America's First Sit-Down Strike: The 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In

Introduction

Becoming the trademark tactic of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the first sit-in occurred well before the era of social unrest that would characterize the decade of the 1960s. Prior to the famous Woolworth counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, five courageous African-American youths staged the first deliberate and planned sit-in at the Alexandria "public" Library in 1939.

Located on the site of a Quaker burial ground, on a half-acre of land, the construction of Alexandria's first public and "free" library was completed in 1937. Prior to 1937, the Alexandria Library Company operated a subscription service throughout various locations in the city. The Alexandria Library (also known as the Queen Street Library) would later become known as the Kate Waller Barret Branch Library after the mother of the benefactor of construction funds for the building.

Located in the center of Alexandria's African-American community, the Robert Robinson Library was completed in 1940 to serve as the colored branch of the Alexandria Library in response to the 1939 sit-in. The era of legalized segregated public accommodations had been ushered in by the 1896 landmark case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which stipulated that "separate but equal" accommodations were constitutional under the law. Thereafter, the Jim Crow system of segregation dictated the daily lives of African-Americans whereby the facilities they encountered were indeed separate, but substantially inadequate to ever be characterized as equal.

Courtesy of Alexandria Library, Special Collections

Courtesy of Alexandria Black History Museum

About This Lesson

This lesson is based on the National Register Nomination, "Robert Robinson Library" and "Alexandria Library," as well as newspaper accounts, personal correspondence, and the meeting minutes of the Board of Directors of the Alexandria Library, and other primary sources. *The Alexandria Library 1939 Sit-In* was written by Mara Mellody and Kristin Engbloom, teachers at Maury Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, and Caridad de la Vega, Historian for the National Park Service National Historic Landmarks Survey. This lesson is one in a series that brings the important stories of historic places into the classrooms across the country.

This lesson plan is made possible by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy (VFH) as part of its African-American Heritage Program, which includes the African-American History in Virginia Grant Program, the African-American Heritage Database Project, and the African-American Heritage Trails Program, a partnership between VFH and the Virginia Tourism Corporation. Through these programs, VFH seeks to increase understanding of African-American history in Virginia; to promote research and documentation of existing African-American historic sites; to strengthen the institutions that that interpret African-American history in the state; and to encourage Virginians as well as people from all parts of the nation and the world to visit these sites. For more information, contact VFH, 145 Ednam Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22903-4629 or visit VFH's website [create link to site].

Where it fits into the curriculum

Topics: This lesson could be used in American History courses in units on the civil rights movement and the history of public accommodations in the United States. This lesson could also be used to enhance the study of African-American history in the United States.

Time period: 1939-1940 and 1960s

Objectives

1. To evaluate the results of the 1939 Alexandria Library sit-in.
2. To interpret the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*.
3. To create timelines featuring the events during the years 1939-1940 in Alexandria, Virginia and in the world.
4. To compare and contrast the Queen Street Library and the Robinson Library.
5. To understand how their own community was important as the setting where Samuel Tucker combined and implemented two important tactics of the civil rights movement, the sit-in and the court system, to contest locally segregated facilities.

Materials for students

The materials listed below either can be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students. The maps and images appear twice: in a smaller, low-resolution version with associated questions and alone in a larger version.

1. a map showing the city of Alexandria;
2. three readings on the history of the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In, Samuel Tucker's personal correspondence, meeting minutes of the Board of Directors of the Alexandria

Library, rules and regulations for the Alexandria Library, excerpt from an oral history interview with Samuel W. Tucker's wife, Julia E. Spaulding Tucker, and newspaper accounts of the sit-in;

3. Four photographs of the Queen Street Library and the Robert Robinson Library

Visiting the sites

The Alexandria Black History Museum (former Robinson Library) is located within the Parker-Gray Historic District, in the north-west quadrant of Old Town Alexandria. The Museum is located midway between Washington, D.C. and Mount Vernon. From I-95/I-495 take the US Route 1 North exit (first exit on the Virginia side of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge). Follow Route 1 (Patrick Street) about one and a half miles. Cross Oronoco and Pendleton Streets, and then turn right on Wythe Street. The center is located on the next corner, at Wythe and N. Alfred Streets. The Robert Robinson library is currently utilized as the Museum. The Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For additional information visit the museum's web-site.

The Alexandria Library is currently known as the Kate Waller Barrett Branch of the Alexandria Library. The Kate Waller Branch is located in Old Town Alexandria midway between Washington, D.C. and Mount Vernon. Take the George Washington Parkway South which will become N. Washington Street upon entering Old Town Alexandria. Travel approximately half a mile and take a right on Princess Street. After traveling approximately a block, take a left on N. Columbus Street. Travel one more block, and make a left onto Queen Street. The library is open Monday –Thursday from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m, Saturdays from 9a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. For additional information visit the library's web-site.

Getting Started

Inquiry Question (based on the image of the five men being escorted out of the Alexandria Library after the sit-in)

What do you think is happening here?

