

The “Negro Branch” Library in Memphis

A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN A SEGREGATED SOUTHERN CITY

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ABSTRACT: Memphis was a pioneer among southern cities in providing segregated library services to African Americans in 1903. However, those services were unequal to services offered to white citizens, and subject to political forces aimed at perpetuating white supremacy. By the 1930s African Americans had become a crucial voting bloc that supported the political machine of “Boss” Crump, who dominated city government between 1927 and 1954. Improved library service was one of many civic amenities that were provided in African American communities as part of an unstated bargain between the Crump machine and African American voters of Memphis. The library became one of many community-building institutions that helped a generation of African American leaders in Memphis prepare for the struggles of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

KEYWORDS: Segregation, bossism, political machines, elections

Any history that involves African Americans must admit that, as Lester Lamon writes, “they have been both a part of and apart from the developments affecting the dominant white population.” In library history, there is a tension that Toby Graham characterizes as “vast exceptions” to the ideal that Americans may freely access information of their choosing through public institutions established by a democratic government; those exceptions revolve around segregation and discrimination. Throughout the American South and in many other parts of the country in the first half of the twentieth century, public libraries often barred African Americans, and in those cities where branch libraries were established for the use of African Americans, facilities and collections were inadequate and unequal to those provided for white patrons. Libraries were not outliers among public institutions; as Cheryl Knott writes, “The creation of racially segregated public libraries early in the twentieth century followed . . . the attenuation of black civil rights.”¹

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In Memphis, Tennessee, segregated libraries were established earlier and persisted later than in most cities. While there is no record of the African American community of Memphis advocating for library services prior to the establishment of the segregated library branch, it is clear that over time the library became a well-beloved institution. The vicissitudes of the segregated branches—placed in suboptimal locations, subject to abrupt closure at the whims of white leaders, and finally enjoying a measure of stability as African American voters became an important source of support to the political machine that dominated Memphis between 1927 and 1954—reveal that library access for African Americans was a precarious amenity, as were the other civic services that the white city government doled out or withheld in efforts to manipulate African American voters. In many ways, the history of library services for African American Memphians is a microcosm of the political fortunes of the same citizens.

Memphis never had a “Public Library” by that name until 1955. Prior to then, its public libraries operated under the moniker of “Cossitt Libraries,” named for the benefactor whose heirs endowed the city with its first library. The Cossitt Libraries were operated as a private philanthropic institution, with a board of directors accountable to no one but the other members of the board, even after the city government began augmenting the Cossitt Library’s funds with public monies.²

Before 1903 Cossitt Library only served white patrons, despite the fact that African Americans were both taxpayers and voters in Memphis. The status of African Americans as taxpayers was not unusual in the South—but their status as voters was. While the Tennessee state government had done much to disfranchise African Americans during the 1880s and 1890s, it had not gone as far as other southern states. The primary limitation on the African American vote was a poll tax; there were no literacy tests, grandfather clauses, or whites-only primary elections in Memphis. Because of the relative affluence of Memphians and the willingness of some white politicians to cooperate with black voters by paying their poll taxes, African Americans could “vote as easily in Memphis as in the North.” The presence of a voting bloc in the African American community was to influence politics—and libraries—in Memphis throughout the twentieth century.³

The motivations for the decision to extend library service to African Americans were not recorded in the minutes of the Cossitt Library Board of Directors. However, the secretary, Alfred D. Mason, said that most of the board members had a “heart interest” in the “mental, spiritual, and cultural

improvement of the Negroes of Memphis, many of whom had lived in close personal relationship with them." Mason did not recall that the board had ever received a request from African Americans, individually or in groups, to extend library services.⁴

Regardless of the specific circumstances of the Memphis library, the Cossitt Library's gesture inaugurated a region-wide movement to include African Americans, to a very limited degree, in the patronage of public libraries. The Memphis precedent was particularly influential in establishing the model of a public library setting up branches within existing educational institutions for African Americans; this method of providing library service was the most common way that African Americans used libraries throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁵

The "branch library for Negroes" established in this period was not a stand-alone building, but rather a collection housed within LeMoyné Institute, an African American secondary school on South Orleans Street a mile and a half from Cossitt Library.⁶ While it was housed within the LeMoyné Institute, the branch was open to any African American patrons who wished to use it. The LeMoyné Branch was a delight to those who patronized it, but faced difficulties reaching its intended patrons, as recorded by G. P. Hamilton: "It is a source of regret with those who are interested in the cause of education that more of our people do not take advantage of the great opportunity afforded them by this library."⁷

