Public Librarians and the Civil Rights Movement: Alabama, 1955-1965

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Racial segregation in southern public libraries affected millions of African Americans before the Civil Rights movement, and for librarians in the South it created a conflict between professional and regional values. Ultimately, it was the efforts of black activists rather than librarians acting on their ethical impulses that ended library segregation. Librarians were constrained by local racial customs, Jim Crow laws, and, often, by their own racial attitudes. Also, librarians recognized that there were inherent dangers associated with defying the segregationists. There were a few, however, who challenged the racial status quo, and these individuals demonstrated the potential of librarians to change society.

Introduction

The tradition of American public libraries is tied closely to the perception that individuals regardless of their social backgrounds may freely access information in those institutions in the interest of self-improvement, social awareness, and entertainment. Born of a democratic impulse, or at least a reform-minded one, this right to read is associated with national issues of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression. It is embodied in the American Library Association's (ALA's) own declarations regarding censorship and information equity.

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There have been, however, many exceptions to this ideal. Quantitatively, the most significant of these was the exclusion of millions of African Americans from southern public libraries before the Civil Rights movement. Public libraries in the South developed in a pattern dictated by a segregated society. Public libraries were for whites only before the 1960s, except for the small, understaffed, and underfunded “Negro branches” that operated in the urban South [1].3 For fifty-five years, black community groups worked within the context of racial segregation to improve library service for their race. But by the mid-1950s, they turned their attention toward desegregating the “white” public libraries. The result was the read-in movement that touched libraries throughout the South by 1965 and that ultimately ended public library segregation. At the same time, public libraries came under attack from white segregationists who sought to ban books that contradicted the racial status quo.

The Civil Rights movement left public librarians in the South with a professional dilemma. These individuals experienced a conflict of values that pitted the ethics of librarianship against southern racial mores. The presence of library censorship and library segregation held a mirror to the profession and tested librarianship’s commitment to the values it professed to hold. This professional dilemma was less intense for African American librarians, since it was the “white” institutions rather than theirs that most required racial reform [2].4 But for both black and white librarians, there were social, economic, and even physical dangers associated with open opposition to the prevailing racial order.

The Civil Rights movement became a key event in the evolution of librarians’ professional values, but only recently has this important chapter in the history of librarianship begun to be addressed in the scholarly literature. Virginia Lacy Jones began a 1962 article, “One phase of American library history that has been neglected is the struggle of the Southern Negro to secure public library service” [3, p. 4504]. Thirty-nine years later, library historians can repeat this sentence with similar conviction.

Events in Alabama vividly portray the troubled relationship between librarianship and race during the movement years. Alabama was one of the most segregated southern states, and it became a crucible in the

3. According to the Southern Regional Council, sixteen southern communities allowed full service for blacks in their main libraries in 1941, and fifty-nine did so in 1953. Most of these communities were in the border states (between the North and South) and had small African American populations.

4. For additional information on African American librarians in Alabama, see [2].
Civil Rights movement. The 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott, the 1963 Birmingham demonstrations, George Wallace's 1963 "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door," and the 1965 Selma voting rights march were events in Alabama that deeply affected America's racial conscience. As conspicuous institutions of culture and education, public libraries often became entangled in the state's racial troubles. During the 1960s, libraries in Alabama were the scenes of civil rights protests, Klu Klux Klan activity, and even mob violence.

The experiences of Juliette Morgan, Emily Reed, and Patricia Blalock best illustrate the precarious position of public librarians in Alabama during the Civil Rights movement. These individuals challenged the forces of massive resistance, sometimes with tragic results. Also significant was the arduous path toward integration for the state library association. As a group, Alabama librarians had great difficulty in coming to terms with matters of race. Even at the cost of its ALA chapter status, the association excluded blacks from its membership until 1965, two years after all of the public libraries in urban Alabama had been desegregated.

Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Opposing the forces of massive resistance could be dangerous, even for native white southerners, as Morgan, a reference librarian at Montgomery's Carnegie Library, learned in 1955. Morgan was a "sensitive, delicate young woman from a fine old Alabama family" [9, p. 36]. She was an educated and conscientious person who took exception to the racial customs into which she was born. As a result of her candid expressions of sympathy and admiration for civil rights workers during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, she became an object of scorn and persecution by other whites in the city.

Morgan was one of the few white integrationists in Montgomery who belonged to the Alabama Human Relations Council. This group of professional and business people in Montgomery held clandestine biracial meetings, working quietly to improve race relations in the city. The group was Alabama's affiliate of the Southern Regional Council. It was the state's most important, and Montgomery's only, interracial organization, "a meeting point for men and women of good will of both races" that advocated equal opportunity for African Americans [10, p. 277]. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and 1956, a few from this small contingent spoke openly in favor of the position of

5. For information on the Civil Rights movement in Alabama, see [4–8].
Martin Luther King, Jr., and the black Montgomery Improvement Association. Morgan became the most visible of these [11, pp. 66–67, 617].

The boycott, which followed the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white man, deeply moved Morgan. She believed in the aims and the methods of Montgomery’s African American citizens, who adopted passive resistance to address racial discrimination in the city’s public transportation system. A week after the demonstration began, the reclusive and normally private librarian wrote a letter to the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser enthusiastically and eloquently lauding the efforts of the Montgomery Improvement Association and the rest of the participants in the bus protest. Referring to the use of taxis to transport troops in the defense of Paris during World War I, she asserted that “Not since the First Battle of the Marne has the taxi been put to as good use as it has this last week in Montgomery” [12]. Morgan compared the exodus of black domestic workers walking from their jobs in the affluent Cloverdale district of Montgomery, Alabama, back to their homes on Mobile Road to Gandhi’s Salt March during India’s struggle to secure independence from Britain.

Morgan’s final and most remarkable assertion was that history would record the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the city’s most significant contribution to posterity. “One feels that history is being made in Montgomery these days,” she wrote, “the most important in [the city’s] career” [12]. This argument left most whites believing that Morgan was “something of a ninny” [5, p. 144]. Montgomery had been the birthplace of the Confederacy. It was inconceivable to most people in 1955–56 that a strike against the city buses would be a milestone on the path of America’s changing racial conscience.