Setting the Stage

Following the Civil War, laws were created to safeguard the civil rights of the newly emancipated slaves. The 1875 Civil Rights Act and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution were drafted to guarantee the legal status and rights of African-Americans since they were recognized as property prior to this. However a need by Northerners to diminish sectional rifts between the North and South; black resistance; and the "control of the white Southerners over a 'new generation of blacks' who would not know their place without legal force;"[1] among other factors, negated earlier attempts at protecting the civil rights of African Americans. The 1890s ushered in an era of entrenched segregation in all aspects of daily life for African Americans.

Southern states created laws denying African Americans access to all types of public accommodations. Virginia, in particular, was among the states to adopt new segregation and discrimination laws between 1887 and 1892. The acceptance of segregation in public accommodations was solidified with the passage of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896. Following the decision of the momentous court case that contested segregated public accommodations on a Louisiana railroad, the Supreme Court legally sanctioned "separate but equal" public accommodations for African Americans. Theatres, restaurants, hospitals, and transportation were all places that required separate accommodations for blacks and whites, with educational facilities not being the exception to the rule. State law during the early twentieth century further established the social institution of Jim Crow, a system defined by "the practice of legal and extralegal racial discrimination against African Americans," by the passage of laws that dictated the daily routines of its African-American citizens.[2]

The Alexandria Library stands as a testament to one of the first challenges to *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. It began when George Wilson, a retired Army Sergeant, was persuaded by 26- year old Samuel Wilbert Tucker to challenge the status quo and apply for a library card at the Alexandria Library. This would be the first step in a series of events that would mark what is known as the nation's first sit-in.

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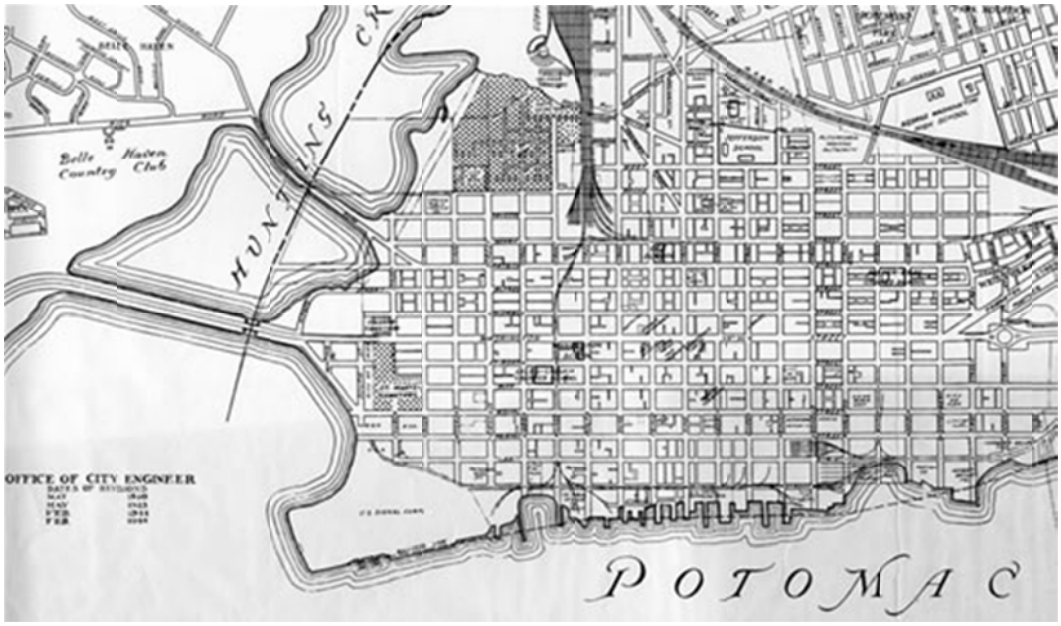
[1] Nan Alamillia Boyd, Matt Garcia, Alton Hornsby, Jr., Steven Lawson and Susan Cianci Salvatore, *Discrimination in Public Accommodations in the United States Draft Theme Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2004), 15.

[2] Quoted in Charles D. Lowery and John F. Marsalek, eds. *Encyclopedia of African-American Civil Rights: From Emancipation to the Present* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 281.

Locating the Site: Maps



click the map to view larger version (pdf)

The Alexandria Library was constructed in 1937 for the use of the white community of Alexandria, Virginia. Because of segregation, African-Americans were barred from using the "white-only" library. The Robert Robinson Library was built in 1940 in response to two incidents that protested the lack of library facilities for African-Americans in Alexandria, Virginia. The Alexandria library is located in the outskirts of "Uptown," an historic African-American neighborhood that developed into a sizeable neighborhood during and following the Civil War. The historic neighborhood is located in the north-west section of Alexandria and is bounded by North Columbus Street, North West Street, Montgomery Street and Cameron Street. This area is currently known as the Parker-Gray Historic District.

Questions for Map

1. Locate the street boundaries for the Parker-Gray Historic District. What buildings are located within the district? What building is located on the edge of the district?

2. Locate the Alexandria Library (located on the corner of Columbus and Queen Streets) and the Robert Robinson Library (located on the corner of Wythe and N. Alfred Streets). What is missing from this map? Why do you think this is so?

3. How many city blocks separate the Alexandria Library and the Robinson Library? Why do you think the city had two libraries in close proximity to each other? What may be some reasons for this?

