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Matthew R. Griffis
University of Southern Mississippi, matthew.griffis@usm.edu

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A Separate Space: Remembering Meridian’s Segregated Carnegie Library, 1913-74

Matthew Griffis
Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Science
The University of Southern Mississippi
matthew.griffis@usm.edu

Abstract: This article explores the largely undocumented history of Meridian, Mississippi’s 13th Street library, a segregated branch library constructed in 1912-13 with funds from Carnegie’s famous library program. Although the library no longer stands, it remains an important connection between libraries in Mississippi and the history of race relations. Using archival sources as well as oral history interviews with some of the library’s former users, the article considers the library’s importance as an early symbol of civic autonomy for Meridian’s African Americans and how it became a valued educational support center and community space. The article closes with a call to preservation, not just of historic library buildings but also of their documentary heritage.

The city of Meridian, home to over forty-thousand people, is one of Mississippi’s most historic. By the turn of the last century, it was one of the New South’s most industrially prosperous centers—poised, in some opinions, to become another Atlanta, Nashville, or Charleston.¹ Touring it even today reveals much about the past: not just about Meridian’s past, but also about the history of race relations in the south.

Meridian, of course, is well associated with the history of race relations, perhaps most specifically with the freedom and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. It also occupies an important place in the history of libraries and race. When retired steel magnate Andrew Carnegie offered Meridian funds for a public library in 1904, it was Carnegie’s first such offer to any town or city in Mississippi.² Meridian built this library on the corner of 7th Street and 25th Avenue and opened it in 1913. Today, it houses the Meridian Museum of Art and remains one of the state’s best-known examples of a Carnegie library building. Less known perhaps is the story of Meridian’s other Carnegie library, which was built on the corner of 13th Street and 28th Avenue in the northwest part of town. Known as the “Colored Library” when it opened in 1913, this second Carnegie building was the first free public library for African Americans in Lauderdale County and one of the earliest in the United States.³ But unlike the downtown library, the 13th Street branch no longer stands. It was closed in 1974 and razed in 2008. And for much of the past forty years, information about it has been scarce.

Last year, this author began a study of the twelve segregated Carnegie libraries that opened across the South between 1908 and 1924. Although we know much already about library services in the age of Jim Crow, and much about the political origins of Carnegie’s segregated libraries, no work has yet examined each of the twelve libraries’ stories in detail and few studies have considered their roles as community spaces.⁴ Space and place, as historian Ira Berlin explains, held profound meaning for African Americans in the Jim Crow south. In the decades following the Civil War, African Americans found a sense of rootedness through the many organizations, institutions, and community spaces that formed in black neighborhoods. These touchstones of community contributed to a sense of shared identity among African Americans and provided a network of social and educational resources helpful to their survival.⁵ This article examines the story of the 13th Street branch, paying specific attention to the library’s importance first as an early symbol of civic autonomy for Meridian’s African American community and second as a place for its members to assemble, associate, and learn. In addition to archival research, the article’s sources include recent interviews with some of the library’s former users.

Carnegie Libraries and Mississippi

Andrew Carnegie’s library program of the early twentieth century changed the course of public library development in most parts of the country.⁶ His proposal was simple: If local governments agreed to furnish a site and maintain their library through taxation, Carnegie would fund its construction. Because it emphasized free access and local support, Carnegie’s program encouraged local governments to abandon many older, membership-based models which
had been popular before 1900. And since most smaller
towns could seldom afford a purpose-built, modern
library relying on only municipal funds, it is
unsurprising that, by 1920, Carnegie’s program was
responsible for the construction of just under 1,700
public libraries across the country. The program
remains the single largest financial stimulus in the
history of American library development.7

Carnegie’s program was not as far-reaching in the
south, however. While states like Indiana and
California opened well over a hundred Carnegie
libraries each, states in the deep south rarely opened
more than a dozen. For example, between 1904 and
1917 Carnegie promised a total of fourteen public
library grants to thirteen communities in Mississippi.
Of these, only ten built libraries: Houston, Mound
Bayou, Clarksdale, Greenwood, Jackson, West Point,
Okolona, Vicksburg, Gulfport, and Meridian.8
Carnegie also funded libraries at Millsaps College and
the University of Mississippi.9 But since Mississippi
was still a predominantly rural state, the Carnegie
program’s emphasis on city-based control of public
libraries discouraged interest from outside urban
centers. Bookmobiles and county library models,
which Carnegie’s original program did not fund,
would later become the standard in most rural parts of
the state. Still, Carnegie’s program introduced some of
first modern library facilities in Mississippi, and to
some extent broadened acceptance of tax-supported
library services within the state.10

