

The Foundation of Cossitt Library and the Inauguration of Library Service to African Americans in Memphis and Shelby County

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Memphis never had a “Public Library” by that name until 1955. Prior to that, its public libraries operated under the moniker of “Cossitt Libraries,” named for the benefactor whose heirs endowed the city with its first library.¹ The Cossitt Libraries operated as a private philanthropic institution, even after the city government began augmenting the Cossitt Library’s funds with public monies.

The public library movement was never as strong in the South as it was elsewhere in the United States. Since the eighteenth century, several cities enjoyed charitable institutions designed to provide educational reading, or library clubs which required the payment of membership fees. However, the public library as thought of today—a tax-funded branch of municipal government—had its origins in antebellum New England. In 1833, the town of Peterborough, New Hampshire, voted to use a portion of its tax revenues to establish a library open to all its residents. The idea was copied in many other New England towns, but came to widespread national attention when the Boston Public Library was founded in 1854. Other metropolitan libraries throughout the North were created in the following decades, but none in the South until 1871, when the Louisville Free Public Library began operation.² Between 1876 and 1903, the number of public libraries in the United States increased fifteen-fold.³

In addition, the public library idea emerged from a New England religious and civic culture very different from that of the South. Wayne Wiegand observes that the public library movement started in part as an attempt to ameliorate the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration upon the electorate; along with compulsory education, libraries were intended to create a literate citizenry to engage in the democratic governance seen in New England.⁴ As New Englanders moved west into the Great Lakes and prairie states, public libraries followed them. Another influence was the religious environment of New England, where Congregationalists and Unitarians valued “the printed word as an instrument for the building of character.”⁵ Patterns of migration—as New Englanders moved westward but remained largely north of the Mason-Dixon line, while migrants from Virginia and the Carolinas populated the Old Southwest—meant that different cultures from before the Civil War persisted throughout the period of great expansion of public libraries from 1876 to 1917.⁶ Rather than direct democracy, the South relied on a Jeffersonian/Jacksonian method of representative government.⁷ And neither Congregationalists nor Unitarians were able to plant many churches in the South. For example, in 1890, there were fewer than 150 Congregational churches in the South, and only a solitary Unitarian congregation in Kentucky.⁸

Both the culture and the economy of the South were less amenable to public libraries than were those of the North. The devastation of the Civil War made the South the poorest section of the nation; that fact, coupled with policies of post-Reconstruction white supremacist “Redeemer” governments in many states to “spend nothing unless absolutely necessary,” offered little prospect of support for public libraries in the postwar years.⁹ The number of public libraries thus grew rapidly outside the South, while making small gains in the South. In 1876, there were 225 public libraries outside the South and 35 in Southern states. By 1903, the non-Southern states had 3,499 public libraries, while there were only 427 in the South. Per capita, by 1903 non-Southern libraries spread so that each library served

an average of 15,682 citizens, while Southern libraries served an average of 49,468 citizens. The twelve states of the South all ranked among the lowest sixteen states in public libraries per capita.¹⁰ Even the offer of philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to build free library buildings, if municipalities would support their operations through taxation, found less favor in the South. By the end of the program in 1917, there was one Carnegie library for every 52,618 non-Southerners, and only one for every 173,819 Southern residents.¹¹ Tennessee was no exception to the trend. Although a handful of subscription or philanthropic libraries had been founded before the Civil War (in Nashville, Dickson, Knoxville, and Rugby), no public libraries emerged until the state legislature passed a bill in 1897 authorizing municipalities of more than 20,000 residents to allocate tax money to public libraries.¹²

Early historians of public libraries emphasized the narrative promoted by public librarians: that of a benevolent institution aimed at uplift of the community through reading of good books.¹³ In the late twentieth century, historians emphasized the library as both a product and a perpetuator of social attitudes toward reading and readers, particularly as librarians assumed the role of arbiters of quality literature.¹⁴ Still more recently, the notion has arisen that libraries were also a tool for social control, with the aim of directing users to conform with certain modes of behavior while discouraging others.¹⁵ The social control aspect of librarianship extends to the historiography of the relationship between Southern libraries and African American patrons. Several recent works detail the many ways in which Southern libraries operated not only to exclude African Americans from their premises, but to limit the reading material of white patrons that might call into question the structures of segregation.¹⁶ A study of the libraries of Memphis in this period provides important operational details that illuminate the role of philanthropy in Progressive Era improvements to civic life, and the ways in which the paternalism of progressive reform in the urban South influenced and was influenced by the strictures of Jim Crow segregation.

Reading in Memphis

In the late nineteenth century, the city of Memphis was in no position to establish a public library. Having been devastated by two successive waves of yellow fever in the 1870s, followed by a period of lax oversight and consequent pilfering of municipal accounts, the city had depopulated and fallen into debt.¹⁷ Any surplus funds were poured into sanitation measures to keep away yellow-fever-bearing mosquitos.¹⁸ Even had the city been flush, it is unlikely that library service would have been extended to African Americans on an equal basis.