Determining the Facts

Reading 1: Segregated Educational Facilities: From Schools to Libraries

On March 17, 1939, attorney Samuel Wilbert Tucker and retired Army Sergeant George Wilson, walked through the doors of the segregated Queen Street Library in Alexandria, Virginia and requested an application for a library card. Tucker passed the newly erected Alexandria library on a daily basis, yet as an African American he had to travel to the District of Columbia to have access to library facilities. Unsatisfied with the unequal access to educational facilities, Tucker decided to battle the system of Jim Crow through the courts.

The educational climate for African Americans in northern Virginia communities prior to the 1930s was abysmal, as no educational facilities were provided for them beyond an eighth grade level. Tucker witnessed this discrimination firsthand as he had to falsely claim residency in the District of Columbia to be able to attend a high school relatively closer to his home, Armstrong High School. The nearest high school available to African- Americans in northern Virginia at the time was located more than 30 miles away in Manassas, while the white citizens of Alexandria attended the local high school located within sight of Tucker's home. Tucker recalls the hardship that he endured as an African-American youth in Alexandria: "I finished the eighth grade in Alexandria and the state of Virginia said that was to be all the education I got. It became fashionable to bootleg an education in Washington." [1] Tucker later attended Howard University and graduated in 1933, passing the Virginia Bar exam that same year.

Tucker worked as a lawyer in an office located near the Alexandria Library, which was constructed with Works Progress Labor (a New Deal era program) and Public Works funds. Prior to 1937 the Alexandria Library operated through a subscription service. Before the library converted to a public facility in 1937, the Alexandria Library Company and the City Council discussed the possibility of providing a colored library for African-American citizens of Alexandria. A committee was appointed to study the possibility of a colored library but nothing was done beyond this point. According to the rules and regulations of the new publicly funded library, the library was accessible to:

All persons of the white race living in the City of Alexandria and to all persons of the white race who are taxpayers in Alexandria. Persons of the white race not living in the City of Alexandria and not taxpayers in the City of Alexandria…upon payment of the sum of one dollar and fifty cents per annum. [2]

Clearly the library was not accessible to Alexandria's African-American community despite the fact that they paid the same taxes as the white citizens of Alexandria. Although an alternative was discussed, a colored branch, the idea was not realized until events in 1939 forced the Alexandria Library Company to reconsider the issue of African-American access to the library.

Tucker believed that as tax payers, African-Americans residing in the city of Alexandria had as much right as the city's white taxpayers to enjoy the public library. As a result, Tucker convinced a retired black Army Sergeant, George Wilson, to allow him to fill out a library application on his behalf. The assistant librarian on duty that day, Ms. Sue Fox, informed both Wilson and Tucker that the Alexandria Library Company had directed the staff to not issue library cards to persons of the colored race. Librarian Katherine H. Scoggin reiterated the library's policy a week later to Tucker and Wilson stating that non-whites were not allowed access to the library. Two days after being denied borrowing privileges at the library Wilson filed a civil suit in the local court, against the librarian and the library's board of trustees, although Ms. Scoggin was never physically present at the time the request was made for a library card.

The suit against Ms. Scoggin was filed in the local court to force her to issue a library card to Sergeant Wilson as a taxpaying citizen of the City of Alexandria. Judge William O. Woolls, the judge who presided over the case, initially denied the petition because Wilson had not provided proof of residency in Alexandria. However, the petition against the librarian was revised and resubmitted by Tucker. The case was eventually heard on January 10, 1940 with Judge Woolls once again refusing the petition because

the application had been completed by Tucker rather than Wilson. Judge Wooll's, however, affirmed that "there were no legal grounds for refusing the plaintiff or any other bona fide citizen the use of the library." [3] The Virginia Public Assemblages Act of 1926 stated that both races were to be segregated within the same facility, therefore according to the law African Americans were unlawfully barred from the Alexandria Library. Within two days of Judge Woolls's decision, two African-Americans applied for library cards. Yet they were refused by being informed that a new colored branch of the Alexandria library was under construction and that their application was under consideration. This was an obvious tactic to appease them until a separate colored branch could be opened.

Although this first act of defiance against the system of Jim Crow did not garner the media attention, this was the first step towards the City of Alexandria seriously considering a colored branch for its African-American citizens and facing the issue of accessibility, however unequal, for *all* of its citizens.

Questions for Reading 1

1. Why did Samuel Tucker have to attend high school in D.C.?
2. In your own words, explain the significance of *Plessy vs. Ferguson.* If needed, refer to *Setting the Stage*.
3. Who did Wilson file a civil suit against? Why? How did the 1926 Public Assemblages Act help Wilson's case?
4. Why was Judge Wooll's ruling significant?

Reading 1 was compiled from Gretchen Babcock,"Robert Robinson Library" (Alexandria, Virginia) National Register of Historic Places Preliminary Information Form, Richmond, Virginia, 2002; "Librarian Faces Jim Crow Suit," Chicago Defender*, 20 May 1939; Beverly Seehorn Brandt,* The Alexandria, Virginia, Library: Its History, Present Facilities, and Future Program*, unpublished manuscript in Alexandria Library Archives, Special Collections, 1951; Shelley Rolfe, "Tucker Recalls the Battle Over Virginia Integration,"* Times-Dispatch*, n.d.; Florence Murray, The Negro Handbook New York, 1942; J. Douglas Smith,* Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia *(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).*

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1. Shelley Rolfe, "Tucker Recalls the Battle Over Virginia Integration" Times-Dispatch, n.d.