Free library services for Mississippi’s African
Americans, however, were practically non-existent at
the time. Public education for blacks existed, and
many segregated schools contained small collections
of books for their students. However, most non-school
and non-college libraries in the state were still library
associations or literary societies. These private,
membership-based organizations had for years allowed
whites to deny equal library access to African
Americans. But after 1900, as tax-supported public
libraries began appearing across the south, white civic
leaders grew increasingly worried over questions of
“equal” library access for both races. Their efforts to
prevent blacks from sharing libraries with whites was
ongoing. Some opened “colored” reading rooms in the
basements of their otherwise whites-only public
libraries. In some cases, African Americans took it
upon themselves to open small libraries in the
backrooms of black schools or in local churches, but
many of these lasted no longer than a few years.11

In other cases, local white leaders opened segregated
branch libraries for the African Americans in their
town and agreed to support these branches with an
annual tax appropriation. For some whites, this
solution probably seemed the most convenient for,
while it provided some degree of “equal” access between races, it also appeared to satisfy demand from blacks for free library services. Carnegie’s library program funded the construction of twelve of these segregated branches. And from an historical perspective, each library’s story reveals much about the state of race relations in that town at the turn of the century.

Meridian and Carnegie Libraries
In most southern towns, the mere suggestion of equal library access for blacks made white civic leaders nervous. Their fears and complaints ran the gamut from theories of possible revolt to the belief that African Americans were incapable of appreciating libraries. The latter view was the case in Meridian—at least in the opinion of the city’s Library Committee chairman, J.C. Fant. “To open a library building equally to whites and blacks would defeat the purpose of the library,” wrote Fant to James Bertram in the summer of 1909. Bertram was the sole manager of Carnegie’s library program, which was headquartered in New York. Fant, one of Meridian’s most prominent civic leaders, was also Superintendent of Meridian’s Public Schools. The suggestion that Meridian provide library access to both races had been Bertram’s, not Fant’s, and the latter’s response was unequivocal. “Few blacks would patronize it and no whites at all,” Fant insisted, “the negroes failing to do so because of lack of qualification and appreciation and the whites because of an unwillingness to associate with the other race.”

Although Meridian was only fifty years old at the time, libraries were not new to the city. It had opened a circulating library as early as 1869, and in 1884 the local Literary and Library Association received its charter. By 1904, this Library Association had formed a sizable collection of books and occupied the second floor of the city’s Board of Trade building. But in his earliest letters to James Bertram, J.C. Fant described his beloved city as one rapidly outgrowing its amenities: “Although Meridian has grown up since the war and might be styled by some as a new town,” he explained, “it is a community of churches and schools and the morals of the people are of a high order.” A new public library, Fant insisted, would “prove a most potent factor in the intellectual and moral advancement of the community.”

But when Carnegie offered Meridian $15,000 in late 1904, the city did not readily accept the offer. in fact, Fant ceased his correspondence with Bertram and Meridian’s application sat for nearly four years. The city renewed its interest, however, in the fall of 1908.
when the secretary of the Library Association asked for $20,000. Fant followed with a letter of his own, requesting an even higher sum—this time $40,000, which he based on an estimated population of 30,000. Bertram once again shook his head: Fant offered no credible basis for his calculations, nor did he account for how his projected population accounted for both races. In fact, he made no mention at all of library services for Meridian’s African Americans—something that caught Bertram’s eye.

Interestingly, Carnegie’s library program neither condoned nor actively contradicted the south’s segregation laws. It simply left local governments to determine their own access policies. But if a city based its application for a library grant on both white and black population figures, it was obligated, in Carnegie’s opinion, to open its library to both groups. But while some southern communities responded by simply abandoning their applications, others used combined population figures to secure larger building grants—only to ban blacks from their completed libraries. Bertram was therefore wise to confront the issue. In his response, Fant claimed that Meridian’s whites outnumbered blacks by almost two to one. He also dismissed the suggestion of equal access between races. There was, he insisted, “absolutely … no call for such a thing and not likely to be for some time to come.”