The branch library's location, staffing, funding, and collection were all markedly inferior to the same functions of the main library for whites, and doubtless played a role in the low use of the LeMoyné branch and its successors. Just as schools, parks, and civic services for African American Memphians were provided with hand-me-downs, unwanted land, and inferior funding, so was the African American library given leftover books, space intended for other uses, and a paltry budget. Until around 1925, the collection consisted entirely of books discarded from the main library. Usage of the branch library was predominantly by students at LeMoyné, who constituted 90 percent of its patrons.⁸

The investment in the LeMoyné Branch paled next to that for the main library. In 1910 the new acquisitions at LeMoyné equaled just 4 percent of the number at the main branch. Alma Childs, the librarian at the LeMoyné Branch, earned a monthly salary of \$35 (a rate that remained flat through 1920, including the war years of rapid inflation)—slightly higher than the night watchman at the main library, who earned \$25. Despite the difficulties offered

by flat salaries and a paltry book budget, Ms. Childs was reported to provide "helpful and encouraging" service to her patrons. The effect of low wages in an inflationary economy, perhaps coupled with the frustrations of a meager budget and an inconspicuous location, was to produce high turnover among African American library employees. No employee stayed in a position longer than four years, and many turned over within a single year.⁹

Improvements in library service to African Americans continued in the 1910s. In 1913 the library began to open branches in the public schools. These school libraries operated under the supervision of a teacher, who was allowed to borrow books for the term and check them out to students. In 1914 the LeMoyne Institute moved to its present location on Walker Avenue, where the new school building provided "better library accommodations." More significantly, in 1914 a second branch library was opened in Howe Institute, another African American school, affiliated with the Baptist church, that encompassed elementary and upper grades.¹⁰

The location of Howe Institute was considerably closer to downtown than the LeMoyne branch. The Howe branch quickly proved more popular than LeMoyne. Perhaps it was a more convenient location or had a more accommodating schedule (records no longer exist), but its circulation was three times greater than that of LeMoyne, and more than eight times as many patrons had library cards at Howe.¹¹

While the Cossitt Library was offering far from equitable treatment to African American patrons, it was nonetheless among the more progressive of southern public libraries. As late as 1913 such large cities as Atlanta, Birmingham, Nashville, and Dallas failed to offer any public library service to African Americans. Memphis also hired qualified librarians, trained at Hampton Institute or the Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Library. And with the advent of a new head librarian, Jesse Cunningham, in 1925, the collection of books was upgraded.¹²

Later developments in library service may have been influenced by the growth in political power of the African American electorate during the era when Edward H. "Boss" Crump controlled Memphis politics. Although he was first elected mayor in 1909, his organization gained complete control of the city's government in the election of 1927—in large part by rallying African American voters against the white supremacist campaign by Rowlett Paine—and continued to "boss" the Memphis city government, while rarely holding office himself, until his death in 1954.¹³ While Crump may have influenced decisions about the library's budget and operations, there is no evidence that

he directly appointed its employees or directors. According to its charter, the board of directors appointed the library's employees and chose new directors to replace those who had died or resigned.¹⁴

Crump had received few African American votes in his first campaign in 1909 but determined thereafter to make African Americans an important part of his electoral coalition. William Miller in his biography, written with the cooperation of Crump's family, notes that "Crump did not cynically court the Negro vote. . . . With Crump there was a more basic consideration of their needs. Negro medical inspectors had been placed in Negro schools; infants of indigent parents had been provided with milk; a movement had been inaugurated to purchase a park; and most important, Crump had moved to break up the inhuman business of preying on Negroes that was practiced by some of the county magistrates and their agents." On the other hand, Elizabeth Gritter sees that

his actions masked his derogatory views and activities. Some African Americans campaigned for him of their own free will, but he also manipulated the support of some African Americans by "herding" them to the polls: he arranged his supporters to pick them up by the carload, pay their poll taxes, and reward them with barbecue and liquor. . . . He perpetuated black inequality by providing public service improvements within the context of the Jim Crow system. African Americans were excluded from participation in the local Democratic Party and occupied the lowest rung of government employment.¹⁵

Wayne Dowdy summarizes the complexities of the Crump machine's approach to its African American constituents: "It appears that Crump had but one guiding principle, winning elections at any cost. . . . When he deemed it practical, Crump played both sides of the racial fence, which meant that the machine juggled the interests of both black and white Memphians while attempting to keep order. When Crump decided that it was not practical to play both sides, he catered to his natural white constituency at the expense of African Americans."¹⁶