2. Quoted in Beverly Seehorn Brandt, The Alexandria, Virginia, Library: Its History, Present Facilities, and Future Program, M.A. Thesis, 1951.

3. Florence Murray, The Negro Handbook, New York, 1942, 45-46.

Reading 2: The Nation's First Sit-In

During the interval between when Sergeant Wilson and Samuel Tucker requested a library card and the final decision on the civil suit that followed in January, 1940, a follow-up attack on the segregated facilities at the Alexandria Library occurred. On August 21, 1939, five young African-American males were involved in an even more audacious defiance of library rules and regulations, a sit-in. The youths involved, between the ages of 18 and 22, were five out of an initial group of 11 who were recruited and secretly trained by Samuel W. Tucker over a 10 day period. He instructed them on what to say, what to wear, and how to act. Tucker planned the sit-in with care so that the young men would not be arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct. He wanted the main issue in the library case to be the legal basis of the whites-only policy of the library. Borrowing from the tactics utilized by labor protesters in the late 1930s, Tucker instructed the youths once they were refused a library card to: "say thank you, go to the stack, pick up a book, any book, and go to the table and sit down and start reading. Next person goes in, and same thing but don't go to the same table, everyone goes to a different table, so they can't be talking to each other." [1]

Samuel W. Tucker ingeniously combined two tactics that would become the cornerstone of the Civil Rights movement. He attacked the system of Jim Crow through direct-action, the sit-in, and acted as counsel for the trials that followed questioning the legality of segregated libraries. Attacking the system of Jim Crow through the courts was the preferred way of bringing about change by the more conservative National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a civil rights organization that first used the court system in fighting segregation in 1910, merely a year after its founding. In addition, the five young Alexandrians were supposedly the first in the nation to use the tactic of the sit-in in the struggle for civil rights. The sit-in, a form of non-violent protest, would become an important tool during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The sit-in of August 1939, masterminded by Tucker, received national media attention as the astute lawyer deliberately alerted the media to the events taking place within the confines of the Queen Street Library. Unfavorable to the event, however, was the invasion of Poland by Hitler within days of the sit-in. Not only was media attention now focused on the war in Europe, but the involvement of the United States in World War II is believed by some, including Tucker's law partner and Civil Rights crusader Oliver Hill, to have delayed the development of a Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The energy of all Americans for the time being, both black and white, was focused towards support for the war effort. It was not until after World War II that African-Americans once again turned their attention towards civil rights.

The *Alexandria Gazette*, one of the many local and national newspapers that chronicled the library sit-in, details the events that took place that day:

Five colored youths were arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct today on the complaint of Policeman John F. Kelley, after they entered the Alexandria Library, withdrew books from the shelves and sat down at a table to read, despite the fact that they were asked to leave by Librarian Miss Catherine Scoggin.

A sixth youth who accompanied the group left the library after police arrived, and was not held.

The youths arrested according to police, included Otis L. Tucker, 22, 916 Queen Street; Edward Gaddis, 21, 335 North Patrick Street; Morris Murray, 22, 813 Prince Street; William Evans, 19, 610 S. St. Asaph Street; and Clarence Strange,807 Duke Street.

The Library has been used by white persons only after it was donated to the city by Dr. Robert S. Barrett several years ago, however, action was taken by a colored resident to secure library privileges, and his petition to secure a writ of mandamus, compelling the librarian to issue him a card, is now under advisement of the Corporation Court. [2]

Ms. Katherine Scoggin, the young librarian on duty that day, was startled when the young men walked in one at a time and asked for borrower's cards. Not sure of how to handle the situation when the five youths refused to leave the library, she ran across the street and informed the City Manager, Mr. Budwesky, of the events taking place at the library. The city manager then alerted local police. The police peacefully arrested and escorted the five African-American youths from the library to police court when they refused to leave the library willingly. Samuel Tucker later remarked that Morris Murray said of the events: "Everything went all so politely, that one would have though that I [Tucker] had also told the police what to do."[3] Nonetheless, the first trial was scheduled for a week later on August 29.

Samuel Tucker's wife, Julia E. Spaulding Tucker, recalls the events of 1939:

…And that was in 1939. His brother [Otis Tucker] was one of the sitters, and two or three of his brother's friends. They called Tucker to get them out of jail because they had had them arrested for sitting in the library, just reading a book, paper or something. But Negroes were not allowed in the public library at that time and I don't think the case ever came to trial…[4]

Initially a deal had been worked out in which the five youths would be tried separately in Alexandria's police court. However, the outcome of the second trial would supposedly dictate the ruling on the other four. Tucker cross-examined the policeman that arrested the five youths at the library:

"Were they destroying property?" asked Tucker. "No," replied the officer. "Were they properly attired?" queried counsel. "Yes," the officer replied. "Were they quiet?" "Yes," the officer responded. "Then they were disorderly only because they were black?" asked Tucker. The officer admitted that the only disorder in question was because the men were members of the Race [black] and the library was for white people. [5]

In spite of Tucker's preparations, the judge charged the youths with disorderly conduct. Tucker argued that there was no local law that forbade the use of the library based solely on race.