After a short period of involvement in city and state government by African Americans, the takeover of local government by white Democrats in the late 1870s led to a "double blow of disenfranchisement and segregation" that sharply reduced the political influence and economic opportunities available to African American Memphians.¹⁹ In Memphis, a string of lynchings in the early 1890s, followed by others in 1912 and 1917, removed any doubt about African Americans' place in Shelby County's caste system.²⁰ Nonetheless, Memphis continued to attract African Americans moving off of farms into the city. Recalling his early adulthood in Memphis during this era, Richard Wright noted both the oppression that made Memphis a southern city and the opportunities that distinguished it from the countryside: "The people in Memphis had an air of relative urbanity that took some of the sharpness off the attitude of whites to Negroes.... Although I could detect disdain and hatred in their attitudes, they never shouted at me or abused me."²¹ Historians have found that, despite such oppression, African Americans in Memphis were not without agency. Above all, they sought education as the means to rise above their circumstances. While African Americans formed many organizations for mutual support and benefit, especially churches and fraternal organizations, each had a component of education, from Sunday classes that taught parishioners to read the Bible to lecture series for edification and uplift. Citizens from all strata of society, especially women, participated in these educational activities. Held on Sundays and in the

evening, they were structured to accommodate the needs of working African Americans.²²

Even for white residents, early efforts at providing a public space for reading in Memphis were haphazard. The first known reading room opened in the office of the newspaper *The Eagle*, in 1848.²³ During the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of mutual benefit societies operated lending libraries and reading rooms restricted to paying members.²⁴ The Odd Fellows Hall and Library Association operated a longer-lived library from 1877 to 1900.²⁵ This appears to have been a shoe-string operation: it gained part of its holdings by appealing to housewives to clean out their shelves, and by 1886, it had only about 2,500 books to lend.²⁶ It even closed during the hottest part of summer to “give the librarian a rest.”²⁷ The Odd Fellows Library ceased operation in 1900 after the Cossitt Library proved to be popular among the reading public of Memphis.²⁸ In 1907, the Goodwyn Institute at the corner of Madison and Third was created to offer “educational agencies” including a public lecture series and a reference library to the white people of Memphis.²⁹ The Goodwyn Institute library never circulated books and merged with the Cossitt Library in 1961.³⁰

The Cossitt Bequest

Given the demonstrated demand for library services, it was fortunate for the reading public of Memphis that Frederick H. Cossitt remembered the city in his will. Cossitt was a native New Englander, but he moved to Clarksville, Tennessee, as a teenager and in 1842 established a successful wholesale dry goods firm in Memphis. He advocated for a public library before the Civil War, but removed to New York City in the spring of 1861.³¹ While he never formally bequeathed funds for a library in Memphis, there was found in his papers after his death a memorandum indicating that he intended to donate \$75,000 (around \$1.8 million in 2016 dollars) to the city of Memphis for building a public library.³² Cossitt had made a promise to his friend Carrington Mason of Memphis that he would make such a donation, and upon his death in 1887 Mason first “carried on

an urgent correspondence,” and then travelled at his own expense to New York in order to persuade Cossitt’s three daughters to honor that promise.³³ Cossitt’s heirs, having seen their father’s letters to Mason regarding the library, agreed to donate \$25,000 each to build a library in Memphis. The library was established as a private philanthropy according to the plans Cossitt had outlined in his papers. On April 7, 1888, nine prominent white Memphians incorporated the Cossitt Library as a “body politic and corporate” with the general purpose “to establish and maintain a Free Public Library within the City of Memphis.”³⁴

The city donated land at the corner of Front and Monroe streets, and promised to provide funds for the “working expenses” of the library. The \$75,000 bequest from Cossitt’s heirs was spent entirely on the construction of a red sandstone Romanesque structure dedicated on April 12, 1893. The city’s initial operating budget (\$3,333.33) could not support the purchase of new books. The library was stocked from private collections and the daily newspapers also led fundraising campaigns, so that by 1898 the Cossitt Library was circulating 150 books per day.³⁵

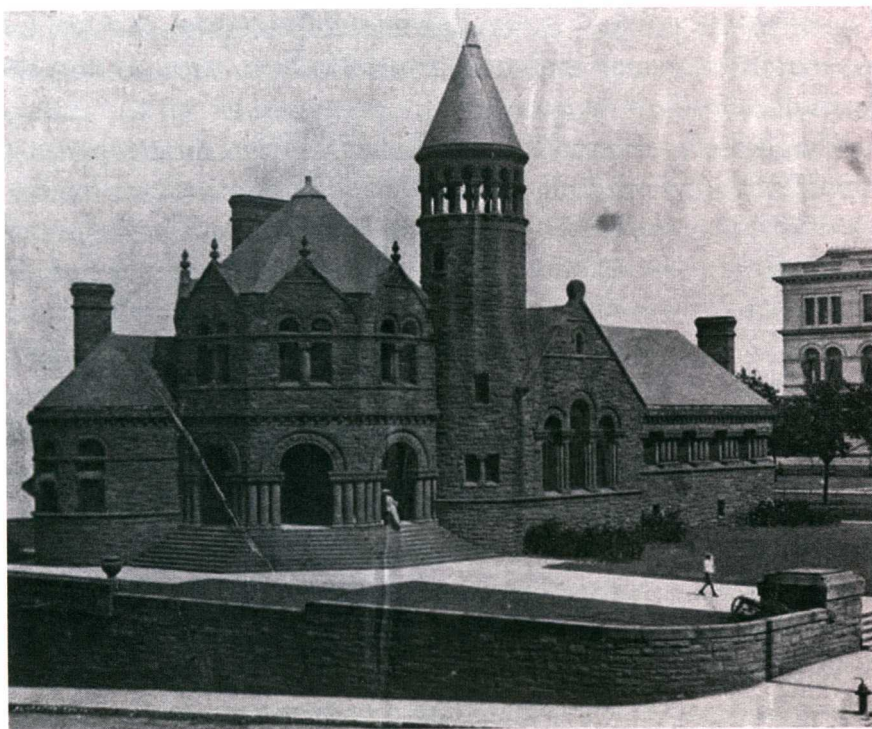
The “General Rules” of the Cossitt Library stated that the building was “open to the public,” with no mention of racial restrictions.³⁶ Nonetheless, African Americans were not welcome, except as members of the janitorial crew. Although the city of Memphis had provided some support for the library, it operated as a private organization. As such, under then prevailing jurisprudence, it was free to discriminate in its services.³⁷ Existing records fail to show that the Directors of the Cossitt Library gave consideration to including African Americans as patrons. Throughout Memphis in this period, establishments opened with a predetermined clientele: a business or institution would serve whites or African Americans, but virtually never people of both races at the same time.