The Crump system for corraling African American votes had the local Democratic Party subsidizing a Colored Democratic Club, paying for its headquarters and salaries. The members of the club, led by insurance magnate J. E. Walker and attorney William Foote, then organized rallies and distributed campaign literature. African American voters who needed help paying

the poll tax could rely on assistance from the club. Come election day, the Crump organization provided transportation to the polls. In some cases, voters were known to cast their ballots at several polling places on the same day.¹⁷

Crump consistently came down on the side of providing a modicum of civic services for African Americans, always in a strictly segregated manner. Historians have not directly addressed the role of libraries within the Crump machine's program of civic services, and in fact the existing documentation shows little evidence that Crump was particularly concerned with libraries. However, in a civic environment that encouraged a minimum level of services to African American residents as a matter of political expediency, the library's directors may have felt emboldened to act on their impulses to serve as many readers as possible. It was all within limits, of course—African American branches received the castoffs of the main collection and made do with pennies on the dollar that the main library enjoyed.

The Cossitt Library's maintenance of two branches for African Americans evidently was not known to all interested citizens. In Richard Wright's famous account of using subterfuge to access the writings of H. L. Mencken from the Cossitt Library, he makes no mention of either branch that was open to African Americans. He wrote, "There was a huge library near the riverfront, but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city." Ironically, Wright had attended the Howe Institute briefly around 1916—but as a small child, he may not have used the library branch during his time in the school, or else the eventful intervening years had driven its existence from his memory.¹⁸

The contradictions embodied in Wright's story reflect the larger picture of library service to African Americans: individuals may have had noble intentions of providing excellent librarianship, but the racial and political power structure required that it be delivered inadequately and out of sight of most of the African American citizens of Memphis. A political use for a segregated library was demonstrated by the closing of the Howe branch at the end of 1926.

In that year, Howe Institute merged with a failed Nashville college, and principal T. O. Fuller began making arrangements to build a new facility on South Parkway, in a neighborhood already populated by African Americans. However, the prospect of an educational institution in Memphis that would attract African American students from the North was too much for a number of white citizens. Several civic clubs pressured the city commission to deny a permit for construction, and the new Howe College was never built.¹⁹

To follow such a crushing blow to Fuller and Howe Institute with a removal of its branch library would seem needlessly cruel—unless this was some sort of punishment intended for Fuller's effrontery in showing untoward ambition for an African American educational program. Regardless of the intentions behind the move, it appears that Fuller regretted the closure. In a letter to the library board (written on letterhead that boasted among other amenities, "Modern Library and Reading Room"), he wrote to the board of Cossitt Library that [he had] "sought every opportunity to elevate my people and there is nothing more effective than the printed page well selected and properly studied."²⁰

The closure of the Howe branch did not reflect an oversupply of library service to African Americans in Memphis. The Howe and LeMoyne branches were both located in South Memphis. Meanwhile, significant populations of African Americans lived in neighborhoods miles away from the LeMoyne branch. Memphis did not have a consolidated "black belt" but rather had concentrated pockets of African American residences that had grown up around workplaces such as railroad yards, lumber mills, and cotton warehouses.²¹ To expect a single branch to suffice for library service to the more than 60,000 African Americans in Memphis was unrealistic—as DeWitt Alcorn wrote to the Cossitt Library Board in early 1927:

A round trip to town requires the consideration of 14 cents [about \$1.94 in 2016], and with perfect transfer connections, one and [a] half hour by street car service. A trip to a downtown branch, LeMoyne or Booker Washington is, as the condition discloses, prohibitive because of the time and monetary expenditure. We could almost say there are no parents who could afford, say the library accommodation of three children under prevailing circumstances.²²

The Great Depression saw a huge influx of African American migration into Memphis (almost 25,000 new African American residents came between 1930 and 1940), and an increase in the power of the Crump machine as New Deal money came under the city administration's control.²³ Under Crump's political philosophy, the extension of library service to African Americans served as both an incentive and a reward for African American support at the ballot box, while segregation remained a guiding principle of library administration.²⁴

The Crump machine was at the height of its powers in the 1930s—during several elections in that period Crump's candidates enjoyed "the honor of

having no opposition." As part of his political strategy, Crump continued building public works in African American neighborhoods. Beale Avenue Park was constructed in 1933 and a swimming pool was built in South Memphis in 1938. Crump's use of public funds to benefit African American citizens was limited, however. The workers paid using New Deal funds were typically white. In 1933 Civil Works Administration funds were made available to Cossitt Library, and workers were employed in making repairs to the main library and the Binghamton branch library for white citizens, as well as in cataloging. Yet none were hired to provide library service for African Americans.²⁵