Armistead Boothe, the city's attorney and opposing counsel in the case, argued that the library was not public and that custom dictated the use of the library by white Alexandrians alone. Realizing the weakness in his argument Boothe then took another approach. He argued that since Virginia and six other southern states were "forced" to approve the Fourteenth Amendment, that they should not be legally compelled to abide by its promise of due process and equal protection under the law. Despite both lawyers' arguments, Judge Duncan asked the attorneys to file briefs based just on a charge of disorderly conduct. The judge not wanting to make an official ruling in the case never recalled it before his court again. The judge decided several times to have continuances, or hear the trial at another time, and never recalled the case to his court. A decision was never made in the case of the five youths.

Questions for Reading 2

1. What was Samuel Tucker's motive when he arranged the sit-in? Why were the boys instructed on what to say and what to wear? What were the two tactics that Samuel Tucker combined that became the cornerstone of the Civil Rights movement?

2. What major event occurred that took media attention away from the sit-in? How did Oliver Hill characterize its significance?

3. What was the result of the sit-in in regard to the men involved? What were the five youths charged with?

4. Samuel Tucker originally recruited eleven young men to be a part of the sit-in. Only five of those young men actually participated in the sit-in. Would you have agreed to take part in the 1939 library sit-in? Why or why not? What risks did the participants face in playing a part in the sit-in? What positive outcomes did the participants encounter as a result of choosing to participate?

5. What might have been the outcome if the five men had not acted cooperatively and were confrontational during the Queen Street Library sit-in?

6. Do you believe the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In was successful? Why or why not?

Readings 2 was compiled from "5 Arrested forUsing City Library in Virginia; Case Puzzles Judge," Chicago Defender*, 2 September 1939, pg.1; Julia E. Spaulding interview by John H. Waley, Jr., February 28, 1995; Gretchen Babcock,"Alexandria Library" (Alexandria, Virginia) National Register of Historic Places Preliminary Information Form, Richmond, Virginia, 2002; Douglas J. Smith,* Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia *(Chapel Hill: University of North*

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1. Quote from Douglas J. Smith, Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 246.

2. Arrested at City Library," Alexandria Gazette, 21 August 1939.

3. Quoted in Douglas J. Smith, Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 264.

4. Interview by John H. Whaley, Jr., February 28, 1995. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University.

5. Quoted in "5 Arrested for Using City Library in Virginia; Case Puzzles Judge," Chicago Defender, 2 September 1939, pg. 1.

Reading 3: Alexandria's Colored Library: The Robert Robinson Library

The issue of whether or not to serve the African-American citizens of Alexandria had been discussed by the library board before the opening of the Queen Street Library in 1937. The 1939 library sit-in forced the issue to the forefront once more. An emergency meeting of the Board of Directors of the Alexandria Library Company was called to discuss the issue:

The following day the Alexandria Board's statement appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette* with their reaction to the sit-in:

City Library Board Outlines Position on Colored Branch
Statement is Issued Today Through Mrs. A. A. Smoot, President

History is Outlined

Efforts to Secure Present Library Cited: Survey Conducted

The Alexandria Library Board, through its President, Mrs. Albert A. Smoot, today issued the following statement to the press referring to the recent incidents at the Library, with the avowed intent of setting before the public some of the principal facts about the library situation in Alexandria:

There was no library of any kind in Alexandria until 1794 when a private one was founded. It remained entirely private until August, 1937. In other words for nearly 200 years the city had no public or semi-public library either for white or colored people. From the founding of a private library it took 143 years for the white people to obtain the library the city now has. Our colored citizens have been seeking a similar privilege for only 2 years.

Indeed it is perhaps inaccurate to say that they have been seeking such a privilege for two years. Shortly after the present library opened, the Library Board appointed a committee to meet with a number of prominent colored citizens of Alexandria. Out of these discussions came the recommendation that the drive for a colored library be temporarily dropped in favor of efforts to acquire a colored boys' club and community center. It was the unanimous opinion of this particular group of people that there was a tremendous immediate need for a boys' club and not a real demand for a colored library at that time.

However, when the present library was built, the Board realized the problem of affording facilities to the colored people and discussed this matter with City Council. Council verbally stated at the time that when the demand arose they would furnish a colored library. To the knowledge of this Board no organization or group of colored people has ever waited upon City Council and asked for a colored library. Still the Library Board has been investigating all possibilities. It has obtained information from Richmond, Roanoke, Lynchburg, Danville and Petersburg relative to the best methods of erecting and administering a colored library. This past spring, Miss Katherine Scoggin, the Alexandria Librarian, voluntarily took part of her own brief holiday to go to Danville to examine personally the advanced colored library facilities in that town.

During the early part of this year and before any of the pending legal steps had been taken by certain private individuals, the Library Board considered and recommended to City Council certain very definite steps which would secure colored library facilities immediately. This recommendation was discussed at a meeting of the Alexandria Interracial Commission. Shortly afterward, and without warning, a suit was filed to compel the Librarian to issue reading cards to colored people.

