

Carnegie Library, Savannah, Georgia

Dedicated August 1914

One hundred years ago in August 1914, the African American community came together to celebrate the opening of our beloved Carnegie Library on Henry Street. One hundred years of service to education. One hundred years of inspiring thousands of citizens to read more, learn more and act in service to our community because of what they learned at the library.

In 1914 the library was a cornerstone of African American accomplishment and education. It was a vibrant center of life then as it is today. Through the hard work and vision of the founders, a legacy was created which continues to play a pivotal role within the community today.

The walls of the Carnegie Library have played host to a multitude of programs and story times. Countless library users have checked out and enjoyed thousands of books and other materials from the Carnegie. Think of the young children who began to learn how to read here, who were inspired to go on and pursue further education and their dreams because of the spark ignited within these walls. Two of those Savannah children were U. S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas and Pulitzer Prize winning author James Alan McPherson.

We also salute the librarians who helped guide their journey and encouraged them to grow and achieve their goals. Think of the homework help and research guidance provided along the way. All of this was possible because the founders dared to dream so long ago.

Andrew Carnegie and Public Libraries in the United States

Industrialist Andrew Carnegie did not invent the notion of the public library, but he did ensure through his philanthropy that public libraries would flourish across the country. Using funds from Carnegie and under the supervision of James Bertram, 1,689 public libraries were constructed in the United States. Within the state of Georgia, 24 public libraries were constructed with grants from Carnegie. "Carnegie and Bertram never insisted on desegregated libraries or that communities accept and maintain separate branches for blacks, but they did attempt to make communities clearly set their own policies, so they could act accordingly. The program funded segregated libraries in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia..."

How it began: public library service in Savannah

With the advent of Carnegie funding for public libraries, citizens of Savannah began to make plans for their own public library. The original application to Carnegie exposed an undercurrent of racial disparity within the city. In an editorial in the Savannah Tribune: "A suggestion was made some time ago to have the Georgia Historical Society control the library so as to keep undesirable persons away... This puts the situation in a clear light and we hope that Mr. Carnegie would act accordingly. In this matter the colored citizens is an important factor, they are tax payers and should be considered. They are as deserving of the benefits of a free library especially when they will pay their proportion for tax for it, as much as any other class of citizens."

On November 1, 1903, without Carnegie funding, the city of Savannah and the Georgia Historical Society partnered to open a public library on a three year experimental basis. This was the catalyst for the African-American community to rally and debate the need for a public library of their own. The debate lasted over two years and culminated in a meeting on February 26, 1906 that established the Colored

Library Association of Savannah. The founding group consisted of: A.L. Tucker, Julian Smith, J.W. Armstrong, E.E. Desverney, J.T. Burton, Henry Pearson, Dr. F. S. Belcher, H.H. McBeth, G.W. Jacobs, L.S. Reed, R.W. Gadsden and C.A.R. McDowell. They met at 22 West State Street and elected A.L. Tucker as president; Dr. F. S. Belcher as vice-president; and J.W. Armstrong, E.E. Desverney, G.W. Jacobs, R.W. Gadsden and Henry Pearson as curators.

Contributions, of both money and books, to the group enabled them to establish the Library for Colored Citizens in space rented from the office of physician Dr. Fannin S. Belcher at the northeast corner of Hartridge and Price Streets. In order to pay for subscriptions to the Savannah Morning News, Savannah Press, and Savannah Tribune, they rented out part of the building. Other books and periodicals were obtained mainly through donations from the public. The curators hired Mr. C.A.R. McDowell as the first librarian.

The City of Savannah was also petitioned for support and in 1906 consented to a monthly contribution toward the maintenance of the library. Mr. Sol C. Johnson and Mr. D.J. Scott were appointed as the city's representatives on the Board of Curators.

With a clear understanding of need and support from the community, Savannah's African-American population was now well-placed to move forward in requesting funds from Carnegie.

Carnegie Library: Planning, Construction and Opening

In 1913 the Board of Curators petitioned the Carnegie Corporation for funding to build a new library building and was awarded a sum of \$12,000. Through the contributions of well-wishers and public subscription, the board raised the sum of \$3,000 and was able to purchase the land where the library still stands on East Henry Street. "Remarkably, black Savannahians had managed to do what the white community and city leaders had not: to fund a public library out of their own pockets and raise the matching money necessary to secure the support of the Carnegie Library Association."

Mr. Julian deBruyn Kops, a Savannah architect and engineer, was commissioned to design the new library. Construction began in early 1914 and on August 14 of that year, the new building was dedicated. Final completion was a short time later in early 1915. In grateful appreciation of the assistance given by Mr. Carnegie's corporation, the name of the library was changed to Carnegie Library when the library was moved to the new building on East Henry Street.

Dedicatory ceremonies were common upon the completion of Carnegie libraries across the country. The endowment of the library was seen as a sign of civic success and demonstrations of civic pride. This was particularly true in the case of the Carnegie Library. Speakers, Professor S. A. Grant, from the faculty of Georgia State Industrial College (now known as Savannah State University), and the pastors of several black churches including St. Phillip's A.M.E., First Bryan Baptist, and St. Stephen's Church, repeatedly cited the library's founding as a "key to black professional's success in Savannah" in their addresses.

The building is significant not only because it is an important part of the African-American history of Savannah, but also because it is the only example of Prairie Style architecture within the city. On the interior, it bears heavy influence of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The monumental staircase leading to the main entrance on the second floor is framed by two enormous piers with sandstone orbs on small pedestals. Additionally there are four tiered brick walls with sandstone coping which flank the staircase. The corners of the piers are delineated by dark glazed bricks, a motif repeated in a horizontal band over the second floor windows and projecting brick cornice

that visually divides the first and second stories. This emphasis on horizontality achieved through the coping and polychromed brickwork is a key element of the architecture of the Prairie School, pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright and his contemporaries. Pairs of narrow, vertical windows, with rectangular transoms, are also characteristic of the Prairie Style. The entrance is flanked by two sconces with large glass globes and is ornamented, above the doorway, with an open book with the inscription "Carnegie Library".