The reaction of whites to Morgan’s letter was both cruel and prolonged. Over a period of a year and a half, the librarian suffered constant harassment by whites, particularly young people, who threw rocks through the windows of her home, where she lived with her mother. They insulted her on the streets and played tricks on her at the library. Morgan received a string of lewd and threatening telephone calls at both home and work. Her obvious sensitivity to these reprisals only served to encourage the perpetrators to do worse. In addition to the heartless pranks, segregationists brought pressure on the city to fire Morgan on account of her racial views. Unable to cope with the unabating persecution, Morgan eventually took a leave of absence from her work at the city library [9, p. 37; 5, p. 144].

Shortly after, on the night of July 17, 1957, Morgan died. The exact cause of Morgan’s demise has been the subject of speculation. It was generally believed that her death was a suicide, brought on by her extreme unhappiness as a result of the harassment she had endured over
the previous year and a half. Using interviews with individuals ac-
quainted with the unfortunate librarian, Taylor Branch asserts in *Part-
ing the Waters* that the death was a self-administered poisoning [5, p. 144]. The official certificate of death attributed the event to a sudden heart attack resulting from hypertension [13]. Regardless of the precise physiological circumstances of Morgan’s passing, the city’s black citi-
zens, including King, and its sympathetic whites believed that Morgan had been persecuted to death because of her opposition to the racial status quo [14, p. 85].

If white librarians in Alabama held any illusions that the high-
minded nature of their occupation would protect them from the segre-
gationists, those illusions were dispelled with the death of Morgan. Morgan never publicly expressed the exact nature of her views in re-
gard to discrimination by the library at which she was employed. But her experiences between December 1955 and July 1957 demonstrated what might happen to other white librarians who thought of doing so. Morgan would be the last white public librarian in the state to speak openly in favor of civil rights for black citizens during the movement years.

Emily Wheelock Reed and *The Rabbits’ Wedding* Controversy

The racial turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s created a climate of fear that fostered the censorship of library materials. The white Citizens’ Councils, the Ku Klux Klan, and even governmental officials clamored for the suppression of library materials they construed as sympathetic to integration. The prospect of book banning coupled the racial trou-les of the era with librarians’ professional ethics in a way that the controversy surrounding Morgan had not. In Alabama, the most visible illustration of the association between segregation and censorship came two years after Morgan’s death, when the state legislature, led by State Senator E. O. Eddins, tried to remove Emily Wheelock Reed, the director of Alabama’s public library agency, from office because of her stand for intellectual freedom. Like Morgan, Reed provided an exam-
ple of what happened to librarians who challenged the racial status quo. In 1959, Alabama’s state library agency, the Public Library Service Division, and particularly its director, Reed, came under attack from the state legislature because lawmakers believed the agency was being used to disseminate books espousing racial integration and commu-
nism to Alabama’s public libraries. The controversy centered around a children’s book entitled *The Rabbits’ Wedding*, which, according to some legislators, advanced the practice of miscegenation. Prosegrega-
tion politicians also resented Reed’s refusal to disclose her opinion in regard to racial segregation, and they opposed the Library Service’s practice of disseminating “notable books” lists generated by the ALA, which contained some works sympathetic to the Civil Rights movement.

In 1958, Harper & Row published The Rabbits’ Wedding, by Garth Williams, a book aimed at children between ages three and seven. The story is about two rabbits, one male and the other female, that play together in a meadow every day. Ultimately, the furry creatures decide that they want to marry. The other animals of the forest assemble for the rabbits’ wedding, and the two live happily ever after [15].

The seemingly innocent story became the center of controversy in Alabama and in other southern states, not because of the subject matter or plot, but because of the colors the illustrator used to help the young readers distinguish between the two rabbits. The male rabbit is black and the female white. Orlando Sentinel columnist Henry Balch railed against Williams’ work: “As soon as you pick up the book, you realize these rabbits are integrated.” He suggested that the book was an attempt to “brainwash” white children [16]. In Alabama, Montgomery’s organ of its local white Citizens’ Council, the Home News, took up the issue of the book. In a column entitled “What Your Children Read,” the Citizens’ Council writer asserted facetiously, “What’s Good Enough for Rabbits Should Do for Mere Humans,” implying that the rabbit book was a subtle lesson in miscegenation [17].

The controversy that soon arose over The Rabbits’ Wedding pitted State Senator Eddins against Library Service director Reed. E. O. “Big Ed” Eddins, of Marengo County in Alabama’s Black Belt, was the son of a Confederate veteran and a staunch segregationist. He was a six-foot-one-inch, 250-pound ex-marine, “a man you don’t push around” [18]. He had fought in World War I as a fifteen-year-old and had become an oil distributor in Demopolis, Alabama, before beginning his career as a state legislator in 1943. Eddins had been a friend to the agents of library development before the Civil Rights movement; he cosponsored the first state appropriation for public libraries and then continued work toward adequate spending for library services. But by the mid-1950s, he had become known more for his strong stands on matters of race than for his efforts on behalf of libraries. In one of his more dramatic early attempts to address racial tension in the state, Eddins introduced a resolution in 1956, which sought federal funds to pay for a mass resettlement of black Alabamians in the North and the West [18–20].

Reed assumed the directorship of the Public Library Service Division in 1957. She was born in Asheville, North Carolina. The state library board made much of her credentials as a native southerner when they
hired Reed, but in fact she spent only her first year in Asheville and considered herself a Midwesterner. Reed graduated from Indiana University, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She earned a library degree cum laude at the University of Michigan. Reed had worked at the University of Michigan, Florida State University, the Detroit Public Library, a public library in Kauai, Hawaii, and, most recently, the state library agency in Louisiana before coming to Alabama. Gretchen Shenk, the interim director, predicted that Reed would soon become attached to Alabama “as everyone does who spends a while” in the state, but the new director was not so fortunate [21]. Her career in Alabama was troubled and relatively brief.