Later in the spring a joint meeting was held between representatives of the Library Board, the Interracial Commission and City Council. The definite decision was made to ask City Council for a separate colored library rather than for an addition to the present one for colored people. The Library Board has been

intensely interested in this project ever since its beginning in 1937. We believe that the majority of the colored citizens in Alexandria realize and appreciate this fact.

The difficulties of getting a library are many. Actually our present library was the result of the generosity and hard work of many of our citizens. The building was given by Doctor and Mrs. Robert S. Barrett. The books were given by the Alexandria Library Society which had accumulated them through years and years of energy, thrift and adversity. The land was given by the Society of Friends. In other words, it did not cost the public of the city one cent to start the library. All of these gifts showed a tremendous interest in and demand for the present library.

We understand that collections are being taken in some parts of the city for the benefit of a colored library. Under our plans and those of City Council no such donations are necessary. If these gifts are being asked for the purpose of paying court expenses or attorneys' fees, we sincerely believe them unnecessary. The Library Board will continue its past interest and efforts to provide complete facilities in Alexandria regardless of steps taken in court by some over-zealous persons. [1]

Regardless of the library board's reluctance in establishing library facilities for its African-American citizens, events forced them to make arrangements to this end. The library board considered three possibilities: the construction of a separate library for African-Americans in their neighborhood, the construction of an annex to the Queen Street Library with a separate entrance, or to establish an arrangement with the Parker-Gray Colored School's library and donate books with Alexandria Library funds. The library board finally agreed that the construction of a separate library facility would be the best solution. On January 12, 1940 the city council of Alexandria approved funding for the new colored library upon its first consideration.

Samuel Wilbert Tucker was displeased with the results of his efforts to gain access to the Alexandria Library for African Americans. While the local African American newspaper hailed the new colored library as a victory, Tucker saw the construction of a separate facility as a defeat. He knew too well that although facilities were to be "separate but equal," the reality was that they were not, or ever would be, equal. For example the Queen Street Library hired a librarian in 1937 at an annual salary of $1620.00, but the Librarian hired in 1940 for the Robinson Library was only offered a salary of $720.00 a year. The maintenance budget for the Robinson Library was merely half than that of the Queen Street Library set at five thousand a year. The Robinson Library had shorter operating hours, was stocked with unwanted books from other city facilities, and was equipped with used furniture. The construction cost for the Alexandria Library was donated, while another $7500 was spent in equipment for the library. Only $4500 was spent on the construction of the colored library. It is clear that Tucker's disappointment was well justified. The numbers clearly reveal that public facilities for African-Americans were not as well funded and equipped as those used by whites.

Following the verdict on Sergeant Wilson's civil suit on January 10, 1940, Samuel Tucker and Sergeant Wilson visited once more the Alexandria Library with applications for the Alexandria Library on the evening of January 30, 1940. Ms. Scoggin issued library cards to both Tucker and Wilson, however, they were for the new colored library. Tucker voiced his discontent and refused to apply for a library card for the Robinson Library in a letter to Librarian Scoggin:

916 Queen Street
Alexandria, Virginia
February 13, 1940

Miss Katherine H. Scoggin, Librarian
Alexandria Library
Alexandria, Virginia

My dear Ms. Scoggin,

Together with copy of letter from the City Manager to you dated January 26, 1940, I am in receipt of your letter of February 9 with reference to my application for library privileges, filed January 30, 1940.

I refuse and will always refuse to accept a card to be used at the library to be constructed and operated at Alfred and Wythe Streets in lieu of card to be used at the existing library on Queen Street for which I have made application. Continued delay – beyond the close of this month – in issuing to me a card for use at the library on Queen Street will be taken as a refusal to do so, whereupon I will feel justified in seeking the aid of court to enforce my right.

A letter is being sent to the City Manager on this subject, a copy of which I am herewith enclosing.
Very truly yours,

SAMUEL WILBERT TUCKER [2]

Many in the African-American community saw this as a victory nonetheless. They preferred a local library that was not at par with the white library than no library at all. In February, the library board voted to name the library after Robert Robinson, a freed slave who was the grandson of one of George Washington's slaves, Caroline Branham. Robinson later settled in Alexandria and became the pastor of the South Washington Street Methodist Church (currently known as the Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church). On April 22, 1940, less than a year after the 1939 library sit-in, a library facility for Alexandria's African-American community was opened at 638 North Alfred Street. The Colonial Revival brick structure located on the corner of Wythe and Alfred Streets consisted of a large reading room, an office and restroom facilities. Unfortunately Samuel Tucker became ill during this time and was unable to put into effect his plan to appeal Sergeant Wilson's case. The efforts of Samuel Wilbert Tucker failed to produce the end result that he was seeking, access to the Queen Street Library by all tax paying citizens of Alexandria regardless of color. Instead the Robert Robinson Library stands as the legacy of Tucker and the five young African-American males who were bold enough to challenge the social system of Jim Crow.

Questions for Reading 3

1. What do you interpret from the statement: "From the founding of a private library it took 143 years for the white people to obtain the library the city now has. Our colored citizens have been seeking a similar privilege for only 2 years."

2. It is noted that all donations to benefit the colored library were "not necessary." Do you think the Robinson Library would have been different if Alexandria's City Council accepted the donations from citizens willing to contribute to the colored library's construction? Why do you think this statement was made?