But whether Fant knew it or not, both his claims were unfounded. Meridian’s population had been 14,050 at last census, 5,800 of which were African Americans. Moreover, at least some of Meridian’s African Americans were indeed interested in obtaining a library. Several teachers from the Haven Institute, a black college located on 13th Street between 27th and 28th avenues, inquired at some point during the city’s correspondence with Bertram about a Carnegie grant for the college’s library. It is unclear, however, precisely when this group made its inquiry.

Though still unsatisfied with Meridian’s calculations, Bertram reluctantly offered the city $25,000 that December. But the city council, which wasted no time commissioning plans for the new building, remained unsatisfied. J.C. Fant spent another year pressing Bertram for more funds for a whites-only library, at one point asking for as much as $50,000. He also enlisted the help of Isaac Marks, one of the city’s most prominent businessmen and a member of the Library Association, who took up the cause on the city’s behalf. Even the library’s architect, Edward Tilton, insisted that more money was necessary to complete the building.

To settle the matter, in the fall of 1910 Bertram requested current population figures directly from the Bureau of the Census in Washington. Although the Bureau would not send its report until the following June, Bertram’s initiative seemed to change something in Meridian. In January of 1911, after telling Marks about the Bureau’s forthcoming report, Bertram once more pressed Meridian to clarify its intentions for equal access. Marks, who surely realized that the city had already approved a $30,000 library with only $25,000 to spend, acquiesced. He asked for a small raise to cover the balance due on the building, whose construction was soon to begin—and “the intention,” Marks finally added, “is to make provisions for a colored library.”

Satisfied, Bertram raised Carnegie’s final offer to $38,000, $8,000 of which was intended for a “colored” branch. Mayor J.W. Parker, who personally wrote Bertram to thank Carnegie for the grant, described how all municipal boards and community groups had enthusiastically and “unanimously accepted” the two-library plan. Still, in December of 1912 when the Meridian Dispatch praised the newly completed main library as “one of the handsomest” library buildings in the south, it commented little about the branch building in progress. It did proclaim, as if to Meridian’s credit, that “the colored population of Meridian was not overlooked” in the city’s campaign for a Carnegie grant.

The Segregated Branch, 1913-74
Meridian’s “colored” neighborhoods were located principally in the city’s northwest. And just as black Atlanta had Auburn Avenue and New Orleans had Dryades Street, Meridian’s northwest part of town had its “negro main streets,” which contained many black-operated businesses, churches, and community organizations. Private black schools like St. Joseph’s existed, yet segregated public schools taught most of Meridian’s African American youth. But while segregated schools often contained libraries, these were quite small and their collections inadequate by public library standards. The 13th Street library was therefore badly needed, and not just for young people.

But when the segregated branch opened in March of 1913, it may have seemed underwhelming in some ways. A one-story, red-brick rectangle, the building was unremarkable in its appearance. While Edward Tilton had given the two-story, downtown library an elaborate, Italianate style with arched windows, the branch’s only nod to architectural sophistication was a stepped front entrance with a pair of windows on either side. The other difference was its size. Although the 13th Street building was designed as a
branch, its users accounted for nearly two-fifths of Meridian’s 1910 population. While the main library housed a cavernous reading room on its first level, and a large auditorium plus several program rooms on its upper level, the branch’s only operable floor was divided between adult and children’s sections with a desk in the middle. Its raised basement may have offered additional space for storage and perhaps even a meeting room, but this is unclear.39 Either way, these differences were obvious for decades afterward. Even in 1958, when a teenager named Jerome Wilson sneaked into the whites-only library one summer afternoon, the differences were clear to him: “It was much larger than our library,” Wilson remembers. “It had the usual stacks, but it was twice, maybe even three times as large.”40 Just as striking was the branch’s conspicuous lack of a sign. While the main library’s builders had engraved “PUBLIC LIBRARY” in marble overtop the building’s front entrance, no such sign identified the segregated branch as a public or cultural building of any kind. For all appearances, the branch could have housed the neighborhood waterworks.41