While the turn of the twentieth century saw a decline in the civil rights of African American Memphians, in many ways the city extended the services and privileges afforded to its white

residents. For example, in 1900 a parks commission was formed and established Riverside and Overton Parks.³⁸ These were followed by children's playgrounds erected in 1908.³⁹ Food inspections, visiting nurses, and the Shelby County Industrial and Training School for juvenile delinquents were instituted.⁴⁰ As the population grew rapidly, school construction boomed: some seventeen new schools were built in a decade.⁴¹ African Americans were typically left out of the benefits of progressive reforms in Memphis. While the visiting nurses did number an African American among their staff, the parks and the juvenile reformatory were reserved for whites. Interestingly, as with the library, there were no laws on the books restricting African American access to public parks. Nonetheless, black Memphians who attempted to enjoy the parks were "routinely driven" from them.⁴² Schools for whites were more numerous (13 out of 17 built in this period) and better furnished: when a new Central High School was built for whites, the old building was "handed down" to be used by African American students.⁴³ In order to enjoy amenities similar to those of whites, African Americans often had to furnish them out of pocket. For example, a Colored Detention Home for juvenile delinquents was created only after African American citizens raised the funds.⁴⁴ Parks open to African Americans were commercial enterprises, such as Church's Park on Beale Street, and Klondyke Park in the neighborhood of the same name.⁴⁵

1903: The Turning Point

In 1903 two momentous events occurred in the history of the public library. First, the library was granted a dedicated millage (a small tax) for its support. For its first ten years, the Cossitt Library enjoyed such municipal support as the city government chose to provide from year to year. From his appointment in 1898, its second librarian, Charles Dutton Johnson, identified variable and capricious funding as an obstacle to the library's growth, and successfully lobbied the Tennessee legislature to add a library millage to the taxes paid by Memphians.⁴⁶ The act passed in 1903 enabled a library millage in "any taxing district



Cossitt Library, 1903, *Image Courtesy of Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library and Information Center.*

having a population of one hundred thousand, or more”—a group of which Memphis was the only member.⁴⁷ The tax of three cents on every one hundred dollars of “all the taxable property, real and personal” was “for the use and benefit of the public libraries already established and in operation within such taxing districts respectively, and for no other purpose whatsoever.”⁴⁸ The establishment of the millage was a milestone in library history—the library itself suggested it was the first such tax in the South.⁴⁹

Curiously, the phrase “public library” appears three times in the bill, which is clearly intended to support the Cossitt Library—yet the Cossitt Library was governed as a private philanthropic institution. Its board was self-perpetuating, with lifetime tenure for members and no accountability to the voting public or the elected officers of Memphis who enforced the taxation required to operate the Cossitt Library. True, it was

“open to the public,” as its directors defined the term, but its operations remained under the control of men with no duty to consult the will of the people.

The second great event occurred when Cossitt Library opened a branch for African American readers. 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. It was simply noted that on November 17, 1903, “the matter of establishing a branch library for the colored people was discussed, the conclusion reached being that the secretary would correspond with Professor A.J. Steele, President of LeMoyné Institute, with whom he had previously talked on the subject and report the results later.”⁵⁰ However, that secretary, Alfred D. Mason, told Rheba Hoffman in 1955 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.”⁵¹ Mason did not recall that the board had ever received a request from African Americans, individually or in groups, to extend library services.⁵² This was not unique to Memphis; it was noted by the American Library Association at its 1913 conference that “among the masses of the colored race there is yet very little demand for libraries.”⁵³ Perhaps the directors of Cossitt Library were persuaded from what their contemporary William F. Yust identified as “the missionary standpoint” that library service to African Americans would have a beneficial effect on the city’s most oppressed residents.⁵⁴

The Cossitt Library’s gesture was the first event of a region-wide movement to include African Americans, to a very limited degree, in the patronage of public libraries. In 1903 the North Carolina legislature established a public library for Charlotte with a mandated separate branch for African Americans. Galveston built an addition to the Negro Central High School in 1904, to house the first purpose-built branch library for African Americans. Louisville, Savannah, and Houston followed by 1909. But throughout the rural South, and in many large

cities, African Americans wishing to use a public library would have to wait until the 1920s or later.⁵⁵ As late as 1935, ninety percent of the African American population in the South could not use any kind of library.⁵⁶ The Memphis precedent was influential in establishing a model for establishing public library branches within existing educational institutions for African Americans; this method of providing library service was the most common way African Americans gained library access throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁷

The LeMoyne and Howe Branches of the Cossitt Library

Cossitt Library likely began service to the African Americans in late 1903 or 1904; in September of 1904 the directors once again “fully discussed” the “matter of a branch library for Negroes” without adding any of the discussion to their minutes.⁵⁸ The “branch library” established in this period was not a stand-alone building, but rather a collection housed within LeMoyne Institute, an African American college on South Orleans Street about a mile from Cossitt Library.⁵⁹ The LeMoyne Institute was founded in 1870 under the auspices of the American Missionary Association (AMA), an organ of the New England-based Congregational Church which had taken on the responsibility of providing education for formerly enslaved people after the federal Freedman’s Bureau was disbanded. Dr. Francis Julius LeMoyne, an abolitionist from Washington, Pennsylvania, donated \$20,000 to the AMA after all its Memphis schools were destroyed in the 1866 “race riot”; \$9,000 was used to erect the building, and \$11,000 was reserved for an endowment. Until 1924, the LeMoyne Institute operated as a “Normal and Commercial School,” training teachers and office workers; after six years as a junior college, in 1930 it became a four-year college.⁶⁰ In 1968, the college merged with S.A. Owen Junior College and is now called LeMoyne-Owen College. It has retained its nondenominational Christian nature, including instruction in morals and character as well as practical and scholarly matters, to the present. In 1903, it enrolled

around 700 students under the leadership of Andrew J. Steele, a white veteran of the Union Army who served as the principal of LeMoyne Institute since 1873.⁶¹

While the LeMoyne Branch of Cossitt Library was housed within the LeMoyne Institute, it was open to any African American patrons who wished to use it. Yust noted that it served as "the book supply for all interested negroes in the city and surrounding district."⁶² The LeMoyne Branch was a delight to its patrons. In his 1908 compendium of African American life, *The Bright Side of Memphis*, G.P. Hamilton rhapsodized:

This library is open to the public at large, and anyone conforming to its regulations will be accommodated. It is the pleasure of the librarian and management to oblige the reading public, and they are anxious to stimulate and promote the growth of intelligence among the colored people of Memphis.⁶³

However, the branch faced difficulties reaching its intended patrons:

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. It is really a public library and is intended to serve the wants of the colored citizens of Memphis just as the Cossitt library serves the wants of the white people.⁶⁴

The branch library's location, staffing, funding, and collection were all inferior to the main library for whites. Until around 1925 its collection consisted entirely of books discarded from the main library.⁶⁵ Although it is not recorded when this policy began, for many years African American library patrons were allowed to request a book from the main library, and the book would be delivered to the Negro Branch whence it could be checked out.⁶⁶ How patrons of the Negro Branch knew of the titles at the main branch was left unstated; they certainly could not use the traditional tools of searching the card catalog or browsing shelves. The delivery of books from Cossitt Library to the Negro Branch, and then back, may be compared to the same

service in Birmingham, Alabama, where a book once loaned to an African American patron would never be recirculated to a white reader.⁶⁷ The Cossitt Library's policy of stocking the African American branch with castoffs from the main branch was standard practice among Memphis institutions. For example, Central High School for white students was built around the same time as Booker T. Washington (BTW) High School for African Americans. Administrators assigned both schools the same nickname, Warriors, so that used athletic uniforms from Central could be given to the players at BTW.⁶⁸

For the first decade, the number of borrowers at the LeMoyne Branch did not exceed the number of students enrolled at LeMoyne Institute. Indeed, use of the library was predominantly by those students. In 1911 and 1912, the library recorded use by students and by other patrons; nonstudent patrons represented only one-tenth of the recorded users.⁶⁹ It seems that the branch's location within an educational institution served to depress its use by the public. A number of factors may have accounted for this effect: users from the general public may have been intimidated about entering a school building, or else under the misimpression that the library was only for students; the library's hours may have been those of the Institute, and perhaps not convenient for working people; and finally, the library's collection may have been focused on those volumes which would appeal most to students, considering that they constituted the bulk of users. Without complete records, these remain matters for speculation.

After a decade of library service, only one out of every eighty-one African Americans in the city held a library card.⁷⁰ However, Cossitt Library continued to offer other avenues of library service. Sometime between 1910 and 1914, the library began to open public libraries in the schools. Each of 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.⁷¹ These services began on September 15, 1913, when the board "ordered that Mrs. Cecilia K. Yerby (Colored) be employed as Superintendent of the Extension of Library work

among the Colored people of the City, at a salary not to exceed \$35.00 per month."⁷² In 1914, the number of books checked out of the school libraries was triple the total checked out of the LeMoyne in comparison to the main library. In 1910, the LeMoyne Branch accessioned 293 "new" titles and checked out 8,155 books to 552 borrowers. The main branch accessioned 8,930 new books and checked out 197,748 books to 11,215 borrowers. Alma Childs, the librarian at the LeMoyne Branch, earned a monthly salary of \$35—slightly higher than the night watchman at the main library, who earned \$25. When all the white librarians received a raise in 1914, there was none forthcoming for the African American employees.⁷³ Charles D. Johnston, the librarian of Cossitt Library, who oversaw the entire operation and dozens of employees, earned \$166.65 per month.⁷⁴

These discrepancies continued for many years. The salary of the LeMoyne Branch librarian remained steady at \$35 per month until 1920, when it was raised to \$50, while Johnston's salary rose to \$300 a month in the same period.⁷⁵ The rapid inflation of the war years made that flat salary an effective 43% reduction. The effect of low wages in an inflationary economy, coupled with the frustrations of a meager budget and an inconspicuous location, produced high turnover among African American library employees. No employee stayed in his or her position longer than four years, and many left their position within a single year. As effective library service often depends upon familiarity with the collection and the information needs of the community, such high turnover may have had a deleterious influence on the level of library assistance provided to African American patrons.