3. What options did the library board consider for providing facilities to its African American citizens? What did the library board ultimately decide to do in order to accommodate its African-American citizens? When did the Alexandria city council approve funding of the new colored library?

4. Why was Samuel Tucker "displeased" about the library board's decision? What was the point of the letter he wrote to Ms. Scoggin?

5. Do you think the Robinson Library was "separate but equal"? Along with your answer, compare and contrast the Queen Street Library to the Robinson Library.

6. Many of the African Americans saw the establishment of a colored library as a victory. Why did Samuel Tucker feel that construction of a new separate colored library was a defeat? Do you agree with the majority of African Americans at that time or do you agree with Samuel Tucker? Based on all the readings, what is your opinion about the library facility that was provided for the African-American community?

Reading 3 was compiled from Gretchen Babcock,"Robert Robinson Library" (Alexandria, Virginia) National Register of Historic Places Preliminary Information Form, Richmond, Virginia, 2002; Beverly Seehorn Brandt, The Alexandria, Virginia, Library: Its History, Present Facilities, and Future Programs*, unpublished manuscript in Alexandria Library Special Collections, 1951; "Fund for Colored Library is Passed on First Reading,"* Alexandria Gazette*, 13 January 1940; Alexandria Library Company Board of Directors, "City Library Board Outlines Position on Colored Branch,"* Alexandria Gazette*, 28 August, 1939;S.J. Ackerman, "The Trials of S.W. Tucker,"* Washington Post Magazine*, 11 June 2000.; Samuel Wilbert Tucker to Ms. Katherine Scoggin, 13 February 1940, Administration Correspondence 1937-44, Box 98J, Folder 2, Alexandria Library, Kate WallerBarrett Branch, Special Collections, Alexandria, Virginia; Mary G. Powell,* History of Old Alexandria, Virginia - Robert Robinson*, Box 98J, Folder 2, Alexandria Library, Kate Waller Barrett Branch, Special Collections, Alexandria, Virginia; Alexandria Library Board of Directors,Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Alexandria Library Society, January 1938-October 1947, Alex Lib, Box 98B, Folder 16, Alexandria Library, Kate Waller Barrett Branch, Special Collections, Alexandria, Virginia, pg. 34*

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1. Alexandria Library Company Board of Directors, "City Library Board Outlines Position on Colored Branch," Alexandria Gazette, 28 August, 1939.

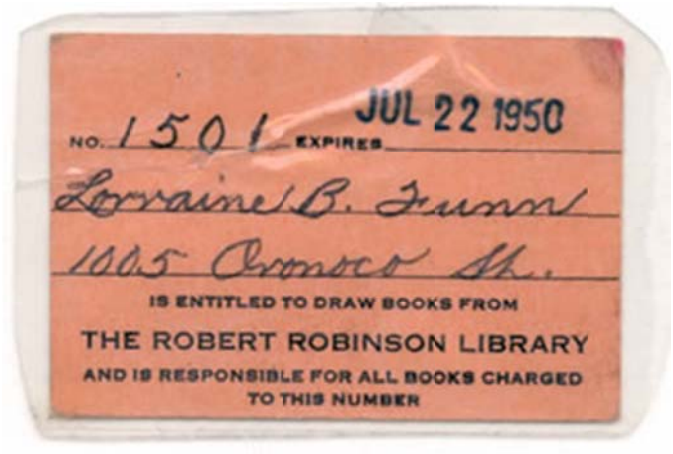
2. Samuel Wilbert Tucker to Ms. Katherine Scoggin, 13 February 1940, Administration Correspondence 1937-44, Box 98J, Folder 2, Alexandria Library, Kate Waller Branch, Special Collections, Alexandria.

Visual Evidence: Images

Photo 1: Men Being Escorted Out of the Library

1. Where do you think the policemen are escorting the men?
2. What image were the men trying to convey when they chose their clothing for the sit-in?
3. What risk did the men knowingly take by participating in this sit-in?
4. How do you think the policemen felt about escorting the men away from the library?
5. Do you think Samuel Tucker expected the men to be arrested when he arranged the sit-in?
6. Put yourself in the men's position. What are your thoughts about the library? the librarian? civil rights? How would you prepare yourself knowing that you would most likely be charged in some way by participating in this sit-in? How do you feel about the charges of disorderly conduct that were originally brought against you? How did it feel to have your photograph taken for the newspaper?

Photo 2: **Robert Robinson Library Card**



1. What responsibilities and privileges come with having a Robert Robinson Library card?
2. What was it controversial among the black community to get a Robert Robinson library card?
3. What might be some reasons why an African American student would refuse to get a library card from the Robert Robinson Library?

Photo 3: **Robert Robinson Library**

(Courtesy of the Alexandria Black History Museum, Alexandria, VA)

Photo 4: Robinson Library Librarian Mrs. Murphy S. Carr , April 1946

(Courtesy of the Alexandria Black History Museum, Alexandria, VA)

Photo 5: Interior View of Alexandria Library, 1948

(Courtesy of Alexandria Library Special Collections, Alexandria, VA)

Photo 6: Interior View of Alexandria Library, 1937

(Courtesy of Alexandria Library, Special Collections, Alexandria, VA)

Compare and contrast the size, space, quality, condition, quantity and availability of resources of the Robinson Library and the Queen Street Library. Use a Venn diagram or the chart below.