In a harbinger of the conflict to come, Reed found herself before Eddins and the Alabama State Senate Interim Taxation Committee in March of 1959 being questioned about her agency’s book holdings. She had appeared to discuss the Library Service’s budget for the upcoming year, but State Senator Eddins had other priorities. He had identified seven books dealing with “segregation and communism,” and he took the opportunity of Reed’s presence before the committee to ask her whether these books were being circulated by the library division. Reed replied that she did not know, but she promised to provide the requested information at a later time [22].

In May 1959, Reed appeared before Eddins again, this time in a meeting of the Senate Finance Committee. Reed had come to renew her appropriation request for the Library Service. Once again, Eddins questioned her about the practices of the library division, insinuating that the agency was disseminating information that flagrantly advocated race mixing [23, 24].

In an exchange that carried over into the state’s newspapers, Eddins asserted that Williams’ book about the marriage of a white and a black rabbit was a particularly dangerous example of the kind of antisegregationist material that Reed held at the state’s library agency. Eddins posed for newspaper cameramen holding a copy of The Rabbits’ Wedding and thundered to reporters that “this book and many others should be taken off the shelves and burned” [24]. He warned that there were other unacceptable books being circulated by the Library Service; some were “of the same nature” as the rabbit book and others were “communistic.” When asked about the implications of his actions for freedom of expression, Eddins asserted that the South could tolerate but one viewpoint on race relations: “The integrationist doesn’t have any right to express his opinion, not down here” [25, p. 17]. Off the record, some of the state senator’s colleagues expressed their disapproval of Eddins’ position to reporters, but they declined to oppose Eddins publicly for fear of being labeled “prointegration” [24].
Reed refused to remove *The Rabbits' Wedding* from circulation. When her agency originally purchased Williams' book in 1958, the cataloger confronted Reed with a vague warning that the work had the potential to bring trouble. Reed had dismissed the comment, seeing "no reason for tossing it out." She thought that children would enjoy the book and remembers, "I couldn't believe that anybody would get excited
about rabbits, for heaven’s sake!” [26]. Reed had not sought a conflict, but once she had added the book to the state library’s collection, she felt an ethical responsibility to defend it against censorship. When Eddins demanded the removal of *The Rabbits’ Wedding* in May of 1959, Reed told him that she would not comply.

This decision to keep Williams’ book put Reed in a difficult position; along with her commitment to preserve intellectual freedom, she had her agency’s financial needs to consider. Eddins had threatened to impede the approval of Reed’s budget on account of her alleged advocacy of controversial books. She reacted to the state senator’s criticisms of the Williams’ work, in particular, by asserting that the Library Service purchased it on the basis of favorable reviews from reputable sources and that she saw “nothing objectionable” in the work [24]. She added that she even liked *The Rabbits’ Wedding*. Reed argued that even if the book could be construed as prointegration, the library agency had a responsibility to provide information “on all sides of a question” [26]. She emphasized that the Library Service also held books espousing racial separation, like *You and Segregation* by Herman E. Talmadge [27].

Reed refused to concede to Eddins’ demands because “it would not be morally right,” but as a concession to the state senator and the other segregationists who had complained about the book, she placed it on a special shelf created for racially controversial materials [28]. Reed emphasized, however, that the book was not banned, that *The Rabbits’ Wedding* was “available for anyone who wants to read it” [24]. She asserted that the book remained on the open shelves of some of the public libraries in Alabama and invited librarians who wanted the book for their own institutions to feel free to borrow it from the Library Service.

The controversy surrounding the children’s book quickly drew national attention. An observer noted in *Time* magazine that it seemed “incredible that any sober adult could scent in this fuzzy cottontale for children the overtones of Karl Marx or even of Martin Luther King” [16]. The Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice in Boston passed a resolution that “thanked” Eddins for vividly illustrating the “futility of censorship” and the “irrationality and childishness of racism” [29]. The author of *The Rabbits’ Wedding*, Williams, issued a statement asserting that he wrote the book for children, not adults “who will not understand it.” He scoffed at the idea that animals with white fur could be considered “blood relations” of white human beings. He “was only aware that a white horse next to a black horse looks very picturesque.” Williams contended that his story was “only about soft furry love and has no hidden message of hate” [16].

The Alabama press was equally critical of Eddins. A segregationist
editor for the *Birmingham News* wrote that, "We have a good, a sound cause in our defense of segregation... We haul many a prop out from under such a cause when we allow ourselves to appear ridiculous." Eddins' public stand against *The Rabbits' Wedding* had "made us just that" [30]. The *Montgomery Advertiser* simply made light of the state senator's actions: "One bunny is white, like Senator Eddins' shirt, and one bunny is black, like Senator Eddins' tie. This combination the senator construes as propaganda to make race mixing palatable to tender minds" [31].

Sensing the unpopularity of his stand, Eddins backed away from his opposition to the children's book, but not from his feud with Reed. The legislature approved the Library Service's budget despite the controversy. By the end of the summer, Eddins was denying that he had ever made "a public or private statement about the rabbit book" [32]. He turned instead to the book lists the Library Service issued to Alabama's public librarians. As a part of its monthly newsletter, *Library Notes*, the library division included a list of notable books compiled by the American Library Association. King's account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *Stride toward Freedom*, appeared on the list twice in 1959, and the Library Service held the work in its own collection. State Senator Eddins took this book up, renewing his attack on Reed.

In August 1959, Eddins delivered a speech on the Senate floor assailing Reed for her inclusion of the prointegration work by King on the Library Service's book list. Eddins also complained to the upper house of the Alabama legislature that Reed had refused to disclose her personal views regarding segregation. She had told Eddins that her "personal feelings had nothing to do with the way the agency was operated" [33]. She argued that her inclusion of the King book, or any other, on the list did not constitute an endorsement of the ideas expressed in the work. The state senator disagreed. The Marengo County legislator told the Senate that he would seek a law to change the qualifications for the position of Public Library Service director. His intention was to remove Reed from office.