The interior continues to show the influence of Wright in the geometric and floral motifs incorporated on columns and pilasters. Other architectural elements include the prominent ceiling beams that visually divide an otherwise open plan, and the curvilinear pediment over the door leading into the main space from the entrance vestibule is unique in its elegant juxtaposition of geometric and organic design.

The plan of the library also reflects the influence of Bertram's reform in library design. According to the pamphlet, "Small libraries should be planned so that one librarian can oversee the entire library from a central position." Though Bertram's plans were meant to be schematic rather than mandatory, and included no specific architectural details such as wall thickness or window placement, open plans were favored. This type of design was popularized in contemporary department stores, factories and skyscrapers, suggesting a connection to Carnegie's corporate philanthropy. When considering the layout and scale of the Carnegie Library, it can be understood as a representative of the perfection of the Carnegie Library, which according to Bertram's notes, was a single floor in a "rectangular building with a small entrance vestibule leading directly into a single large room."

It has been included in the National Register of Historic Buildings as part of the overall historic neighborhood designation.

Carnegie Library: 1914-1962

In the annual report to the Mayor of Savannah, the Chairman of the Curators, A.L. Tucker, said this of the first full year of operations: "In submitting the report I respectfully call your attention to the commendable growth of the Library and its great step in meeting the needs of the colored citizens of Savannah as is most clearly shown by this most excellent report of our Librarian."

A study of this report clearly shows the need of more books for children and the great opportunity along this line to do good." Additional funding was requested but more importantly, for later growth of the facility: "As Chairman of the Board, and seeing the ends of the Library, I also most earnestly recommend the purchase by the City, an addition to the present domain of the Library, of the two lots of twenty-two and a half feet on either side of the Library."

That same year, the Librarian, P.A. Denegall, reported: "In submitting this report of the work of the Carnegie Colored Public Library for the year ending December 31st, 1915, I am pleased to say that there has been a marked increase in the number of those who used the library during the past year, and that the facilities and advantages which it affords are being more and more appreciated by those whom it is intended to serve."

From these humble beginnings the library grew to support a vibrant community, to be a sanctuary and educational hub for generations of African-American professionals and leaders. Pulitzer Prize winning author, James Allen McPherson said of the library: "...the Colored Branch of the Carnegie Library was a life-saver for me. If it had not been there, I probably would have drifted into the street culture, as my cousin, Samuel Collins, did. I can't say what the library meant to others, but I am sure that I would not be here, as a teacher of young writers or as a writer, if the resources offered by the library had not been available."

Like McPherson, the Honorable Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, attributes the library as a sanctuary from his grandfather and the unrelenting summer heat: "Its basement provided escape from Anderson's stern glare and the unending lectures and from Savannah's summer heat. "I used to run to the library to flip through the pages and dream," Thomas later said, according to David Kaplan in *Newsweek*. At age seven, he listened as librarians read stories. Later, he leafed through "every single page of every single encyclopedia," the authors of *Supreme Discomfort* reported. "I was never prouder than when I got my first library card, though the day when I'd checked out enough books to fill it up came close," Thomas wrote in *His Grandfather's Son*.

Locally, doctors, professors, aldermen, commissioners and mayors have all recalled the impact that the Carnegie Library had on their lives and how the library helped them succeed in life. Some of these include: Judge Orion Douglas; Dr. Nelson Stringer; Dr. J.W. Jamerson; former Savannah Chatham School Superintendent Virginia Edwards; and Mayors Floyd Adams, Otis Johnson and Edna Jackson.

Post-Desegregation 1963-2014

With the end of segregation, the Carnegie Library joined with the larger Savannah Public Library system in 1963. This meant that African-Americans were able to access the Bull Street Library for the first time. The cultural importance of Carnegie remained, even as the educational necessity waned. At the end of the 20th century, the Carnegie Library had slipped into disrepair and closed.

In 2001, Live Oak Public Libraries undertook a capital campaign to renovate and expand the historic facility. Hansen Architects were retained to develop a plan to return the original building back to its historical roots and to design additions that would provide 21st century amenities while remaining true to the original architectural style of Julian deBruyn Kops.

On the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Carnegie Library, the newly renovated and expanded Carnegie Library was reopened. On the day of the rededication, Dr. Virginia Edwards said "Without Carnegie Library, many successful blacks in this community would have had a difficult time accomplishing the many things they have achieved. The library provided information and knowledge that was of great benefit to our overall success. I am pleased we are able to keep the doors to the library open to the public."

In 2004, the renovation and expansion of the building was awarded the Historic Preservation Award by Historic Savannah Foundation. In 2005 the building was awarded the 2005 Georgia Preservation Award and the 2005 Marguerite Williams Award, both from the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. The Marguerite Williams Award is presented annually to the project that has had the greatest impact on preservation in the state. Later that same year, the Library was recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation with a National Preservation Award for the restoration and seamless expansion of the Carnegie Library.

The centennial of the Carnegie Library

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of this iconic structure, its value as an architectural treasure is surpassed by its cultural significance, which the words of Justice Clarence Thomas so eloquently express: "I would walk into that place and in the Carnegie Library I would see the pictures of Booker T. (Washington) and pictures of Frederick Douglass and I would read... Did I dream that I would be on the Supreme Court? No. But I dreamt that there was a world out there that was worth pursuing."