It was not until the late 1930s that African American library patrons saw much benefit from public works in Memphis. After the closure of the Howe Institute branch, Cossitt Library had opened a branch in Booker T. Washington (BTW) High School, but it proved of little use to readers outside the school walls. The LeMoyne branch, which had also proved to be more popular with students than community readers, ceased its relationship with Cossitt Library in 1932.²⁶

The closing of the LeMoyne branch, like that of the Howe branch, appears at first to be a matter of retaliation for African American ambition that the white establishment was unwilling to countenance. LeMoyne Institute had a new president, a white man named Frank Sweeney. When the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (SACSS) evaluated the institute and found its library to be substandard, Sweeney suggested that the Cossitt Library increase the size of the collection. Cunningham demurred. As the branch library was intended to serve the public and not merely the students of LeMoyne, Sweeney's request and its consequent increase in expenditures could not be justified. Sweeney then moved to purchase a sufficient number of books to satisfy SACSS—and bypassed library procedures for selection and cataloging. As a result, the library had a mixture of books. Some belonged to the Cossitt Library and met Cunningham's professional standards, and others belonged to LeMoyne Institute and had not been approved by Cunningham. Upon discovering this situation, Cunningham suggested that Cossitt withdraw from the LeMoyne branch.²⁷

Sweeney's decision to proceed without the approval of Cunningham perhaps served as final confirmation that the LeMoyne branch was unsatisfactory to its intended public as well as its host institution. While the library was used mainly by LeMoyne students, the trustees and Cunningham frequently stated their intention that it serve as a public library branch. Sweeney and Cunningham differed in their assessments of the size and quality of

a collection necessary to support their institutions' divergent purposes. Throughout his career, Cunningham reiterated his belief that because very few African Americans used the public library, a small collection was acceptable. Nonetheless, as a public library, the LeMoyne Branch was intended for the use of the general public, not just LeMoyne students. Later reflection by Rosa Cooke, who was to serve as a librarian at various African American branches of Cossitt Library between 1937 and 1955, noted that "there was a hesitancy on the part of most colored people to make use of the LeMoyne Library facilities because the location of the Library gave the impression that it was for school people only."²⁸

In the end, the closing of the LeMoyne Branch may have been less a matter of racial politics than bureaucratic turf warfare, as Cossitt Library intended to continue library service for African Americans. The books at LeMoyne belonging to Cossitt Library were to be transferred to the BTW branch. However, because the public did not access the BTW branch, for three years no African Americans who were not students in the city schools received library services.

In perhaps the clearest indication of political motives, in 1934 Cunningham called to the board's attention a "petition of a Committee of colored citizens for the establishment of a branch library for the colored people, also the interest and cooperation being shown by Mayor [Watkins] Overton for the City Commission and Mr. Renfrow for the Park Commission, and the proposal to use a very suitable room in the Church Auditorium on Beale Ave." Church Park, site of the auditorium, was municipal property set aside for African Americans. Within a month, the Park Commission began construction of furniture for the branch library, while Cossitt Library staff made arrangements to relocate suitable materials to the branch. It appears that those materials came from the main library. Mayor Overton's role in spurring this project is not clear. Scott Melton notes that, while Overton owed his election to the Crump machine, he was a capable administrator who occasionally took initiative in regard to making decisions about city government. Wayne Dowdy, while acknowledging Overton's administrative skill, observes that "major decisions on policy and politics" required Crump's personal approval.²⁹

Demand among African American Memphians for library services was, in the 1930s, a strong driver of change. The petition of 1934, a time when the Crump machine was seeking ways to shore up its support in the African American community, proved to be a powerful incentive. In January 1935 the branch library in Church Auditorium was opened to the public and immediately proved popular. Its location at the edge of the main commercial district

for African Americans paralleled the main library's position near the white business downtown. Circulation at the "well organized free library independent of an educational institution" was triple that of the LeMoyné branch.³⁰

As was typical of city services for African Americans, library patrons at Church Auditorium were given the bare minimum of service. Branch libraries in white neighborhoods were placed in storefronts, rented at the library's expense, and dedicated as spaces for library service. By contrast, the African American branch was located in a shared space already owned by the city. Behind it was a playground, and inside the auditorium was a gymnasium. The noise of running and playing was distracting to those who wished to concentrate.³¹