On August 18, 1959, Eddins appeared before the Joint Segregation Screening Committee to present his bill. The committee had been created earlier that year to rule on the merits of the many segregationist measures being submitted to the legislature and to screen them before sending the bills to the full Senate for a vote. Eddins complained to the committee that the present rules prevented an Alabamian from becoming director of the Library Service. The position required an ALA-accredited masters degree in library science, and Alabama had no school that offered such a degree. He neglected to mention that there were numerous librarians from Alabama who had gone out of the state
for their professional education. Eddins sought to drop the library degree requirement and to limit the position to natives of Alabama, which disqualified Reed [34, 35].

The Segregation Screening Committee voted to support Eddins' bill. The members of the committee made no secret of their motives. Representative and Committee Chairman Sim Thomas of Barbour County said it would be the "purpose and intent" of the bill to get rid of Reed [35]. When asked whether the bill would result in the director's dismissal, another member replied, "That was the whole idea wasn't it?" [36].

Over the course of the next several weeks, however, the Segregation Screening Committee and Eddins backed away from their insistence on Reed's immediate removal. The Screening Committee appointed a subcommittee to study the Library Service situation. Eddins, Lawrence K. "Snag" Andrews of Bullock County, and Larry Dumas of Jefferson County comprised the new group. These legislators were unable to establish that they could legally remove Reed. The executive board of the Public Library Service had the ultimate responsibility for hiring and dismissing a director of their agency, and any law the legislature might create would most likely only apply to the next director and not to Reed. Also, the committee was feeling the pressure being applied by the librarians and library-minded citizens in the state who were beginning to express their dissatisfaction with the attacks on their Library Service director [37, 38].

Although normally quiet on matters associated with race, professional librarians of Alabama had discovered an issue in which they felt comfortable engaging in debate. Reed does not recall receiving any meaningful support from the librarians of the state during her controversial stand against the censorship of The Rabbits' Wedding. But when the legislature began debating the segregation subcommittee's library service bill in the late summer and fall of 1959, librarians around the state, mainly through their state library association, expressed their disapproval of Eddins' plans for their state library agency. They were particularly concerned about the measures changing the qualifications for the director's position. The president of the Alabama Library Association, Edna Earle Brown, obtained a public hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee to express her objection to the work of the segregation subcommittee. Several other librarians, led by former state library board member Mrs. J. E. Price, also made vocal appeals to the legislature [26, 39, 40].

Attempting to save face, the segregation subcommittee worked with the executive board of the Public Library Service to create a compromise bill. Eddins told the press that the reports that his bill was
designed to oust Reed were in error. Retreating from his hard-line position, Eddins argued that his actual concern was over the fact that a graduate of an Alabama university could not meet the qualifications set for the Library Service post, since it required an ALA-accredited masters degree in library science. As a remedy, the subcommittee offered an addition to the current rules so that a candidate with a masters degree in education majoring in library science would be an acceptable choice for the director position. The compromise bill also gave the politically appointed executive board more authority over the director. For its part, the board agreed to take a more active role in supervising the creation of the Library Notes newsletter, which had brought on the second phase of the controversy. The board agreed that the newsletter would be "prepared locally" rather than offer any book recommendations by ALA [37; 41, p. 1589; 42].

The state legislature passed the Library Service compromise bill, which left Reed with her job. The subcommittee and the state library board offered an upbeat statement describing the compromise, asserting that "libraries in Alabama shall remain free and Alabama is not afraid of freedom of information. No books have been burned or banned in any state library in Alabama" [43]. Eddins hinted that the executive board of the state library agency might still fire Reed, however, and he apparently hoped that it would. The Montgomery Advertiser revealed that the director's most vocal advocate on the board, chairperson Mrs. J. U. Reeves of Mobile, Alabama, would not be reappointed after her term expired at the end of September. This news gave credence to the state senator's insinuation that Reed's days in office were numbered. But the board gave no indication that it had plans to remove its director [42].

Reed had weathered the controversy brought on by her commitment to the professional ethics of librarianship, but she chose to leave the state only two months after the compromise bill went to the legislature. The Library Service director was profoundly embarrassed that the state of Alabama, and her agency in particular, had been portrayed in such a negative light in the press. She had received newspaper clippings regarding the censorship controversy from as far away as London and Paris. Reed believed that the entire affair had impeded the progress she had hoped to make in library development in Alabama. With few vocal supporters of her stand within the state or national library community to bolster her, Reed took a measure of the blame on herself for this perceived lack of progress. In January 1960, the Library Service director announced that she would relocate to Washington, D.C. She had accepted a position with the District of Columbia Public
Library as a consultant in adult education. Reed's decision was not under duress from the board, and at least to the public, she asserted that, "My leaving [Alabama] was not directly related to the incidents last year" [44, 45].

The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee failed to support Reed during the censorship controversy, but events in Alabama did help to shape the opinions of committee members on the issue of libraries and segregation. Dan Lacy wrote to committee chair Archie McNeal in October 1959 to express his desire that the Intellectual Freedom Committee take a more active role in southern censorship cases. "I must say I feel increasingly ashamed of myself," Lacy wrote, "that I have not before now spoken up about the need for ALA to take a stand on the harassment of southern librarians in connection with their holdings of books in the field of race relations" [46]. He complained to McNeal that Alabama's state librarian had almost been fired for circulating ALA's own book list, making the association "directly and immediately affected" [46]. Lacy pointed out the need to publicly reaffirm ALA's "Freedom to Read" statement and that the committee might be more persuasive in its appeal to the South if it suggested that the segregationist point of view be represented in libraries outside the region. McNeal replied the he would support a statement by the committee but warned that inappropriate action by ALA could actually make the position of southern librarians more difficult [47]. The exchange foreshadowed the more public debate that would characterize ALA in the next decade.

