman at the house came out, [and] I dropped them..."

- Jerome Wilson, Meridian

"[The library] was just down the street from our apartment, so I solved my problems with the outside world by playing hooky from school some days and going into the library to read books."

- James Alan McPherson, Savannah



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Reading in public as shared experience and identity

"Since I was in public, the seemingly infinite variety of my reading was complemented by an endless variety of library occupants, who were young and old, able-bodied and physically challenged, soft and loud, bellicose and deferential. Naturally, all of the library's patrons were black, or, as we then called ourselves: colored.

"What was so clearly inferable at the Western Branch Library were not only general, democratic vistas of American reading but also specifically African American diasporic valuations of literacy, the library, the habits of public reading as a certain path—in the designation of the great black orator and writer Frederick Douglass—from slavery to freedom."

- Houston Baker, Louisville (taken from *I Don't Hate the South*, 2007).



Reading room in Louisville (Western Branch)

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Contact

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

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Slides 7 and 13: City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library.

Slides 8 and 9: Houston Area Digital Archives, Houston Public Library Special Collections.

Slides 10 and 17: Meridian-Lauderdale County Public Library.

Slides 12, 16, 17, 20 and 23: Western Branch Library African American Archives, Louisville Free Public Library.

Slides 12 and 14: Foltz Photography Studio Photographs, Georgia Historical Society.

Slides 12, 19-21: Auburn Branch Library Records, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History.