The 13th Street library’s users were nevertheless grateful for their new branch. Its plainness made it a kind of blank canvas, ready for transformation into a community institution. In some ways, the prospect of a segregated library made the building valuable even before its construction. While the conditions of the Carnegie grant guaranteed the branch annual support from the city, its governance was left almost entirely to the newly formed Colored Library Advisory Board, which consisted of some of Meridian’s “leading members of the colored race.”42 These were: Dr. J. Beverly Shaw and Dr. Triplett, both college professors; physician Dr. E.E. Howard; Jeff Wilson; John Harris; and Frank Berry and Henry Strayhorn, co-owners of the local black funeral home.43 The board’s nucleus had actually formed two years earlier, in 1911, when the city made Shaw, Howard, and Strayhorn the library’s Cooperation Committee to serve as liaisons between the city and the black community.44 When the branch was completed in 1913, the other leaders joined, and newly formed board chose Dr. Shaw as its chairman. Shaw, a graduate of Rust College in Holly Springs, had moved to Meridian in 1906 to serve as President of the Haven Institute.45 Shaw’s wife, Lizzie, was the Institute’s librarian. Haven Institute was affiliated with one of Meridian’s oldest black churches, St. Paul’s Methodist, which stood on the corner of 13th Street and 26th Avenue. Both institutions operated through the African Methodist Episcopal Churches; and the Haven Institute, whose campus occupied land on 13th Street between 27th and 28th avenues, had donated the site for the branch.46

Indeed, the branch’s location was one of its assets. Several black churches were within walking distance, as were many black schools. The offices of several community organizations and groups, including the Masonic Temple, were also nearby. Even the 13th Street library’s first librarian, Mary Rayford Collins, lived across the street at the Haven Institute. Collins, whom the Colored Library Board selected as its first librarian in 1913, remained at the branch until 1916, when the board replaced her with Helen Strayhorn.47 Although Collins’s tenure was brief, it was the beginning of what appears to have been a long career in education. Decades later, Atlanta University would establish a scholarship in her name.48

The 13th Street Library Remembered

Archival traces of the 13th Street library’s operations are scarce. It remained a segregated branch governed by a separate board until July of 1964, when Meridian integrated its public libraries just a month after the Freedom Summer murders in nearby Neshoba County.49 But even after its desegregation (which was peaceful, according to at least one librarian’s account), the 13th Street branch continued to serve Meridian’s northwest community.50 Meridian no longer referred to it as “the colored library” but simply as “the branch.” The city nevertheless closed it in September 1974, claiming that changes in building code requirements made it unsuitable for public use. All the branch library’s collections, as well as its last librarian, Gradie Clayton, were transferred to the Meridian-Lauderdale Public Library building, which had opened downtown in 1967.51

The 13th Street branch survives in the memories of several of its former users, however. Their recollections show that by the 1950s and 60s the library had grown into a valued and well-used community institution. “My parents couldn’t afford encyclopedias or lots of books,” says Jerome Wilson, recalling the role the branch played in his early life. Many of the branch’s users had no comparable access to collections like the branch’s. “So, I spent a lot of time reading. And often, I stayed there until the library closed.”52 Maxine Turner, who also grew up in Meridian, began using the branch as a young girl. “I would go to the library and spend a few hours there, a few days a week,” she recalls. The library was a popular spot for Meridian’s black youth: “Everybody knew it was there,” Turner says.53
For Wilson and Turner, memories of Meridian during that period are vivid. “It was staunch segregation,” Wilson recalls. “There were signs with ‘colored’ and ‘white’ and, of course, you had to ride in the back of the bus.” Segregation was taken for granted and often unquestioned, at least by many of Meridian’s younger blacks: “It was automatic,” Turner says. “For the most part, the black community lived separately,” adds Wilson. “We had all the things contained in the black community that we needed.”

Both Wilson and Turner recall the African American community’s central business district, concentrated along the southwest part of 5th Street. Black-owned businesses included E.F. Young’s Hotel, the Star Theatre, a shoe and a watch repair, and at least two florists. There were also black-operated barbershops, pharmacies, restaurants like Bill’s Café, and funeral homes. But while social injustice surrounded them—“You weren’t respected, really, as a full human being,” reflects Wilson—neither Wilson nor Turner remembers Meridian as an entirely “bad” place for black children in latter days of Jim Crow. “It was a segregated city, but we were exposed to quite a bit of culture,” explains Turner, who attended music recitals at the nearby Wechsler Junior High School. Leontyne Price and Philippa Schuyler also performed in Meridian: events that “would be rather unheard of in a number of other smaller places in Mississippi,” says Wilson. “If I look at the state of Mississippi and my growing up,” he adds, “Meridian was rather progressive with respect to how the black community dealt with segregation.” Turner agrees: “I feel very fortunate to have been raised in Meridian,” she says. “We were exposed to a great deal as black children that others were not in other cities in Mississippi.”