Jim Crow era racial customs also meant that whites offered African Americans less respect. During the first half of the twentieth century, whites often shied away from placing African Americans in any position of public trust. The Cossitt Library Board found itself troubled by such conventions in 1912, when it recorded that "the Librarian explained the need for the employment of a white man who would have charge of the Building, and could be clothed with greater authority and police powers than the present colored Janitor."⁷⁶ The board excluded

African American librarians from aspects of librarianship requiring fiduciary responsibility. The budget for library materials, for example, was set by the Board of Directors (likely at the suggestion of the head librarian). The LeMoyne Branch seldom acquired new books. For example, in 1912 the main library spent more than \$5,400 on new books, and LeMoyne spent \$47.⁷⁷ In other years, expenditures were even lower. Perplexingly, in many years the budgeted amount for books at LeMoyne was not fully expended. Few librarians with control over their own collections would deliberately under-expend their budgets. However, if white librarians purchased for the African American collections with no sense of responsibility to the African American patrons at branch libraries, they may have been tempted to balance budgets by moving money away from the branch libraries. Alternatively, they may simply have neglected their duties in this regard, having little incentive or inclination to purchase new books for African American patrons. Another possibility is that African American librarians sought to curry favor with their white supervisors by operating their libraries at a lower expense than anticipated.

Improvements in library service to African Americans continued in the 1910s. Through no effort of its own, the Cossitt Library obtained a more capacious library for African Americans when the LeMoyne Institute moved to its present location on Walker Avenue, where the new school building provided "better library accommodations."⁷⁸ More significantly, in 1914 another branch library opened in Howe Institute, an African American school affiliated with the Baptist church that encompassed elementary and upper grades.⁷⁹ Peter Howe founded his namesake Institute in 1883 to educate young Baptists, but the school experienced a dramatic increase in enrollment after T.O. Fuller became its principal in 1902. His expanded curriculum included some vocational programs, which he publicized in the white press to make the Howe Institute palatable to the community, and a more comprehensive liberal education curriculum that paralleled the offerings in the city's high schools for white students.⁸⁰ By 1915, at least 500 students were enrolled.⁸¹

The Howe branch quickly proved more popular than LeMoyne. Perhaps it was a more convenient location since it was located at the corner of St. Paul and Wellington about a mile and a half from the Cossitt Library, and considerably closer to downtown than the LeMoyne branch, 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. By contrast, the users at LeMoyne borrowed many more books per capita—eight books per user, compared to less than one book per user at Howe.⁸²

While the Cossitt Library offered 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.⁸³ Memphis, by contrast, was continuing to expand its public library services—and even participating in the only program of library education available to southern African American librarians. Thomas Fountain Blue, a librarian in the Western Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library, had “entered the library field with[out] formal training or education for librarianship” in 1905, but in seeking to provide an easier transition for other African American librarians, he established a training program that was the only one of its kind until 1925.⁸⁴ In 1914, as the Cossitt Library expanded its school libraries program, “the Librarian reported that he had sent Cecilia K. Yerby to Louisville for six weeks to attend a Library School.”⁸⁵ But Yerby remained on the payroll as Supervisor of the Colored School Department for only two years.

From 1915 through 1926, LeMoyne Institute and Howe Institute housed their branch libraries for children and adults, and children were also allowed to check out books from the very limited collections offered in their local schools. Although the library millage rate increased a penny to four cents in 1919, the increase had little effect on the allocation for books at the African American branches.⁸⁶

Richard Wright in the Cossitt Library

The Cossitt Library's maintenance of two branches for African Americans evidently was not known to all interested citizens. One writer's tale of the Cossitt Library clearly demonstrates the restrictions placed upon African Americans, and assumptions white librarians held about the interests and capabilities of African American readers. The story told by Richard Wright, who later became famous as the author of the novel *Native Son* and many other works, was typical of many Memphians—born in rural Mississippi in 1908 and haphazardly educated, he migrated to Memphis in 1925 and found work in “an optical company” downtown. He stayed in Memphis for a brief period before moving on to Chicago in 1927.⁸⁷ Sometime in that period, around 1926, Wright encountered an editorial in the *Commercial Appeal* denouncing the Baltimore author and editor H.L. Mencken, whose iconoclasm did not sit well with many Southerners. Intrigued, Wright wondered, “How could I find out about this Mencken? There was a huge library near the riverfront, but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves



Richard Wright, Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city.”⁸⁸ Ironically, Wright had attended the Howe Institute briefly around 1916—but as a small child, he may not have used the Howe branch during his time in the school. Regardless, he made no mention in his memoir about branch libraries for African Americans. In fact, he “knew of no Negroes who read the books I liked and I wondered if any Negroes ever thought of them.”⁸⁹

His detachment from the library-going class of African Americans was such that "I knew that there were Negro doctors, lawyers, newspapermen, but I never saw any of them."⁹⁰

African Americans were not barred from the grounds of the main library—they could borrow books on behalf of white patrons. Taking advantage of this exception, Wright persuaded a Roman Catholic white man, Mr. Falk, to let Wright use his library card and check out a book by Mencken.⁹¹ Wright, not knowing any of the titles of Mencken's books, forged a note saying, "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?" (Wright used the epithet to make it appear that he could not have written the note).⁹² The librarian, echoing earlier comments by Wright's white sponsor, Mr. Falk, was concerned about an African American reading Mencken's works; but a lie about being illiterate removed Wright from suspicion. The librarian accommodated the request by delivering two of Mencken's books.⁹³

Consider what might have happened if Wright had made his way to one of the branch libraries and made the same request. If, as it appears, white librarians controlled the book collection at the branch libraries, and if they held the same attitude toward Mencken's suitability for African American readers as did Mr. Falk and the librarian at the main library, then there would have been no Mencken on the shelves. To be sure, Wright could have requested a book be sent from the main library to the branch. But without being able to search the card catalog or browse the shelves, how could Wright have known the titles of any Mencken books to request? A librarian might have helped overcome those obstacles by consulting bibliographic guides, but she might have been hindered by an inadequate reference collection as well.