The unsatisfactory location of the branch on Beale Street may have been brought to the attention of Cunningham through another mechanism in which African American Memphians had a semblance of a voice but also clearly lacked control. When the branch opened, "a few Negroes prominent in political circles" were consulted about forming a Negro Advisory Board for the library. African American professionals including teachers, pastors, and dentists served on it. Recollections of board members show some of ways that African Americans were stymied in Crump's Memphis. One member could not recall ever attending a meeting; another member called it "an empty honor to flatter their ego and to give the impression that Negroes participated in policy-making affairs." Although he could not identify any concrete accomplishments of the advisory board, one member was "quite outspoken about the location of the Negro Library in the noise and confusion of a park auditorium." The advisory board met only a few times.³²

As early as April 1936, the Board of Cossitt Library was considering, yet again, the "most suitable location for a branch for colored people." In a letter to Mayor Overton, Cunningham averred that "we have met with a great deal of difficulty in finding a suitable place so located as to reach the largest number of the colored population" and went on to note that "the problem involves more than just the moving of the present library. We would like this move to involve a planned program for the establishment of a library that would serve as the center for library service to the colored population, just as the library, at Front and Monroe, serves as the center for service to the white population."³³

One should not confuse Cunningham's professional commitment to providing the best service to African American readers with any personal sympathy for his fellow citizens of color. In 1936 the American Library Association held its annual convention in Richmond, Virginia. African American attendees

were excluded from social gatherings and meals and required to use separate doors and sit in separate sections from white attendees. The library press was filled with what Cunningham called "rather strong criticisms of the Southern customs with respect to negroes," and he responded with a letter to the *Library Journal*:³⁴

Liberal provisions were made for Negro librarians to attend sessions at Richmond. . . . It is just unfortunate that emphasis was placed on the negative side of Negroes attending meetings where food was served. No Negro attending a meeting in Richmond would expect this. It is not the custom. . . . What does Rhode Island or New Jersey know about the Southern Negro? A population of five whites to one Negro does not make a problem. It is another matter entirely where communities have a Negro population ranging from 3 to 1 to 7 to 1. The entire Negro population of Providence would not make a crowd for the dice and policy games on Beale Street, Memphis, on a Saturday night.³⁵

A temporary solution to the problem of locating a standalone site for an African American library branch was found when an empty storefront on Butler Street became available. This site was about four blocks south of the Church Auditorium, and opened on June 7, 1937. Rosa Cooke, a graduate of BTW and LeMoyne, who had "also received some special training in library work at Atlanta University," was hired as the librarian for the Butler Street Branch.³⁶

The Butler Street branch was not the only advance in library service to African Americans during the late 1930s. The library became involved in public housing in October 1938 when a small branch library, supervised by a social worker, was opened inside the administrative offices of Foote Homes. Given the inadequate geographic coverage of the widely separated African American neighborhoods in Memphis, this choice seems myopic: Foote Homes was about a half-mile from the Butler Street branch, while Dixie Homes was about two miles away.³⁷

Between 1938 and 1940, the relationship between the Crump machine and African American Memphians changed profoundly. According to Wayne Dowdy, the triggering event was an instance of police brutality, in which African American postal worker George Brooks was shot to death under questionable circumstances. Community leaders such as J. E. Walker protested to Crump, but their complaints were ignored; subsequently, political organizers

in the African American community threatened to withhold their votes from Crump's candidates. Additional public works, including a swimming pool and a park, were promised to stanch the defections. In the 1938 gubernatorial primary Crump's candidate was victorious, but by a much smaller margin than in 1936. Dowdy attributes the difference to African American votes going against the Crump machine.³⁸

It appears that by 1939 the Crump machine had decided to discontinue courting the African American vote—and in 1940 imposed a crackdown on African American Republican campaign efforts. The Crump machine's hard line disturbed not only African American voters, but also a number of moderate whites, some of whom decried the "intimidation and persecution of citizens by the police."³⁹

After 1938, then, the relationship of the city government to its African American citizens was less straightforward. Crump often used police power to intimidate African American politicians, particularly Republicans, who failed to toe his line, but at the same time the city did continue to cater to African American Democrats in hopes of retaining their votes for the Crump ticket. By 1948 the Crump machine had loosened its grip on the city; by taking a reactionary stance to the Truman administration's mild initiatives on civil rights, Crump troubled not only African American voters, who by then included a large contingent of World War II veterans, but also a number of "moderate" whites who were willing to ease segregation in their city. The votes of those two groups were lost to the machine, and Crump's candidate lost the US senatorial primary in Memphis that year. From this start, African American leaders began to organize a mass movement to elect African Americans to political office, and fight segregation. By the early 1960s, the movement would include not only political activists but churchgoers, students, the NAACP, and other civic groups.⁴⁰