The 13th Street library occupied a special place within this social and informational landscape. In some ways, many of its users remember the library as no different than any “real” (white) public library: “I remember when we went to the library, we had to be really quiet, like you do in all libraries,” recalls Rellie Mae Williams, who visited the branch as a child. But while the branch was much smaller than the white library downtown, it was nevertheless always “full of books, from top to bottom” says Turner, who also remembers the librarian’s many displays and reading centers. “There were books on tables, where Mrs. Mathis had displays set up. She always had different little sections for special things, holidays or events.” The branch was open six days a week, late on weeknights. “It closed at 8pm,” Wilson recalls, “and I was there when Mrs. Mathis locked up.”

Most of the branch’s younger users visited for school-related research or to explore their personal interests. “I read at that library for many summers,” recalls Cassandra Lewis Sloan, who, with her brother, regularly walked the full eight blocks to the library and back. “We came from a family that required us to read, so we utilized the library card.” The branch’s collections and programs were designed primarily for children and teenagers, not just to supplement school curricula but also to offer resources those schools’ libraries did not: “The public library had more,” claims Turner—whose mother, a local English teacher, supplied her daughter with summer reading lists. The branch maintained strong ties with local black schools as well as vacation bible schools run by neighborhood churches. Even the youngest visitors learned how to navigate the library independently, since its librarian at the time, Mrs. Katherine Mathis, regularly taught the Dewey Decimal System to users. “At first, I didn’t know how to use a catalog,” recalls Rellie Mae Williams, “but soon I learned how to use the library for research and enjoyment.”

Many younger members of Meridian’s African American community remember Katherine Mathis, the branch’s librarian in the 1950s and 60s. “She was very giving of her time,” says Jerome Wilson. Mrs. Mathis always had something interesting for us to read, or something for us to do,” Turner adds. “She always made everything interesting.” When the branch began children’s story hours in the mid-1950s,
the new program attracted many young attendees.69
“[Mrs. Mathis] would read stories to us and then ask
us questions about it, and how we could relate to it,”
Turner remembers. “She had a very special talent at
drawing you in. You were just fascinated with her
reading a story to you.”70 Sometimes Mathis’s
assistant, Ruby Yarbrough, would conduct the story
hour. But this did not make it any less memorable for
the young Cassandra Lewis Sloan: “Story time at the
library was one of my favorite things,” she says.71

The branch’s collections were clearly an important
part of its allure. Maxine Turner, who as a girl studied
dance, recalls pursuing some of her early interests at
the library. “I knew it was a place where I could go
and read about travel and explore music books,” she
says.72 Jerome Wilson recalls pursuing his early
interests in mathematics and history: “I was curious
about the slaves and how that all came about,” he says.
“And of course, at 9 years old, I didn’t fully
understand. It was Ms. Mathis who helped expand and
give me a better understanding. In fact, I learned more
about African American history in that library.”73

The last years of Jim Crow were among the era’s most
dangerous, and the social tensions that floated through
Meridian often reminded Wilson of the place the 13th
Street branch occupied in his life. He recalls one
afternoon in 1955, not long after the murder of
Emmett Till, walking through a white neighborhood
on his way home. Stopping at the curb, Wilson noticed
“there were National Geographic and Life magazines
on the trash, and I stopped to pick some of them up.”
But when a white woman emerged from the house,
Wilson promptly dropped them.74 Another time, when
the teenaged Wilson needed a book available only at
the main library, he boldly slipped into the building
through a side door. He was spotted, of course, and
promptly reported to the librarian on duty. “She
grabbed me by the arm and took me into her office,”
he remembers. “She admonished me that I was not to
come back, and that if I needed anything I was
supposed to go to Katherine. And of course, she
addressed Ms. Mathis as ‘Katherine,’ not as ‘Ms.
Mathis.’”75