Wright was further handicapped by his exclusion from the library as he tried to explore Mencken's works. He wondered, "Who were these men about whom Mencken was talking so passionately? Who was Anatole France? Joseph Conrad? Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dostoevski... and scores of others? Were these men real? Did they exist or had they existed? And how did one pronounce their names?"⁹⁴ As a supremely gifted

individual, Richard Wright was able to organize his fraudulent library use and expand his understanding of literature and writing, but one can imagine an average person, simply seeking the pleasure of good literature or the challenge of reading, being stymied by the obstacles that stood between an African American reader and most of the library's collection. Wright persistently felt "a vague hunger ... for books, books that opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing, and again I would forge another note to the white librarian. Again I would read and wonder as only the naïve and unlettered can read and wonder, feeling that I carried a secret, criminal burden about with me each day."⁹⁵ Richard Wright was bold enough to bear his "secret, criminal burden" and hungry enough for learning to risk an encounter with white authorities. It is not known how many other African Americans shared those characteristics—and the opportunities Wright had, which would have been limited to people working downtown with white colleagues willing to indulge them.

Improvements in Library Service During the 1920s

The contradictions embodied in Wright's story reflect the larger picture of library service for African Americans: a noble intention of providing excellent librarianship, but delivered inadequately and out of sight of most of the African American citizens of Memphis. It was not uncommon for white southerners to fail to recognize the dichotomy between segregation and other ideals of democracy and equality. For example, at about the same time Wright arrived in Memphis, the Board of Directors adopted a Code of Ethics for Cossitt Library. Most of the points dealt with on-the-job behavior, but the last item was ideological:

THE ETHICS OF THE PROFESSION MUST STAND FOR:

1. A spirit of democracy.
2. Freedom of thought and expression permitting the fullest initiative within the limits of the broad policies of the library.
3. A broad social view point.⁹⁶

Richard Wright had certainly not benefitted from a broad social view point or spirit of democracy—but it is likely that many white patrons would say that they had.

In Memphis, African Americans made some gains as library patrons in the 1920s, even as the library branches remained little noticed and underused. Many advances stemmed from new leadership at the Cossitt Library. Upon the death of Johnston in 1924, the Board of Directors appointed a new head librarian. Jesse Cunningham was a Missouri native who had formal training in librarianship—a first for the leader of Cossitt Library. After his appointment in early 1925, he introduced many professional practices to the library system, such as organizing books using the Dewey Decimal System.⁹⁷ His reform of the LeMoyne branch was particularly dramatic. When he inspected the branch, Cunningham was satisfied with the competence of the librarian in charge there, but not with the use the branch received. He was especially dissatisfied with the quality of its book collection. As discards from the main branch they were “not books that might have stimulated a desire to read or satisfied the desire of one wanting to read.” His solution was to have the entire collection removed from the shelves and burned. The replacement of the old book stock with newer, more appropriate materials, however, did not have an appreciable effect on library usage at the LeMoyne branch.⁹⁸

Cossitt Library continued to seek highly trained librarians for its African American branches. In addition to the training offered in Louisville by Thomas F. Blue, in 1925 Hampton Institute, an African American school in Virginia, opened a Library School that trained public librarians.⁹⁹ While the Hampton Library School eventually became a course of study terminating in a bachelor's degree, at its inception it was a junior undergraduate program.¹⁰⁰ When the Cossitt Library agreed in 1926 to hire Virginia Dare Young, a recent Hampton graduate, to be an assistant at the LeMoyne branch with a salary of \$75 per month, it added to its staff a member of the initial graduating class from this first southern institution to grant library degrees to African Americans.¹⁰¹ The library's insistence

on “trained colored librarians” for its African American branches bore fruit in 1926 when a vacancy occurred in the chief librarian’s position at LeMoyne. The Cossitt Library board of directors arranged with the AMA, sponsors of LeMoyne Institute, to supplement Cossitt’s budget and provide a high enough salary to recruit a qualified candidate.¹⁰²

The Shelby County Rural Libraries

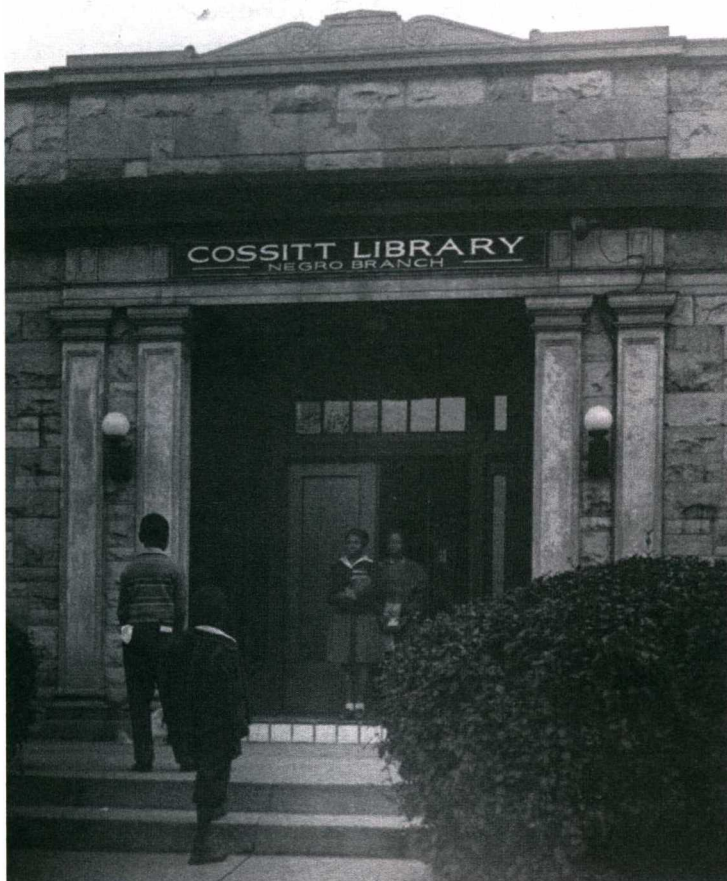
For African American readers outside Memphis’s city limits, this same period saw a great expansion of library access. Such access for Tennesseans living outside of major cities was scarce until 1929, when the state legislature empowered county governments to establish libraries using either general funds or library-specific levies.¹⁰³ As late as 1960, all the Shelby County library branches were restricted to white patrons only, except for a branch inside a bi-racial hospital in Oakville.¹⁰⁴ To combat the detrimental effects of racism on educational opportunities, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck from 1908 to 1924, funded charitable projects for African Americans in the South since 1910; in particular, his money was used to build almost 5,000 schools, including several in Shelby County.¹⁰⁵ In 1928, the Rosenwald Fund expanded its scope to include rural library access for African Americans, and in 1929 inaugurated eleven demonstration projects including one in Shelby County.¹⁰⁶ The demonstration projects showed whether the idea would work as intended; if successful, the funding would extend to other communities.