The strife surrounding Alabama's Public Library Service Division in 1959 demonstrated that some librarians found it easier to defend white readers from censorship of prointegrationist books than to take on the more complicated and deeply ingrained notion that black readers should be excluded from "white" libraries. Most librarians continued to avoid such controversies, however. The debate demonstrated that the massive resistance to integration drew some white southerners to defend segregation with the same measure their forebears had used to defend slavery; they attempted to curtail the free expression of information and ideas contrary to their own. But in 1959 most whites, or at least the most vocal of them, found censorship distasteful. To moderate whites and even to some dedicated segregationists, Eddins' actions seemed embarrassing, backward, and un-American. Clearly, Reed could have defused the situation early by cooperating fully with State Senator Eddins. Her refusal to take The Rabbits' Wedding out of circulation represented an important stand for the freedom to read in Alabama, however, and there was public support for it. But if the feud
between Reed and Eddins was at the least a partial victory for intellectual freedom for whites, it left the library situation for blacks in Alabama no better.

Patricia Blalock and Selma’s Carnegie Library

Addressing the question of library service for black southerners, McNeal and other leaders of ALA argued that, despite the difficulties and dangers involved, white librarians in the South were working quietly, but diligently, behind the scenes during the early 1960s to integrate their public libraries. Such was not the case in most Alabama cities. In Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham, Gadsden, and Anniston, protests or judicial action preceded the integration of the public libraries, and these factors more than a perceived ethical obligation moved librarians and library boards to act.

A notable exception to this trend occurred in Selma, where Blalock, a white native Alabamian, worked toward a peaceful desegregation of the city’s Carnegie Library and, thus, demonstrated librarians’ potential to influence social change. Integration, in general, was a slow, painful process in Selma. The white Citizens’ Council dominated local politics, and the city became a focal point of civil rights activity in 1965 when Americans watched police forces savagely beating voting rights marchers on national television. Although equal access to most public accommodations in Selma was not easily won, the library had desegregated quietly and voluntarily in 1963 after the city librarian insisted that her library board repeal its policy of excluding African Americans. Hard-line segregationists controlled Selma’s library board, and Blalock’s ability to cajole them into integrating demonstrated the important part southern librarians could play in the Civil Rights movement in libraries.

Selma, the scene of America’s most successful campaign for black voting rights, sits on a bluff above a bend in the Alabama River. Located fifty miles west of Montgomery, in the “heart of the Black Belt,” it is the seat of Dallas County. Before the Civil War, Selma was a center for river transportation from which the cotton grown in the rich black soil of the surrounding countryside was piloted downriver to Mobile for export. It became a foundry town during the war, providing arms and ammunition for the Confederacy until it fell to Union raiders in 1865. Selma’s economy continued to be based on agriculture in the years after the war, and its politics remained largely the domain of “well-to-do patricians with long genealogies” [48, pp. 13–17].

By 1960, Selma had a population of approximately 28,400 people, a
little more than half of whom were African American. Race relations were based on a 140-year-long tradition of paternalism. African Americans were denied a political voice. Although they were in the numerical majority, blacks comprised only one percent of the electorate by 1960 [49, p. 77]. A "feudal society" prevailed on the farms and plantations of rural Dallas County, and Selma itself was strictly segregated with distinct white and black communities [50, p. 56]. Although it had a larger black middle class than surrounding Black Belt towns, most who lived along the unpaved streets of black Selma were poor and had few opportunities for betterment.

White Selma had reacted to the Brown v. Board of Education decision and to the bus boycott in Montgomery by creating the state's first white Citizens' Council in 1955. The organization was more "respectable" than the predominantly lower-class Ku Klux Klan, and it worked to preserve segregation without violence. The council became the predominant force in public life in Selma, controlling municipal politics and public opinion. The organization "drew a tight net of conformity" around white Selma, directing social and economic retaliation on whites who displayed racial views inconsistent with the norm [51, p. 84].

There remained, however, numerous moderates in Selma and a small group that supported desegregation. Most of them felt isolated on the question of race relations, however, and feared to speak openly of their views. One of the few whites in Selma who actively opposed segregation in the Black Belt city was Patricia Blalock, the director of the Carnegie Library.

Blalock attributes her atypical racial views to her upbringing by racially moderate parents and to her experiences as a medical social worker in rural Alabama. She was born and raised in Gadsden, sixty miles northeast of Birmingham. Her family had been more liberal than most that surrounded them. According to Blalock, her grandfather had been one of the first Populists in the area during the previous century, and she remembers that she was "brought up" not to fear blacks. Blalock attended Alabama College at Montevallo. After graduating with a degree in social work, she took a job as a truant officer in the Black Belt town of Marion, Alabama. In 1937, she moved to Selma and became a district supervisor for the State Crippled Children's Service. In her work for the agency, which was originally created to address the hardships of the 1936 polio epidemic, Blalock oversaw the administration of medical aid for twenty-eight central Alabama counties. It was a moving experience, and she asserts that it instilled in her a need to treat all people with dignity [52, 53].

Blalock married, and when she had a daughter in 1946, she ended
her work with disabled children. Six years later, the local librarian, “Miss Betty,” recruited the former social worker to serve as a part-time assistant at the Carnegie Library. After serving in this capacity for about a decade, Blalock agreed to serve temporarily in the place of the library director, who had fallen ill. When the library board learned that the director would be unable to return to her duties, it asked Blalock to accept the librarian position on a permanent basis. She was initially unsure. She stressed to the board that she had no formal library education, that all she knew of librarianship came from work experience. The board members expressed their faith in Blalock’s abilities, and, ultimately, she accepted the position. Blalock became director of the Carnegie Library in 1963 [52, 53].

With Blalock’s acceptance of the director’s position, the board had hired a librarian whose racial views were inconsistent with its policy of serving only white patrons. In the years since the Carnegie Library was formed, there had been no formal public library service provided for African Americans. Selma lacked even the customary Negro branch created in other Alabama cities. According to local attorney and civil rights activist J. L. Chestnut, Jr., the occasional black Selmian was served from the back door of the Carnegie Library by the library’s African American maid [51, p. 220]. These were unofficial exceptions overlooked by sympathetic librarians. The status quo did not suit Blalock, however, and she began to press the issue of segregation almost immediately. The “first thing I did as director,” she remembers, was to begin a dialogue with the board members on integration, “but it was pretty difficult” [52].