More than an educational support center, the 13th
Street branch was also a meeting place for its users.
Meridian’s black youth had many places to go for fun:
churches often organized special programming; some
of the neighborhood’s housing projects had
recreational centers; and St. Paul’s church, which by
the 1950s had relocated to the Haven Institute’s former
site on 13th Street, maintained a well-used basketball
court. But even when it seemed the branch’s users
were doing nothing more than reading, they were still
among their peers, and often visited the library with
friends or with siblings. “It was a well-used library,”
Maxine Turner remembers.76 Wilson agrees: “There
were young people, my age and younger,” he recalls,
adding that older teenagers and adults were also
among the library’s clientele. Both Wilson and Turner
were involved with youth organizations, including the Boy and Girl Scouts of America (which, under Jim Crow laws, were also segregated). “You recognized people from different communities,” says Wilson, who recalls bumping into some acquaintances from his Boy Scout troop and others from church, school, and playing basketball.77

Conclusion
Although available information about the 13th Street library is scarce, what does survive suggests that the branch, while a last-minute addition to Meridian’s Carnegie grant, was an important place nevertheless for the city’s African Americans. For while the surviving correspondence between the city and Carnegie’s offices suggests that Meridian’s civic leaders accepted Bertram’s two-library proposal simply to obtain a larger grant for the white library, the 13th Street branch, though smaller, was left to the supervision of a separate, “colored” board, something which helped make the branch an early symbol of civic autonomy for Meridian’s African Americans.

Moreover, while it appears the 13th Street library’s collections and programs were intended primarily for educational support, the library’s existence as a place for quiet reading and reflection made it a valuable community space at a time when few other such places would have existed for Meridian’s African Americans. Recalling his childhood visits to Louisville, Kentucky’s segregated Carnegie library, the Western Colored Branch, Houston A. Baker suggests that reading at the library as a public act helped nurture a broader sense of community and shared identity among its users. “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,” he reflects. “Naturally, all of the library’s patrons were black, or, as we then called ourselves: colored.” This made a difference in his life, and not just when he was young: “What was so clearly inferable at [the library] were not only general, democratic vistas of American reading,” Baker continues, “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.”78 Baker, now a professor at Vanderbilt, is a decorated writer and one of the country’s preeminent scholars of African American studies.

Meridian’s 13th Street library undoubtedly had similar effects on some of its users. At least for Maxine Turner and Jerome Wilson, both of whom would leave Meridian for college, the branch provided them with early opportunities to explore interests that later blossomed into successful careers away from home. Turner, whose primary interests as a child were music and dance, later attended Tougaloo College and Jackson State University, eventually earning her master’s in music education.79 Jerome Wilson would earn a PhD in the sciences and, more recently, become a published historian.80 After leaving for college, Wilson would occasionally visit Meridian during the
summers. He remembers returning to the 13th Street library at least once, not to borrow books but instead to see Mrs. Mathis and, as he puts it, “express to her the values that she helped me develop at the library.”

Although the former 13th Street branch was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, it was razed in 2008. Only a piece of its front walkway remains. Two years earlier, the Lauderdale County Human Relations Commission had announced a plan to convert the empty building into a center for arts education. The project ended, however, when the former branch, which had not been used as a public building since 1974, was determined structurally unfit for preservation. Its demolition was a disappointment to many hopeful civic officials and to the locals who remember using it as a library. Though not all historic libraries can be saved, it is nevertheless crucial that researchers, archivists, and librarians preserve the documentary heritage these libraries have left, and if possible record the recollections of their former users.

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Notes
1 For information about Meridian and Lauderdale County’s social and economic history, see June Davis Davidson, Meridian (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2012) and Richelle Putnam, Lauderdale County, Mississippi: A Brief History (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2011).
3 Several sources claim that Meridian’s 13th Street branch was the first public library for African Americans opened in Mississippi, but this is not accurate. Mound Bayou, an exclusively African American town in the delta region, opened its Carnegie library in 1910.
9 Carnegie also promised library grants to Amory, Greenville and Laurel but various setbacks prevented these towns from constructing their Carnegie libraries. For information about Amory and Laurel’s cases, see the CCNY records, series II.A.a, reels 2 and 16, respectively; for information about Greenville’s case, see “Greenville Offered Carnegie Library,” Delta Democrat-Times (Greenville, Mississippi), Jan. 3, 1912.
10 Anderson, Carnegie Corporation Library Program 1911-1961, 79. Contrary to some accounts, Carnegie did not grant library funds to Mississippi Industrial College in Holly Springs, MS.
12 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Jul. 9, 1909, CCNY records.
13 John Clayton Fant would later co-author a textbook, A History of Mississippi: A School Reader, which was published in 1920 and used in Mississippi classrooms well into the midcentury.
14 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Jul. 9, 1909, CCNY records.
16 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Mar. 16, 1904, CCNY records.
17 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Feb. 25, 1904, CCNY records.
18 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Dec. 12, 1904, CCNY records. In this letter to Bertram, Fant expresses appreciation for Carnegie’s offer and explains that further agreement will be required from the city’s Board of Trade, the Library Association and the Mayor, among others. But Fant would not write Bertram again until June 7, 1909. His explanation for the five-year silence: “I wish to say that in our opinion no opportune time has...
presented itself to bring the matter officially before the City Government until now.”