The Rosenwald Foundation’s general plan extended aid to local governments by matching county funds. Typically, the Rosenwald Fund spent money to open branch libraries in schools serving both races and open to the public. Lucile Merriwether, a New Mexico librarian who studied the libraries of the Rosenwald schools, reported that “the aid was to extend over a five-year period (later extended to seven years at the request of the Fund) with a sliding scale for matching appropriations: one dollar from the Fund for a dollar from local sources during each of the first two years, one dollar from the

Fund for two dollars from local sources for the third and fourth years, and finally one dollar from the Fund to match four from local sources for the fifth year."¹⁰⁷

The Rosenwald Fund approached the Cossitt Library to administer a demonstration project in Shelby County. The newness of the county library system, established in the same year as the Rosenwald proposal, may have precluded its participation. Due to an extended period of negotiation with Shelby County authorities, more than two years passed between the Fund's offer and the opening of Rosenwald branch libraries in rural schools. The Cossitt Board first discussed the the Rosenwald Fund's proposal in April of 1929, and approved it in June.¹⁰⁸ It was not until July of 1930, however, that the Shelby County Board of Education appropriated \$13,500 for support of Rosenwald libraries.¹⁰⁹ More months passed as contracts were drawn up and approved by the Cossitt Board and the Board of Education, and then two (presumably white) Cossitt employees received training through Julius Rosenwald Scholarships at the Library School of Emory University.¹¹⁰ Finally, with the beginning of the school year in August 1931, three Rosenwald libraries opened in African American high schools in rural Shelby County.¹¹¹ A month later, five more branches opened in junior high schools (along with six branches for white residents). Each branch held around 500 volumes.¹¹² The grant gave the Cossitt Library administrative jurisdiction over the selection and cataloging of books and supervision of library employees. The library workers remained employees of Shelby County, however. The county recompensed Cossitt Library for administrative expenses.¹¹³

Although the inauguration of Rosenwald Libraries was beneficial for African American readers, the Shelby County Board of Education supplied less money for their operation than had other local government bodies—it granted only \$190,000 over five years (about 75 cents per resident), while the more thinly populated Hamilton County (seated in Chattanooga) provided around \$216,000 for the Rosenwald Libraries (about \$1.81 per resident).¹¹⁴ The last payment from the Rosenwald Fund came in 1937.¹¹⁵ The Shelby County Board of Education



Cossitt Library Negro Branch, Image Courtesy of Preservation and Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

continued to contract with the Cossitt Library to administer its school libraries until 1952, but then took over its own library operations afterwards. By 1961 all the African American county libraries had closed, except for the hospital branch at Oakville.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Library services for African Americans within the Memphis city limits ebbed during the 1920s; the Howe Institute branch closed in 1926 and the LeMoyné Institute severed its connection with Cossitt Library in 1932. A branch operated within Booker T. Washington High School for a few years, but it served only

students. However, as Edward H. “Boss” Crump’s political machine extended a modicum of city services to African American citizens, the city restored library services in a dedicated “Negro Branch” on Vance Avenue after 1939.¹¹⁷ A second branch for African American readers was constructed during the 1950s on Vollintine Avenue and is now known as the North branch library. In 1960, after a Jesse Turner filed a federal lawsuit and a series of sit-ins led by students from LeMoyné College, the city desegregated its public libraries. The main branch of the library is now named after civil rights activist Benjamin L. Hooks. That dramatic story is told elsewhere, but it will suffice to say that the libraries of Memphis were an integral part of the story of the Bluff City’s progress toward desegregation.¹¹⁸

While Memphis was certainly no pioneer in establishing public libraries, it was well ahead of other cities in the South. The provision of library services to African Americans in a segregated branch and the adoption of a dedicated library millage (both in 1903) were pioneering efforts that many cities emulated. However, the record shows that library services to African Americans were inferior to those offered to white patrons. While library service in rural Shelby County came much later—and libraries for Shelby County’s African American residents emerged due to the Rosenwald Fund’s philanthropic efforts—the Cossitt Library continued to be a popular service for Memphians and its place in civic life made it a focal point for desegregation struggles in the 1950s and 1960s.

ENDNOTES

¹ “The First 80 Years: Cossitt Library – Memphis Public Library and Information Center, 1893-1973,” pamphlet (Memphis: Memphis Public Library and Information Center, 1973), Library History Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center (hereafter abbreviated L.H.C.).

