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Library Service to African Americans in Kentucky

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REVIEWS

Library Service to African Americans in Kentucky. By REINETTE F. JONES. Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2002. Pp. viii+200. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN 0-7864-1154-6.

During the first half of the twentieth century, an era when towns and cities in the American South excluded millions of black readers from “white” libraries, Jim Crow branches for African Americans survived as best they could, with meager public funding and with the active support of the constituencies they served. White library boards often shunted public libraries for African Americans into rented spaces or into rooms donated by churches or civic organizations. Not so for Louisville, Kentucky, a city with not one, but two, fine Carnegie library buildings constructed for the exclusive use of the black population. Correspondingly, it was a city where black readership was high, and Louisville became the home of the first significant library education program for African Americans. Reinette F. Jones’ book is the first dedicated to the library history of blacks in Louisville and in the rest of Kentucky.

Between 1908 and 1947, Louisville developed a segregated system of public libraries that was considered the leading example of the region’s custom of separating black readers from white. The city’s western (1908) and eastern (1914) branches—which constituted Louisville’s “Colored Department”—opened in new Carnegie library buildings, and they featured an entirely African-American staff, including Reverend Thomas F. Blue, who directed the department. Louisville’s library system became the benchmark for other southern cities interested in public libraries for blacks (p. 50). In 1912, under the direction of Blue, Louisville opened its own library training program, which was the only library education opportunity available for blacks in the South until Hampton Institute’s library school appeared in 1925. The Louisville program trained librarians for the African American public library branches that were opening in Atlanta, Birmingham, Houston, Knoxville, Tampa, and other cities across the South during the period.

Though Kentucky was a state where racial segregation was both custom and law, and though it provided some of library segregation’s most elaborate manifestations, Kentucky occasionally broke from the pattern of black library service set in states further south. Berea College, with its roots in the abolitionist movement, opened in 1866, and the school, along with its campus library, served both blacks and whites until 1904 when the state legislature outlawed integrated higher education. In terms of public libraries, Covington, Kentucky’s library board ruled in 1901 that its facility “in all its parts shall be open to every man, woman and child” in the community (p. 65). Forty years later, Covington’s still was only one of five southern public libraries that admitted African Americans without restriction.

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Jones' book is more aptly described as an annotated and pictorial chronology of events than an interpretive historical narrative; the work's segmented organization characterized by numerous instances of repetition suggests that the author intends it to be used as such. Historical analysis of social and political factors seemingly is outside the purview of the study, which the author asserts is not intended to be a comprehensive coverage of the subject but a "base, a footing" toward greater understanding of the origins of black librarianship in Kentucky (p. 2).

As a result, the book leaves a number of questions for further study. For example, what made the town of Covington, with its anomalous integrated public library, so different from the rest of the state and region? Jones asserts that Covington had a "fairly tolerant community" and a "forward-thinking" library board, but it would be helpful to know if there were demographic, economic, political, or other characteristics that shaped the social climate the author describes (p. 6). Also, why did Louisville, where a tradition of segregated public library service was so firmly entrenched, become a relatively early adopter of integration? Perhaps the city's actions merely were a natural extension of the emphasis that Louisville placed on library service for African Americans, but the politics of race in southern cities rarely were so uncomplicated. In general, the subject of library desegregation during the 1950s and 1960s warrants closer examination, though the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky's libraries may have been less tumultuous than in those of other southern states. Likewise, the author mentions only in passing the Depression era programs such as the Works Progress Administration and Tennessee Valley Authority, which played significant roles in library development elsewhere in the region.

Jones makes good use of reports, studies, and other materials published contemporaneously with the events that she describes. Other primary sources tapped include the Kentucky Library Association (KLA) archives, which provide information on the unhappy compromise in which blacks were allowed to join KLA by 1940 but remained segregated in terms of meals and accommodations at annual conferences. The author also consults library board minutes for one community. Additional use of this type of firsthand material and—for the latter period—oral histories may have provided further insight.

Once finished with Jones' book, those interested in the history of black library service in Kentucky may want to continue their reading with two related journal articles: John Wilkins' short piece on "Blue's 'Colored Branch'" in *American Libraries* 7 (1976): 256–57 and Cheryl Knott Malone's "Books for Black Children: Public Library Collections in Louisville and Nashville, 1915–1925" in *Library Quarterly* 70 (April 2000): 179–200.

The primary strength of Jones' book is that it covers a topic on which far too little has been written. Book-length studies of library segregation—though more common than a few years ago—still are unusual, despite the social significance of the subject and its relevance to the historical development of professional values among librarians. Also, Jones brings an important perspective. The preface suggests that the author has an attachment to the subject matter beyond the scope of scholarly inquiry. She perceives a kinship to this history and a sense that she is the professional legacy of the African American librarians about whom she writes.

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