19 Mrs. Collins to Andrew Carnegie, letter, Oct. 14, 1908, CCNY records. Bertram responded by asking why Meridian had not accepted the offer from 1904.


21 See: James Bertram to J.C. Fant, letters, Jun. 22, 1909 and Dec. 2, 1909, CCNY records. In the latter, Bertram wrote: “You said in your letter ... that you did not know definitely [the black and white populations of Meridian]. If you don’t know definitely, it ought not to be a very great work to find out.”

22 Bertram to Fant, Jun. 22, 1909. “[A]re they [blacks] to use the Library Building equally with whites,” Bertram asked, “or are they to have a Library Building erected for them?”

23 Jones, Carnegie Libraries Across America, 32-36, 93. The specific case Jones examines is the Carnegie library of Clarksdale, Mississippi, which included a “colored” reading room in its basement but closed it soon after opening the library, because its users “overwhelmed the two white librarians”. Clarksdale eventually opened a segregated branch in 1930. For the correspondence between Clarksdale and the Carnegie program, see the CCNY records, series II.A.a, reel 6.

24 James Bertram to J.C. Fant, Jun. 22, 1909, CCNY records.

25 Fant to Bertram, Jul. 9, 1909. Fant based his ratio on enrollment of the two races in the city’s public schools.

26 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Dec. 15, 1909, CCNY records.

27 Broach, The Meridian Public Libraries: An Informal History, 6. Although her work focuses little on the segregated branch, Broach explains how “a group of Negroes ... approached the city fathers about such a library for their Methodist-supported Haven Institute.” But their request was rejected, per Broach’s account, “since school libraries were not in the Carnegie [library] program.” Broach, however, does not indicate precisely when or to whom the Institute made its request, or at least when the city became aware of it. The issue is important as it suggests aspects of the city’s relationship with Meridian’s African American community at the time. Contrary to Broach’s claim, Andrew Carnegie did offer library grants to colleges and, after 1906, even increased his focus on small black colleges specifically. Had the Haven Institute made its request directly to Carnegie, their application would likely have been approved. Yet no record of such an application could be found in the CCNY’s records, and Bertram saved all applications regardless of outcome. Therefore, if the Haven Institute did show interest in a college library grant, it likely brought its request directly to the city. But nowhere in the entirety of its correspondence with Carnegie’s offices does the city mention any interest from the black community in obtaining any library of their own, let alone a college library. The omission suggests that Meridian’s civic leaders may have deliberately avoided bringing the issue to Bertram’s attention.


29 J.C. Fant to James Bertram, letter, Jan. 8, 1910, CCNY records.

30 Edward Tilton to James Bertram, letter, Jun. 27, 1910, CCNY records. Tilton claimed that to finish the library as designed would cost the city $29,900.

31 When the Bureau’s report finally arrived in June 1911, it supported what Bertram had suspected all along. While Meridian had indeed grown since 1900, per 1910 figures it contained only 23,285 people, 9,321 of which were African American. See Bureau of the Census (Washington, DC) to James Bertram, letter, Jun. 15, 1911, CCNY records.

32 James Bertram to Isaac Marks, letter, Jan. 12, 1911, CCNY records.

33 Isaac Marks to James Bertram, letter, Jan. 18, 1911, CCNY records.

34 James Bertram to J.W. Parker, letter, Mar. 18, 1911, CCNY records.

35 J.W. Parker to James Bertram, Mar. 15, 1911, CCNY records. Parker then asked for $35,000 for the main library and $10,000 for the segregated branch. Bertram’s response (if he responded at all) does not appear to survive in the CCNY records.