Library service for African Americans in this period was similarly a mixture of successes and setbacks. Crucially, in 1939 the Cossitt Library erected a standalone branch in South Memphis dedicated to serving African American patrons. But for many years following, the library denied requests for expansion of services in other African American neighborhoods, even as it built branches for whites at a steadily increasing pace. Some of this denial was due to Crump's "hardening" racial attitudes, and some was due to the Crump machine's commitment to keeping taxes low, with amenities for African Americans suffering disproportionately even as city services in Memphis generally fell behind other cities.⁴¹

The Butler Street property had been leased with an option to purchase the property. Word came that the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) was contemplating construction of another project in the area; with the potential of earning a tidy profit from sale of the lot, the board of directors decided to "exercise the option" and purchase the property in February 1939. In short order, the MHA made a bid on the lot and the library realized a profit. The profit was retained as the seed money for a grand project—the renovation of a building to serve as a Negro Branch library. For the few months after MHA took possession of the Butler Street lot and before the Negro Branch was opened, the library resumed operations in Church Auditorium.⁴²

The site selected for the new Negro Branch was 531 Vance Avenue, about four blocks north and east of the Butler Street branch, and five blocks south and east of the Church Auditorium. It was within walking distance of Beale Street, and was near a streetcar line at a transfer point. Prior to its possession by Cossitt Library, the building had been the site of the McDowell-Monteverde funeral home. Frank Monteverde had served as mayor of Memphis from 1917 to 1919, but in less than twenty years Vance Avenue had become firmly established as an African American neighborhood. Rather than building a new edifice, the Cossitt Library completely renovated the undertakers' establishment. The work took three months and cost a total of \$10,654—far more than was gained from the sale of the Butler Street property.⁴³

When completed, the Cossitt Library Negro Branch was "a one story structure of gray stone . . . ample in size; about one half of the space [was] used for the book shelves, reading rooms, and the circulation desk. The other half house[d] the office of the Librarian and shelves for the public school depositary book collection." Promotional literature for the Negro Branch showed pictures of a reading room full of school-age children "enjoying free library books."⁴⁴

The Negro Branch opened in the fall of 1939. It not only served as a public library open to African Americans, but was also the center for coordinating the school libraries program in African American libraries, a task that had been impossible at the branch libraries hosted within other institutions. Acquisitions, cataloging, and classification were performed by staff at the main library, and the books were delivered "ready for circulation" to Vance Avenue. The Negro Branch was open six days a week, for four to six hours per day, served by five employees. Circulation remained similar to the levels seen at Butler Street.⁴⁵

The Negro Branch quickly took on functions associated with public libraries in many neighborhoods. Local groups such as Boy Scout troops, a young mothers' club, a garden club, churches, and adult education classes visited. Special programming included a book festival in the spring and Book Week after school resumed in the autumn; exhibits were keyed to seasonal themes, and book displays tied to local events. Although it was underfunded, the Negro Branch played an important role in the education of African Americans in Memphis. Benjamin Head, librarian in the late 1970s, noted, "All the blacks who lived and were educated in Memphis had to use that library. For . . . any number of community leaders, it was the only place . . . in the city where they could study and find materials."⁴⁶

The Negro Branch also, of course, played a part in the Crump machine's efforts to retain the African American vote. In 1944 the city prepared a booklet, *Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis: Civic Progress 1940-44*, designed to emphasize the services that the city administration provided to its African American citizens. As Elizabeth Gritter notes, the booklet emphasized, among other features, "the city's one black library branch as a privilege for African Americans while ignoring the fact that they could not utilize the city's other library branches." Five hundred copies of the booklet were distributed at the Negro Branch library.⁴⁷

The library's collection was not large—in 1942 only 4,781 books were on its shelves; that is, one book for every fourteen African Americans in the city. Despite this, Cooke did her best to make the library a center for research specific to interests within the African American community. As early as 1940, Cooke began organizing exhibitions to commemorate Negro History Week. She and her colleagues also built a rich collection of primary and secondary sources on local and worldwide black culture. The African American history collection included "irreplaceable, first edition material," including manuscripts by T. O. Fuller and African American historian Carter G. Woodson.⁴⁸ The library was burned in 1978 when a nearby vacant building was torched during a wave of arsons accompanying a firefighters' strike, and the fire spread to the Vance Avenue Branch. Because of the strike, a group of firefighters refused to extinguish the blaze and watched the library burn, as they did with other buildings in the city. Although the fire was one of many set across the city during the strike, the loss of the library was regarded as a great tragedy and "remained a source of resentment in the Vance-Lauderdale community against the firefighters for several years." The branch was rebuilt on the same site in 1981.⁴⁹

