

University of Southern Mississippi: New Online Archive on Racially Segregated Libraries



Matthew Griffis (matthew.griffis@usm.edu), Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Southern Mississippi, has conducted extensive research as the lead investigator on racial segregation in public libraries in the South. His research has been digitized and is now available online. The archive, made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services is entitled “*The Roots of Community: Segregated Carnegie Libraries as Spaces for Learning and Community-Making in Pre-Civil Rights America, 1900-65.*”

Griffis’ primary area of research is the library as place, including library buildings as social architecture, public libraries as community spaces, and the history of libraries and librarianship in North America; he also studies the history of postcards and postcard collecting and qualitative research methods in Library and Information Science

Project Overview

The *Roots of Community* project examines the history of the twelve segregated Carnegie libraries (or “Carnegie Negro libraries”, as they were called then), a group of public libraries that opened between 1900 and 1925 and were an official extension of Andrew Carnegie’s (and later the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s) well-known library building program. These libraries opened in Atlanta, GA; Greensboro, NC; Houston, TX; Knoxville, TN; Louisville, KY (2 libraries); Meridian, MS; Mound Bayou, MS; Nashville, TN; New Orleans, LA; and Savannah, GA. Only one segregated Carnegie library opened in a northern community: Evansville, IA. For as many as six decades these libraries served as learning spaces for African Americans in the pre-Civil Rights American South. By the 1970s, most had closed or were integrated into the formerly white people-only public library systems of their larger communities.

Little published research exists about them, however. And while public historians, researchers, and students of various academic and professional fields will likely benefit from knowing more about them—where they existed, how they were governed and managed, what guidelines or expectations they had to follow as a result of accepting Carnegie’s funding—these twelve libraries’ stories also have great potential to help today’s library professionals better understand how library users, especially those from marginalized groups, create and sustain a sense of community among members as well as within the larger community outside of the library space.

The *Roots of Community* project's objectives are twofold: First, to complete the first comprehensive study of all eleven segregated Carnegie libraries, a project that will consider each library's civic and economic origins, governance, spatial design, collections, use, and place in the larger community. Drawing on documentary, archival, and other historical materials as evidence, the project aims to determine the extent to which African Americans used these libraries as spaces for participatory learning and community-making in the pre-Civil Rights south. Its second objective enhances the first: to seek surviving users of these libraries and record their recollections and experiences as oral histories.

Project deliverables include a full-length book (in progress), an educational toolkit for libraries and librarians, materials for the www.BlackPast.org scholarly web resource, and completed oral history interviews to be made available through the University of Southern Mississippi's online special collections.



Users at a “colored library,” 1928. Jackson Davis Collection of African American Educational Photographs, University of Virginia Special Collections, MSS-3072.

Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie Libraries, and Carnegie “Negro Libraries”

Carnegie libraries have been a popular topic of historical research for the past forty years. They were, put simply, public libraries that were funded by the Scottish-born American steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who, from 1898 to 1917, funded the construction of 1,689 public and academic libraries across the United States. General historical perspectives about Carnegie libraries are common, and provide a rich and detailed basis for understanding the social contexts and economic origins of the Carnegie library grant program in the United States (Jones, 1997), the program's overall contributions to the development and spread of the modern free public library as a means for self-education and the spread of literacy (Bobinki, 1969), and, most especially, how Carnegie library buildings contributed in the early century to the standardization of power relations between people in public space (Van Slyck, 1995; Prizeman, 2012).



Andrew Carnegie (third person to the right) at the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its foundation in 1906. To his right is Booker T. Washington, with whom Carnegie enjoyed a long-term correspondence. *National Portrait Gallery NPG.2009.8, via Wikimedia Commons.*

However, while Carnegie's library grant program flourished, free library services to African-Americans in the United States were still limited (Musmann, 1998; Carmichael, 2005), especially in the pre-Civil Rights South where segregation laws (also known as "Jim Crow laws", a term used to describe the US state laws passed in the 1890s onward that legislated the separation of Black people from white people in the South in housing, public education, public facilities, and other areas) prevailed. In most southern communities, attitudes of white people summarily dismissed the need for library service of any kind for Black people (Bobinski, 1969). Although segregated libraries were not uncommon then, there were not many (Battles, 2009) and only eleven communities in the United States opened libraries for African Americans through Carnegie's program. The Carnegie segregated libraries were not just some of the few such libraries to occupy full, freestanding buildings in their communities (i.e., were not simply "Negro reading rooms" hidden away in the damp basements of the public libraries for white people), they were among some of the first free public libraries accessible to African Americans at a time when such resources were relatively unavailable (Battles, 2009). And, as extensions of the broader Carnegie library grant program, these twelve libraries would have been subject to many of the same conditions of governance, taxation, and maintenance that Carnegie's program typically imposed upon communities accepting his gifts (Jones, 1997). This alone makes these libraries landmarks of civic history and creates, for the interested researcher, a basis for endless (and interesting) comparisons between the white people-only Carnegie libraries and their segregated counterparts the same city or community.

Become a Participant

Were you ever a user of any of the segregated Carnegie libraries examined in this project (possibly the libraries in Houston [TX], Louisville, Knoxville, New Orleans, Meridian, Atlanta, Savannah [GA], Nashville, or Evansville)?

If so, you may wish to donate an oral history interview to the project. The interview would be audio-recorded and would focus on your memories of the library, its librarians, its users, and its larger community at the time.

All interview participants are offered a \$25 bookstore gift-card in return for sharing their memories. Completed interviews will be accessible for other researchers and the general public via the University of Southern Mississippi's online digital collections.

If interested, please email the researcher directly at matthew.griffis@usm.edu, call 601-266-5502 (please provide your name, and phone number).

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Source: The Aquila Digital Community, an open access digital repository containing all of the scholarly works created by the University of Southern Mississippi faculty, staff, and students. Hence, <http://aquila.usm.edu/rocoverview/>; <http://aquila.usm.edu/rocinformationandresources/>