Chris Heinz, Selma’s mayor, and Bernard Reynolds, Dallas County Probate Judge, were ex officio members of the library board. Unlike Bull Connor in Birmingham, Heinz and Reynolds took their membership on the board seriously, and they were regular attendants at its meetings. They were also orthodox segregationists. White moderates believed Heinz would “rather see Selma blow away than to change any of its traditions” [48, p. 106]. Heinz and Reynolds were both leaders in Dallas County’s white Citizens’ Council. They were often on stage at Citizens’ Council rallies and in 1955 had made the nominations for the organization’s first board of directors. Heinz even became chairman of the council in 1965 [51, p. 83; 54, p. 171].

Blalock faced the task of convincing Heinz, Reynolds, and the rest of the members of the library board to consider integration at the library. In addition to the two ex officio members, the group consisted of three men and two women. They were civic leaders mostly from prominent families and included a Harvard-educated attorney, a certified public accountant, and a chair who was independently wealthy.
"They were all fine people," the librarian recalls, "but they were just very strong about this [question of race], even the most liberal-minded, some of the ones that I was devoted to, who had the library interests at heart" [52]. The librarian raised the issue of integration at her second meeting with the library board. Finding the group unresponsive, she visited individually with each member. Blalock argued that integration should be the board's "top priority" and urged the members to begin work on a desegregation plan [52].

Predictably, Heinz and Reynolds were difficult to convince, but the librarian was insistent. Blalock recounts that she genuinely believed segregation to be wrong but that she was also driven by a desire to avoid a disturbance at her library. Events in Alabama and throughout the South suggested that desegregation of public libraries was inevitable. Montgomery's city library had been integrated the previous year under federal injunction. In April, Birmingham desegregated its library system after a student demonstration. Blalock argued to Heinz, Reynolds, and the other board members that to maintain their commitment to segregation at the Carnegie Library would lead to trouble and perhaps even closure of the library. She believed that integration would eventually come to Selma and argued to the board that "we need to get it done in a good way, and do it on our own" [52].

By mid-May, Blalock's entreaties to the board had assumed a new urgency. She believed a "push" by black demonstrators was imminent. Library board minutes record that she had received some "unusual telephone calls" [55]. The librarian wanted the board to produce a desegregation plan immediately. Meeting continued intransigence, Blalock offered the library board an ultimatum. She recalls communicating to the board members, "I think we need very badly to get this library integrated, and I don't believe I can open up Monday until we've made a real decision" [52]. Blalock remembers the board members as segregationists, but also as civic-minded individuals who genuinely cared about the Carnegie Library. They responded to the librarian's protest, agreeing to meet at her home on Monday, May 13, at 8 A.M., before the library was scheduled to open, to consider desegregation.

In the face of the librarian's ultimatum, the library board acquiesced. The Monday morning meeting included the board and the entire library staff. After a lengthy discussion, the group began to form a plan that it hoped would result in a quiet and peaceful integration of the Carnegie Library. The desegregation plan that resulted from the meeting, and from a second meeting held the following Friday, called for an initiation of the "vertical integration" used at the public libraries in Danville, Virginia, and in Montgomery. To prevent black and white
patrons from sitting together, the staff would remove the chairs and store them in the library's basement. This change was intended to be a temporary measure to "help the community to adjust to integration." The staff would return the furniture "as integration in the city progressed" [52]. The board voted to print new membership application cards requiring each applicant's name, address, and length of residence in Selma. The application would also call for two references. As an impediment to Selma's black citizens seeking use of their local library, the effectiveness of such a form would be negligible. But board members, particularly Heinz, were irritated by the participation of "outsiders" in Selma's civil rights activity, and they were looking for assurances that nonresident blacks would not interfere in the execution of their plans. The board also voted to close the Carnegie Library during the week of May 13-May 19. Officially, the library was closed to take "inventory" [55]. Apparently, the board wanted time to carry out their desegregation plan and to forestall any visits by blacks before the library could be integrated. The moves toward biracial service were to be kept quiet. Neither the board nor the staff was to make announcements to the newspapers—nor even to black leaders. The librarian was uncomfortable with some of the terms of the plan, particularly the removal of the library furniture, but seeing the opportunity for peaceful desegregation of the library, she felt compelled to compromise [52, 56].

The Carnegie Library reopened uneventfully on May 20, 1963. Reverend Ralph Smeltzer visited the facility during the first days when it was still practicing "vertical integration." Smeltzer was a white Brethren preacher from Chicago and Southern California who came to Selma in 1963, hoping to open a dialogue between black and white leaders in the racially divided city. Smeltzer needed a place to write and went to the public library. Learning of the facility's temporary lack of furniture, he inquired about sitting in a corner or using a back room. He noticed footstools and asked to sit on one. A library worker eventually suggested that the minister sit at a low table in a corner "where no one would see him." Smeltzer recounted in his journal that the library staff was helpful and apologetic. The librarian explained the situation to Smeltzer, and he was surprised to learn that she "seemed sympathetic to integration" [48, p. 32].

Selma's librarian also believed that her staff should be integrated, and soon after the board voted to desegregate the library, she hired the city's first African American library assistant. Annie Molette had been the Carnegie Library's maid for many years, and she had quietly used her position to provide library service to a small number of black Selmians from the Carnegie building's back door. Blalock told Molette that the library would hire a new maid and that she wanted Molette to begin doing actual library work and openly serving the public.
According to Blalock, her hiring of the African American maid as a library worker was designed to "lay the groundwork for having some black employees" [52].

There was no rush of black patrons, since the African American community was initially unaware of its new library privileges. African Americans were beginning to test the public facilities in Selma, however, including its library, and they slowly began to arrive. By November, black patrons were a common sight [48, p. 32].