² Rosemary Ruhig Du Mont, *Reform and Reaction: The Big City Public Library in American Life*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), ch. 2.

³ Data taken from *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 1143-74; and *Public, Society, and School Libraries in the United States with Library Statistics and Legislation of the Various States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 945.

⁴ Wayne A. Wiegand, *Main Street Public Library: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876-1956*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 8-9.

⁵ Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 238.

⁶ Stephen A. Flanders, *Atlas of American Migration*, (New York: Facts on File, 1998), 81-84.

⁷ George E. Howard, *An Introduction to the Local Constitutional History of the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1889).

⁸ Edwin S. Gaustad, and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion In America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91, 248. The South is defined here as the states of Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia.

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¹¹ Data taken from Durand R. Miller, *Carnegie Grants for Library Buildings, 1890-1917*, (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1943); and George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969).

¹² Mrs. John Trotwood Moore, “The First Century of Library History in Tennessee, 1813-1913,” *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, Vol. 16 (1944), 3-21.

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¹⁴ See for example, Du Mont, *Reform and Reaction*; and Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920*, (New York: Free Press, 1979).

¹⁵ See Michael H. Harris, "The Role of the Public Library in American Life: A Speculative Essay," Occasional Papers, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, January 1975; Elisabeth Jones, "The Public Library Movement, the Digital Library Movement, and the Large-Scale Digitization Initiative: Assumptions, Intentions, and the Role of the Public," *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 52, no. 2 (2017), 229-63; further discussion of the question is also found in Patrick Williams, *The American Public Library and the Problem of Purpose*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); and Lowell A. Martin, *Enrichment: A History of the Public Library in the United States in the Twentieth Century*, (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998).

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²² Beverly G. Bond, "'Every Duty Incumbent Upon Them': African-American Women in Nineteenth Century Memphis," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2000), 265-66.

²³ C. Lamar Wallis, "Memphis and Shelby County Public Library," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent, vol. 17 (New York: Dekker, 1976), 440.

²⁴ Anonymous pamphlet, circa 1945, in *Press-Scimitar* clipping files, University of Memphis Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection.

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²⁶ *Commercial Appeal* [hereafter abbreviated *CA*], December 2, 1882; *CA*, April 17, 1886.

²⁷ *CA*, August 28, 1886.

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²⁹ *Goodwyn Institute Year Book, 1930-1931*, L.H.C.

³⁰ G. Wayne Dowdy, *Hidden History of Memphis*, (Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2010), 67.

³¹ George Sisler, "Record Volume of Business Reported by City Libraries," *CA*, January 24, 1954.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Alfred D. Mason to the Board of Directors of Cossitt Library, March 17, 1927, L.H.C.

³⁴ Cossitt Library Charter of Incorporation (1888), L.H.C.

³⁵ *CA*, March 13, 1894; Wallis, "Memphis and Shelby County Public Library," 440-441.

³⁶ Cossitt Library General Rules (1894), L.H.C.

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⁴⁰ Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era.*, 115-16; Randall G. Shelden, "Origins of the Juvenile Court in Memphis, Tennessee: 1900-1910," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1993), 33-43.

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⁴⁷ Tennessee House Bill No. 604, 1903.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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⁵³ William F. Yust, "What of the Black and Yellow Races?" *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, 7 (1913), 167.

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⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hoffman, "A History of Public Library Service," 13.

⁶⁶ "Negro May Place Order for Any Library Book," *Press-Scimitar*, January 15, 1960.

⁶⁷ Graham, *A Right to Read*, 5.

⁶⁸ I have found no citation for this widely-held belief, which nonetheless stands to reason.

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⁷¹ Ibid., 20.

⁷² Minutes, September 15, 1913.

⁷³ Minutes, January 20, 1914.

⁷⁴ Minutes, January 17, 1911.

⁷⁵ Minutes, January 22, 1912, January 19, 1915, January 15, 1917, January 17, 1918, January 15, 1919, January 28, 1920.

⁷⁶ Minutes, November 9, 1912.

⁷⁷ Minutes, February 18, 1913.

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⁷⁹ Hoffman, "A History of Public Library Service," 20.

⁸⁰ Carroll Van West and Jen Stoecker, "Thomas Oscar Fuller," in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, version 2.0, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=528>.

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⁸⁵ Minutes, July 21, 1914.

⁸⁶ Minutes, April 16, 1919.

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⁸⁸ Wright, *Black Boy*, 244-45.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 251-52.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 245. Wright observed in his white Protestant co-workers an anti-Catholic animus as well as white supremacist attitudes.

⁹² Wright, *Black Boy*, 248-49.

⁹³ An attempt to trace a Mr. Falk who lived in Memphis in 1926 and worked for an optical company has turned up no information. Perhaps Wright used a pseudonym for his sympathetic co-worker.

⁹⁴ Wright, *Black Boy*, 248-49.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

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⁹⁷ Dowdy, *Hidden History of Memphis*, 66-67.

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⁹⁹ Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, *Library Service to African Americans in Kentucky*, 81.

¹⁰¹ Minutes, June 1, 1926.

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¹⁰⁹ Minutes, July 17, 1930, October 16, 1930.

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¹¹³ Minutes, October 16, 1930.

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¹¹⁵ Minutes, December 16, 1937.

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¹¹⁸ The events leading to the desegregation of the libraries are covered in Steven A. Knowlton, "Since I Was a Citizen, I Had the Right to Attend the Library": The Key Role of the Public Library in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis," in *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee*, ed. Aram Goudsouzian and Charles McKinney (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), in press.