In September 1953 Margaret McCulloch, a white teacher formerly at LeMoyne College, organized a Committee on Community Service to publicize the library among those who were not already patrons, and to solicit gifts for the library. As had been the case twenty years before, leading African American teachers, pastors, and professionals were given a nominal voice in, but not control of, library management. Cunningham even reserved the right to veto the addition of books that were offered for donation.⁵⁰

The distance of the Negro Branch from many African American neighborhoods continued to trouble residents of those areas. A 1952 newspaper account reported that the Negro Branch had become "a favorite haunt *for those who live nearby*." Over the next decade a number of proposals for new branches serving African Americans were considered, but none were adopted.⁵¹

As the 1950s loomed, Memphis and its libraries faced drastic changes. Crump pushed through bond issues in 1951 and 1952 to enable the construction of permanent branch locations, rather than storefronts, and a new Central Library to replace the crumbling Cossitt Library downtown. Between 1951 and 1968, twelve new branch libraries were constructed all across the city. The master plan included "another library for our colored citizens."⁵²

African Americans in Memphis were also experiencing an expansion—in their housing choices, in their popular culture, and in their political power—although it remained curtailed by the white establishment. The 1950s also saw a resurgence of African American political activity outside of the Crump machine's control. As early as 1951, African American candidates began to seek election to city offices such as the school board, judgeships, and the city commission—building political networks outside of the Crump machine, or what remained of it after Crump's death in 1954.⁵³

In this optimistic environment, the Cossitt Library enlisted the support of Mayor Overton, and in January 1952 it announced plans for the new Central Library and a "North Memphis branch library for negroes." The branch for African Americans would be built only after the new Central Library was completed.⁵⁴

It appears that, finally, the Cossitt Board was taking seriously its intention to build another branch for African Americans. In these intentions, however, it found an opponent in Cunningham. He had been thinking over the question of branch libraries in general and had noted that a concern over lack of access to libraries may have been overblown when "such a small percentage [of the population] use the facilities provided." Further, he expected that book-mobile service could "be a factor in helping us locate good sites for branches,"

by providing a way to measure local interest in library services. He was particularly concerned that "a study of the negro areas in Memphis and the type of negroes in them, raises a serious question in my mind about spending much money in an attempt to provide them service." However, bookmobile services in 1952 did not extend to African American neighborhoods.⁵⁵

The library added bookmobile service for African American neighborhoods in 1953. Cunningham "concluded that one or two bookmobiles would furnish more or better service and at much more reasonable expense than . . . construction of a branch for Negroes." Cossitt Library had provided bookmobile service in white neighborhoods since 1935.⁵⁶

However, the question of what constitutes "more or better service" requires a definition of those terms. As Wayne Weigand explains, libraries serve as communal spaces where reading is valued—and librarians serve communal information needs through programming and community outreach. To assert that the community of African American readers could be served as well with a bookmobile as with a library was to dismiss their needs for space, fellowship, service, and self-determination. Despite its disadvantages, the bookmobile service did find a ready audience. Some children in African American neighborhoods waited for the bookmobile to arrive with the expectancy typically showed for the ice cream truck.⁵⁷

The rhetoric of democracy often arose in discussions of the library—and it is indicative of white Memphians' notions of inclusivity. For example, in the summer of 1955 the library branches reduced their hours by closing on Saturdays. Outraged letters to the newspaper cited the fact that the library was "built to accommodate all the people" and should stay open for those who worked during the week. In 1956 the Memphis Public Library promulgated a Code of Ethics for its employees. Among its provisions is this statement: "It is . . . unethical to discriminate in service towards any particular patron at the expense of another. The service is for the commonweal." In none of these discussions was the concern directed at the segregation of library service by race—instead, the matter was differential treatment of white patrons.⁵⁸

Phoebe Weaver Williams, who was born in 1946, recalls the Negro Branch in the 1950s: "As a family we patronized the Colored Branch of the City of Memphis Library. It was located in a small building in a black neighborhood. The City of Memphis employed black librarians to work there, and they were courteous and kind to us. Yet, I knew that white children had access to a much better facility. During trips downtown I could see what appeared

to me a massive and impressive structure that housed the downtown public library . . . open to whites only."⁵⁹

Assessing the state of affairs in 1955, Hoffman noted that "library facilities for Memphis Negroes lag far behind many other southern cities" and noted that in many of those cities African Americans patrons had by persistent requests achieved access to the main library. She found "no comparable record on the part of [Memphis] Negroes on behalf of library services" and noted that "there is reason to believe that if Negroes of Memphis asked for better library services they could be obtained."⁶⁰

It is true that by 1953 there were fifty-nine southern municipalities where African Americans had access to the main public library. But in many cases, there were limitations on African Americans' borrowing privileges, or seating areas, and often segregated restrooms or circulation desks. In the largest cities, including Richmond (desegregated in 1947), Louisville (1948), Chattanooga (1949), and Little Rock (1951), the libraries' leaders had given in to "subtle but persistent pressures from black communities" when deciding to open their facilities to African American patrons.