Blalock believed that, overall, the integration had been remarkably successful, but it was not without its problems. The white library staff members lacked enthusiasm for the changes their director was bringing in Selma, the integration, and the promotion of their former maid. They respected Blalock but did not understand or agree with her racial views. Recognizing the discomfort of her employees, the director began holding daily meetings in which the staff could discuss problems that arose during the day. Blalock hoped that her staff could air its grievances within the context of the meetings. Discussing the library's problems "around the bridge table," she believed, would only make matters worse [53].

Disgruntled white patrons sometimes openly expressed their disapproval of the Carnegie Library's new policy on integration. Surprised over the presence of African Americans in the library, a white woman "went into a tirade," and she asserted that she would rather see the library closed than to endure integration [52]. One of Selma's leading citizens entered the library in 1963 and found black patrons reading at the tables and charging books. He became incensed and demanded of the librarian, "What's going on here!" Dissatisfied with her response, the white patron began making angry remarks to blacks using the library. His performance continued until a policeman arrived and informed the irate man that he would have to "move on" [52].

As integration progressed, Heinz and Reynolds began to feel pressure from their constituents to reverse their decision regarding the library. They were seasoned politicians who understood keenly the political dangers of the board's actions. Heinz and Reynolds began calling the city librarian in the evenings for updates on how the integration was progressing. It was a particularly worrisome time for Heinz, who told Blalock that he had received communications from white Selmians urging that he either resegregate or close the Carnegie Library. Concerned about the mayor's backsliding, the librarian remembers suggesting to Heinz that he lay the responsibility with her: "Chris, I'll tell you what to do. Just tell them I did it... they can blame me. Tell them that you didn't have anything to do with it" [52].

It was a difficult time for the city librarian. She had to harden herself to the complaints of angry whites and to the disapproval of associates.
who did not share her views. The crisis did not last long, however, and the reactions of some whites helped to affirm her commitment to integration in the library. She describes one incident in which a patron—a white man who she thought to be "friendly" and "scholarly" but also "one of the worst racists in the world"—came into the library to find a line of blacks waiting to apply for library cards. He turned to Blalock and commented, "You know, that's not so bad." She believed she had cleared "a big hurdle" by winning the man's acceptance [52]. Another white patron demonstrated his opposition to integration by tearing up his library card and vowing never to return. The librarian was heartened when the man arrived two weeks later to charge a book. She presented him with the pieces of his old library card, which she had clipped together and saved in case he returned [52].

The voluntary integration of the Carnegie Library in Selma by its board in 1963 represented an anomaly in local race relations. It is remarkable that a city that met civil rights marchers with clubs and cattle prods, whose white community largely abandoned the public schools rather than endure integration, and that had the state's first and most active white Citizens' Council would desegregate any of its public facilities in the absence of organized duress. In May 1963, however, the members of the city's library board, two of whom were also the county's leading segregationists, quietly and peaceably integrated the public library at the insistence of the city librarian. The board recognized that interracial service at the Carnegie Library did not represent as socially dangerous a situation as race mixing in schools or as threatening a proposition as equal voting rights. But it also mattered that the white librarian was the individual pressing for change. Unmistakably southern in bearing, manners, and speech, Blalock was one of them. She was a long-time resident of the community, a respected citizen and friend, and, though she did not share the board members' racial views, she "understood how they were brought up" [52]. Changing the library board's membership policy at the insistence of a native white Alabamian was more amenable to segregationists like Heinz and Reynolds and less politically damaging than integrating at the behest of black demonstrators, "outside agitators," and federal judges. Blalock's performance demonstrated that southern librarians could be effective agents of social change, even in the most inhospitable political environments.

Alabama Library Association

Library leaders organized the Alabama Library Association (Ala.L.A.) on November 21, 1904, in Montgomery. Its objectives were "the pro-
motion of libraries and library interests" in the state and creating an "esprit de corps" among Alabama librarians [57, p. 1]. The organization adopted a constitution at its first meeting; it provided that "any person desirous of promoting the objects of the Association shall be eligible for membership" [58, p. 3]. In reality, the group was only open to whites. There was no official statement barring African Americans, but it became the practice of the library association to ignore applications submitted by blacks.

In 1951, Ala.L.A. president Gretchen Shenk prompted the organization's first moves toward integration, but her efforts were unsuccessful. Under Shenk's leadership, the association created a Bi-Racial Committee to study the possibility of admitting African American librarians. The group held a meeting on April 12 at Montgomery's Carnegie Library to "determine whether Negro librarians wished to join Ala.L.A., and to discuss problems which are evident in any bi-racial group" [59]. Ten black librarians attended along with six whites. The African American group expressed its desire to participate in the activities of the state library organization and to enjoy full membership privileges. The meeting had little effect. African American school librarian Carrie Robinson attended and remembers that it was clear that the library association members were unready to accept her and the other blacks. She remarks on the "ease with which some members of the Alabama Library Association demeaned prospective black members" [60, p. 49]. According to Robinson, William Stanley Hoole, library dean at the University of Alabama, demanded during Shenk's failed attempt to integrate, "Who is stuffing these Negroes down our throats? I want you to know that I represent a conservative institution" [60, p. 49]. The Bi-Racial Committee dissolved the following year.

In 1963, Ala.L.A. once again had a president sympathetic to racial integration. Richard J. Covey, who had helped to integrate his library in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1962, received letters of application from six librarians at the Tuskegee Institute during the spring of 1963. They were professionals with substantial educational credentials. Three were department heads. Covey replied to the Tuskegee group, "You might know that there has never been a Negro member of the Association. We have, by custom, never offered anything but rather weak excuses" [61]. He asserted that the segregation policy had been "most irksome" to him and promised to submit the matter to the Executive Council for a vote. He would reply as soon as the Council had decided.

Covey wrote to the members of the Executive Council on April 11. The association president described the qualifications of the applicants and reminded the Council of their association's inclusive membership clause opening the group to "any person" who supported
the organization's objectives. "It is false to operate" under the constitution, he wrote, "if we do not mean it." Covey argued that if the Ala.L.A. wanted to remain segregated, "let us say so"; otherwise the Council should make a statement integrating the organization "and stand behind it" [62]. Earlier decisions to remain segregated rested on an argument that blacks could not be accommodated at conference hotels and meeting places on account of local segregation ordinances. But Covey contended that the actions of individual cities was not an excuse for Ala.L.A. to shun its own responsibilities. He instructed Council members to submit their votes on the Tuskegee applications by mail.