36 “Mrs. J.S. Hamm is Librarian,” Meridian Dispatch (Meridian, MS), Dec. 13, 1912. Even in his letter to Bertram the following June, in which he praises the success of the main library, Isaac Marks does not mention the 13th Street library. His only subsequent reference to the branch occurs in a letter from late 1912, in which he refers to the branch simply as “Library #2.”

37 See Lana Lumumba and Ann Branton, “Historical Survey of Library Services for Blacks in Mississippi: 1866 to 1954,” Mississippi Libraries, 66, no. 2 (2002): 37-38. The earliest school libraries for blacks in Mississippi date to the late nineteenth century. However, since they were established primarily to supplement classroom learning, they were often small and poorly maintained. As Cheryl Knott observes in Not Free, Not for All: “As schools failed to serve the needs of African Americans, public libraries could potentially take up the slack. This may help to explain African Americans’ interest in free public libraries and the collections that could be used to supplement school libraries or to serve in their place where school libraries did not exist” (p. 52).

38 As he explains to James Bertram in his letter of June 1910, Tilton modeled Meridian’s main library after Hornell, New York’s Carnegie library, which Tilton had designed in 1908. Edward Lippincott Tilton, who is also remembered for the Ellis Island buildings of 1900-01, was one of the most prolific and influential library architects of the period. In his early years, he apprenticed with McKim, Mead, and White, the architects of the Boston Public Library of 1894. Tilton’s libraries often mimicked the Boston library’s shape and style, the best example being the Carpenter Memorial Library in New Hampshire, which opened in 1914. Tilton also designed Vicksburg, Mississippi’s Carnegie library of 1916. Interestingly, though it appears Tilton was the only architect Meridian hired to design its libraries, nothing in the CCNY records directly links the 13th Street branch’s design to him.

39 The model building plans that Bertram regularly sent architects show that raised basements were mandatory in nearly all Carnegie libraries of this period. These basements usually contained storage rooms and at least one lecture room. (For reproductions of these model plans, see the Bobinski, van Slyck, or Jones books listed in note number 4.) However, since no original building plans for the 13th Street library could be located, it is unclear whether the 13th Street branch’s basement included these spaces. Former library users interviewed for this project could not recall visiting the basement.

40 Author interview with Jerome Wilson, November 2016.

41 Other cities, among them Louisville, Kentucky and Houston, Texas, opened segregated Carnegie branches in noticeably elegant buildings.

42 “Mrs. J.S. Hamm is Librarian,” Meridian Dispatch (Meridian, MS), Dec. 13, 1912.

43 Ibid.

Central Alabama Institute, Birmingham, Alabama. President J.B.F. Shaw, PhD,” *The Christian Educator* 27, no. 3 (1916): 6. Also see Meridian’s city directories for this period.


City directories show that the Collinses (Mary and her husband Malachi) departed Meridian by 1917. Some sources (see following note) also indicate that they moved to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where Mary’s husband managed a funeral home.

The finding aids for the Collins Family Papers (1889-1988), created by the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, contain much biographical information about Mary Augusta Rayford Collins, Malachi C. Collins and Emma Claire Collins Harvey.


Author interview with Maxine Turner, January 2017.

Wilson interview.

Turner interview.

Wilson interview.

Ibid.

Turner interview.

Wilson interview.

Wilson interview.


Turner interview.

Wilson interview.

Owens, “Study stirs”.

Owens, “Study stirs”.

Turner interview.

Wilson interview.

Turner interview.

Broach, 42.

Turner interview.

Owens, “Study stirs”.

Turner interview.

Wilson interview.

As Wilson explained in his interview, this woman was not angry and encouraged him to take the magazines. In fact, she also offered him a job doing yardwork. But Wilson’s mother, concerned with growing racial tensions from the Emmett Till case of 1955, advised against it.

Wilson interview. Wilson claims his motivations were practical, not political: “I didn’t go in with any real sense that ‘I’m going to integrate the library’…. I figured that library contained what I needed, so I went there and got it.”

Wilson interview.

Wilson interview.


Turner interview.

Wilson interview. See also Ethel E. Young and Jerome Wilson, *African American Children and Missionary Nuns and Priests in Mississippi: Achievement Against Jim Crow Odds* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2010).

Wilson interview.

Bibliography