Those cases confirm the observations of many librarians—including Lamar Wallis, who oversaw the desegregation of Memphis libraries in 1960—that desegregation of libraries was less troublesome than that of schools or parks, because the interaction was more business-like than social, and less likely to lead to "race mixing." If African Americans and whites could shop together, then they could patronize libraries together.⁶¹

Hoffman's criticism of Memphians for failing to mount a pressure campaign for better access to libraries may have been grounded in a similar understanding to that of Wallis. What she may have overlooked is that in Memphis, African Americans and whites did not, in fact, shop together. Downtown department stores were not desegregated until 1962. Alma Booth recalled, "At Goldsmith's and Levy's [you] had to go in the back to try on the hats, you couldn't go to out front [to try on clothes]." Johnnie Mae Peters remembered it similarly: "You didn't have a right to try clothes on, look at them too much. . . . If you wanted something, you had to know what you had and buy it."⁶²

Phoebe Weaver Williams recalls an instance of underground resistance to such policies: "My grandmother greatly resented store policies that prohibited black women from trying on hats before purchasing them. She protested against this practice by purchasing the hat, trying it on at home, and returning it if she did not like it. We made many trips to the hat department.

She explained to me that despite store policies, some white woman would eventually wear a hat that had been on the head of a black woman.”⁶³

The provision of segregated library services in Memphis was typical of the Memphis city government’s relationship with its African American citizens. In order to retain the support of African American voters, city services were extended, but not in a way that would challenge white supremacy. The conservatism of white Memphis in racial matters made it necessary to preserve segregation in all public facilities. However, by relying on African American political leaders to organize the Crump machine vote within their neighborhoods, Crump had unwittingly “helped to create an African-American populace willing to challenge the established order.”⁶⁴

By the time the second “Negro Branch” in North Memphis was completed in 1961, the network of African American lawyers, politicians, and activists who had first come together to challenge the Crump machine in the 1940s had achieved the desegregation of the Memphis Public Library through litigation and direct action. The sit-in movement in Memphis began in the spring of 1960 at the main library, and kicked off years of demonstrations that eventually resulted in the complete removal of all *de jure* segregation in Memphis. Although allegations of racism in hiring and promotions persisted into the 1980s, there was little documented resistance by white citizens to sharing library spaces with their African American neighbors.⁶⁵

The tale of segregated libraries in Memphis is one in which African American readers found their right to read restricted by the choices of library directors who were unaccountable to them, head librarians with racial animus, and budget choices dictated by a political boss whose intention was always to favor his white constituents. Nonetheless, the embrace of the library within the African American community was one of many developments that allowed African American leaders to build a network of activists that would eventually desegregate the libraries and all public institutions in the Bluff City.

Appendix

Timeline of Events

1888: Cossitt Library founded as a private philanthropic institution

1893: Cossitt Library building opens (to white citizens only)

1903: Library millage instituted

1903 or 1904: Branch library for African Americans opens inside LeMoyne Institute (operates until 1932)

Ca. 1910–14: Branch libraries open within public schools

- 1914: LeMoyne Institute moves to larger building
- 1914: Second branch library for African Americans opens in Howe Institute (operates until 1926)
- 1925: Jesse Cunningham appointed Cossitt Library director, overhauls collection in LeMoyne Branch
- 1926: Howe Institute branch closes
- 1927: Crump machine takes control of city government
- Ca. 1927: Branch library for African Americans opens in Booker T. Washington High School (operates until ca. 1937)
- 1932: LeMoyne Institute branch library closes
- 1933: New Deal legislation begins funneling money for public works through city administration
- 1934: Branch library for African Americans opens in Church Auditorium (operates until 1937)
- 1937: Church Auditorium branch library closes
- 1937: Branch library for African Americans opens at 366-368 Butler St. (operates until 1939)
- Ca. 1937-39: Booker T. Washington High School branch closes
- 1938: Branch library for African Americans opens in Foote Homes
- 1939: Branch library at Butler Street closes
- 1939: Branch library for African Americans opens at 531 Vance Ave. (still in operation)
- 1953: Bookmobile service extended to African American neighborhoods
- 1960: All libraries in Memphis desegregated

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