Covey was unable to get a quorum in his mail ballot. There were four affirmative votes, three votes against admitting the black librarians, and four abstentions; the remaining Council members failed to reply. One of the negative votes came from Farris Martin, the Montgomery librarian who grudgingly integrated his facility under federal injunction in 1962. Martin warned Covey that "with Mobile integrated, Montgomery under injunction," and "Birmingham under duress" the racial climate was too dangerous to begin admitting blacks to the library association. He believed that the ALA access survey and the Mississippi and Louisiana chapters' withdrawal from ALA provided further evidence that Covey's timing was poor. Taking up the issue of desegregation of the membership might "tear both the Executive Council and the whole Alabama Library Association asunder" [63].

At the annual meeting the Council voted to delay a decision on the Tuskegee applications and to change the constitution so the association could officially deny membership to future applicants if it wished. Covey wrote to the Tuskegee librarians explaining the council's actions. He asserted that he was "not at all satisfied" with the outcome and admitted that he was "a little ashamed" by the affair [64].

In December 1964, the Ala.L.A. finally desegregated. The Civil Rights Act, passed earlier in the year, made segregation in public accommodations illegal, and the library association could no longer use its traditional excuse that segregation laws prevented biracial conventions. Also, ALA had applied pressure on associations like Alabama's, forbidding its officers from participating in the activities of segregated organizations. Of more immediate importance to Alabama's association, the federal government had begun to instruct its employees not to take part in organizations that excluded blacks. This instruction meant the loss of the association's current president, Maxwell Air Force Base librarian Robert W. Severance, and several incoming council members [65–67].

In a letter to the membership that appeared in Alabama Librarian,
the president explained the council’s decision to integrate. He asserted that the association was “not engaged in attempting to solve racial problems” and hoped that a “minimum of publicity” would accompany the change [68; emphasis in original]. The library associations in Alabama and Georgia had lost their chapter status in ALA in 1956 as a result of their refusal to desegregate. Severance added in his letter that Ala.L.A. would not immediately seek to rejoin ALA, even though the desegregation made it eligible for membership. He explained that some members of Ala.L.A. were resentful of the actions ALA had taken in regard to state library organizations in the South; they opposed the “application of force by outside agencies” [68].

The Ala.L.A. held its first integrated convention in Mobile during the following spring. Freed to participate in the meeting by the state association’s decision to desegregate, Eric Moon, the controversial editor of Library Journal who favored integration, delivered the principal address. His speech, “The Central Fact of Our Times,” covered civil rights and the responsibilities of the library profession [69]. The Alabama Librarian described the talk as “well-received,” adding, “You do not have to agree with the man to admire him” [70, p. 5]. About forty African American librarians joined the association during the first two months of integration. According to Moon, fifteen to twenty of them were in attendance at the convention, and they were represented in “just about all the meetings.” He asserted that there was “not too much open mingling of the races” but that the black librarians he talked to seemed “generally pleased” with the conference atmosphere and had experienced no significant problems [71].

After a decade of banishment, Ala.L.A. rejoined ALA in July 1965. The membership of the state library organization had approved the union 124 to 3 in a mail ballot. The civil rights years had been tumultuous ones for librarianship in Alabama, but it was clear that its library association, as a segregated organization, was in no position to provide leadership in matters of race. The group’s own internal struggle regarding membership provided evidence that the association reacted to, rather than participated in, the changes in race relations in Alabama, and the association had no observable influence on the events of library desegregation. In fact, after all of the state’s major cities had integrated their libraries, the Ala.L.A. still excluded black librarians.

Conclusion

As a group, Alabama’s librarians exhibited no clear pattern of genuine support of library desegregation, nor did they rush to the defense of
Reed during *The Rabbits' Wedding* controversy. Black librarians were excluded from the decision-making process, and they could not exert measurable influence on "white" libraries. In general, white public librarians understood the volatility the subject of race engendered in the Deep South, and they sought to avert conflict in their institutions. The state library association was consumed with a quiet debate over its own segregationist practices, and it successfully avoided the issue of public library integration.

Most white librarians in the state were moderates and largely apolitical; they were neither fervent segregationists nor vocal supporters of civil rights. Their attitudes toward blacks were as varied and as difficult to explain as the complex relationships between white moderates and blacks in the general population. Their racial attitudes incorporated notions of paternalism but also of professional responsibility. The Civil Rights movement was a time of anxiety for them, but for some the fear of changing racial mores was acute.

Ultimately, it is easier to understand why many Alabama librarians did not lead their libraries toward desegregation than to explain why some did. Professional ethics stood little chance against a tradition that overpowered white consciences, democratic values, and even Christian teachings. Most who believed segregation wrong could not imagine actively opposing it. For native Southerners, it meant questioning what they had been taught in school, at church, and at home, challenging the "natural order" of things. Supporting integration meant allying with the enemy, not the southern blacks, but the "hypocritical" white outsiders. It meant risking ostracism and possibly worse. Within their own profession and their own state, Alabama librarians saw in Morgan and Reed examples of what happened to individuals who challenged the agents of the massive resistance to desegregation.

The deeply ingrained racial attitudes of white southerners were becoming less impregnable by the 1960s, however, and library directors responded to the changes in race relations. Blalock was a genuine integrationist who ended exclusions at Selma's Carnegie Library in advance of any civil rights demonstrations or federal intervention. More common were individuals like Guenter Jensen of Mobile, Covey of Huntsville, and Fant Thornley of Birmingham, who reacted to duress by black activists and to judicial pressure by leading their libraries toward integration. They held moderate racial views and valued the well-being of their institutions more than racial separation. But their actions demonstrated that the efforts of black protesters were ultimately more important to the cause of equal access to public libraries than the impulses of librarians on the state and national level to fulfill their professional values.
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