	Robinson Library	**Queen Street Library**
Size		
Space		
Quality		
Condition of Library		
Condition of Resources		
Quantity of Resources		
Availability of Resources		

Putting It All Together: Activities

1. Research Question

Although the 1960 Woolworth sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina is noted as the first sit-down strike in the modern civil rights movement, the 1939 library sit-in in Alexandria, Virginia was actually the first pre-meditated sit-in at a public facility. Compare and contrast the Woolworth sit-in in Greensboro to the library sit-in in Alexandria. Below is an excerpt written by Jim Schlosser, *News & Record Staff* writer taken from http://www.sitins.com/story.shtml.

The Story of the Greensboro Sit-Ins
By Jim Schlosser, News & Record Staff Writer
Originally published in 1998

On Feb. 1, 1960, the Greensboro Four, as they would later be called, felt isolated and alone as they sat at that whites-only lunch counter at the Woolworth Store on South Elm Street.

They were seeking more than what they ordered – sodas, coffee, donuts. They were attacking the social order of the time. The unwritten rules of society required black people to stay out of white-owned restaurants, to use only designated drinking fountains and restrooms, to sit in the rear of Greensboro city buses, in a separate balcony at Center Theatre and in segregated bleachers during sports events at War Memorial Stadium.

The four black youth – Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair Jr. and David Richmond, all still teenagers and all still freshmen on academic scholarships at N.C. A. & T. State University – had entered the unknown. McCain, who grew up in Washington and spent one year attending Greensboro's Dudley High School, says he expected to be arrested, beaten to a pulp or worse.

All four would emerge unscathed and eventually be recognized as heroes of the civil rights movement.

They were persistent. In the days after Feb. 1, they would be joined by other students at the Woolworth counter and at the Kress 5 & 10 lunch counter a half-block away. Their protests inspired black people to do the same at Formica-topped dime-store counters in other cities. The movement led to the integration of the Woolworth and Kress chains, landmarks on every main street in the South.

The Greensboro acted at a time when protests against segregation in schools and on buses were taking place in the South, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. But there were few challenges to segregation in privately owned businesses, such as Woolworth. The thinking was that a man's business was an extension of his home. It was his castle, and he had the right of association.

2. Timeline Activity

Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group to create a timeline of the events in the lesson. Assign the other group to create a timeline of major national events that occurred from 1937-1940. Compare the 2 timelines and discuss any impact they may have had on each other. Were there any other civil rights movements happening at the same time? What impact do you think WWII had on the Alexandria library sit-in or the civil rights movement in general?

3. Research the Jim Crow Laws

Research the Jim Crow laws and summarize the facts of the laws by writing an informational newspaper article OR after researching the Jim Crow laws, write a newspaper editorial expressing your opinion either as a Caucasian or as an African American person.

4. Library Card Activity

Create library cards that duplicate the Robert Robinson Library card (see image). Make a rule about who can obtain a card. This rule should separate the class into two groups (for example only those students who are wearing blue will get a card). Each group must conduct research on a given topic. Provide the materials for each group, giving the Robert Robinson Library card holders group outdated, used, and inadequate materials. Provide the other group with everything they will need to conduct complete and thorough research. After providing some time for research, pull the class back together and have a discussion about fairness issue. How did the Robert Robinson library group feel about the assignment?

Supplementary Materials

http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/lectures/lecture26.html
The Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin's web site features lectures exploring the messages and actions of civil rights leaders. It provides related web links as well. One particular lecture to view is "Civil Rights in an Uncivil Society."

www.civilrights.org
The Civil Rights Coalition for the 21st Century offers a research center for review of historical data. The site also has a range of current issues on civil rights that can be utilized in a classroom to compare past events with current ones.

www.loc.gov
The Library of Congress web site offers many extensions to the civil rights issue, along with specific information on sit-ins around the United States, legal cases and provides images of "separate-but-equal" facilities and racial segregation. There is also a feature "Today in History" which can be searched for exact moments in history.

www.civilrightsmuseum.org
The National Civil Rights Museum located in Memphis, Tennessee, is dedicated to teaching the public about the struggle for civil rights, not only in the United States but worldwide. Its exhibits, educational and research programs chronicle the history of civil rights from the 1600s to the present. The site offers students the opportunity to explore different topics such as the Jim Crow Laws, Civil Rights Acts and the Student Sit-Ins, among others.

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/
PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow provides an interactive site for students to explore the impact that the Jim Crow Laws had on the African-American individual. This visually captivating site is a supplement to a four parts series on Jim Crow. The site offers an interactive timeline for students, contains historical documents, visuals and first-hand accounts from individuals personally and deeply affected by the system of Jim Crow, among other useful and interactive features.

www.jimcrowhistory.org
The History of Jim Crow web-site provides a look into the history of Jim Crow and Civil Rights in America. This is a complimentary site to the PBS sponsored *Fall and Rise of Jim Crow* web-site. It takes a different approach to the study of Jim Crow and Civil Rights through the use of literature to address this issue in American history. The site features detailed essays and uses literature based lesson plans to provide students with a greater understanding of the system known as Jim Crow.

Suggested Reading List

Smith, J. Douglas. *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.