
Unannounced and Unexpected: The Desegregation of Houston Public Library in the Early 1950s

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ABSTRACT

Houston Public Library operated as a racially segregated system until 1953, when it quietly changed its policy to one of token integration. Occurring some seven years before the Houston Independent School District began to desegregate, the public library's policy change depended on a few key individuals. Drawing on the library's records of discussions and events, this article traces the history of a major shift in philosophy and practice at a large urban public library in the U.S. South.

Historian William Henry Kellar's book, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (1999), examines how it was possible for the largest segregated public school system in the nation to desegregate peacefully in the fall of 1960. In 1954 the federal Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional the separate but equal policy in public schools in its *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision. In response, some Deep South states declared they would organize massive resistance against court-ordered desegregation. In September of 1957 Arkansas governor Orval Faubus ordered state troops to prevent nine black students from attending the all-white Central High School. President Eisenhower responded by sending federal troops and the National Guard to escort the Little Rock Nine as they entered the school amidst a crowd of threatening, cursing, spitting whites. In June of 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace personally, physically blocked two black students from entering the University of Alabama, giving his infamous "schoolhouse door" speech proclaiming that the federal government had no right to tell the state how to run its public school system. President Kennedy sent the

National Guard to the campus and Wallace left, but his term as governor was marked by state-supported violence against blacks, most notably in Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham.

But between Little Rock in 1957 and Tuscaloosa in 1963, Houston desegregated its public schools. Kellar does a very good job of telling the story of the civil rights movement in Houston, a city largely overlooked in the huge body of literature on the civil rights era, despite the fact that several key court cases originated in Texas. He finds that the combination of an educated, motivated, and well-established black elite and middle class, with effective community organizations and three black-owned newspapers, along with a white business elite intent on avoiding the economic disaster that befell Arkansas as a result of the bad press around Little Rock, led to peaceful integration of the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Kellar notes that by the fall of 1960, when twelve black students were quietly admitted to elementary schools and thus token integration was achieved, the city's golf courses and buses had already integrated and the local Catholic schools were already admitting black students.

What Kellar does not mention is that Houston Public Library also had already desegregated, and it had done so in August of 1953, several months before the *Brown* decision. Houston Public Library in fact appears to have established the pattern of quiet token integration that HISD would follow seven years later. The same combination of black activism and white business leaders' desire for expediency was also at work.

In 1904 the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library had opened downtown in a newly constructed edifice funded by steel baron Andrew Carnegie. In 1913 the Colored Carnegie Library opened its new building nearby, again funded by the patron who had made millions in steel. The Colored Carnegie Library operated independently until 1921, when it became a branch of the newly renamed Houston Public Library (Malone, 1999). By 1953 the system included the main library downtown, six branches, a few small deposit stations, and two bookmobiles, all for the exclusive use of whites, and the Colored Carnegie Branch and three deposit stations in a high school, an elementary school, and a park for African Americans (Houston Public Library, 1958, p. 2).

So the library system did provide collections and services to blacks as well as whites, but in a segregated arrangement that blacks were no longer willing to accept forty years after its instigation. Desegregation of public transportation, accommodations, and institutions in Houston took place in waves set in motion by two significant civil rights victories in Texas. The first of these was *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), which outlawed the state's whites-only primary elections (Hine, 1979). The second case was *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), which ruled that black students must be allowed to attend the University of Texas Law School since the existing separate law school for blacks was not the equal of it (Pitre, 1999).

Soon after the Supreme Court rendered its decision in the *Sweatt* case, influential blacks in Houston turned their attention to the central library. In a letter to the library board quoted by the *Houston Informer*, five African American leaders and activists, including Lonnie Smith of the *Smith v. Allwright* case, noted that they could probably win a lawsuit against the library if they chose to file, but they preferred “a voluntary solution” because such an approach “would go a long way toward establishing a better understanding and feeling between white and colored people of Houston.”¹ The writer, and apparently other leading black citizens, thus saw the effort to desegregate the public library as historically significant, a logical next step in their long fight to secure citizenship rights and educational opportunities.

Working with them was attorney Herman Wright. He and his partner, Arthur J. Mandell, had represented the Congress of Industrial Organizations in Texas in the 1930s and 1940s. Both had become members of the Houston branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1947 (Pitre, 1999, p. 72). Wright, as a member of the NAACP’s Legal Redress Committee, followed up on the group’s first approach after library board members failed to respond. Early in October of 1950 he talked by phone with board president Mrs. Roy L. Arterbury regarding the possibility of arranging a meeting between the board and the NAACP’s Legal Redress Committee. She apparently was noncommittal because Wright followed up again, this time with a letter on November 17. He stated that if the board had not arranged a meeting by November 27, the committee would consider filing suit. Library director Harriet Dickson Reynolds promptly wrote back, saying that Arterbury and other board members were out of town and that a quorum could not be reached. She assured Wright that Arterbury would call him when she returned, although she did not say when that would be.² It was a classic case of “don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

Harriett Reynolds was stalling. She sent Wright’s letter and her reply to assistant city attorney Herman W. Mead. At the end of January 1951, Arterbury and another long-time board member, Mrs. R. L. Young, met with Mayor Oscar Holcombe to discuss ways to increase the library’s budget. During their visit, Holcombe instructed them not to meet with the NAACP committee and not to entertain the possibility of desegregating the library.³ Holcombe had been mayor throughout the 1920s and off and on through the next three decades, and after a very brief membership in Houston’s Ku Klux Klan chapter, had decided neither to participate in nor interfere with that organization during its heyday in the 1920s (Kellar, 1999, p. 15).

Another year passed and another group took up the project of pressing for access to the library. In February 1952 board president Arterbury and librarian Reynolds met with a white woman, Mrs. Newton Rayzor, and a black man, Charles Shaw, representing the Church Alliance Council. In a memo written after the meeting, Reynolds noted that “Mr. Shaw pounded on the

point of political equality. Mrs. Rayzor talked of Christian brotherhood." Rayzor and Shaw asked for two things: that Houston's black residents be allowed to use any and all of the city's libraries and that they be given representation on the library board. Reynolds and Arterbury tried to appease them by pointing out that blacks could use the central library for reference work and they could request that books from the central collection be sent to the (Colored) Carnegie Library for their use. Reynolds also suggested that the Carnegie Library needed a Friends of the Library group to help increase the use of and donor support for the branch.⁴

With the election of Roy M. Hofheinz as mayor, the city's official treatment of African American residents began to change. Soon after taking office early in 1953, Hofheinz appointed Gould Beech, his executive assistant, to advise the library board. Beech went to the board's meeting in February, where the board talked with him about strategies for increasing the library's budget. He then broached the subject of desegregation, asking board members what they thought about the possibility. Present were board members Arterbury, Mrs. A. T. Carleton, and Carl F. Stuebing and librarian Reynolds, but their responses are not recorded in the minutes of the meeting.⁵

Then, in May, Mayor Hofheinz himself attended the library board's meeting. He told the board members that he thought it was time to desegregate the library. He noted that Houston's black residents were taxpayers who should have access to the municipal services their taxes supported. He alluded to a court case to desegregate the city golf course, acknowledging that the city expected to lose and would not appeal. He reassured the board that Houstonians were ready to accept blacks in the library, especially since those who would take advantage of the opportunity would be "serious minded and with good demeanor" and would follow the same rules as whites who used the library. He told the board to desegregate quietly, making no announcements to the news media or to the NAACP.⁶ Neither long-time board members Arterbury or Young were present. Arterbury, who had served on the board since her appointment in 1931 by Mayor Walter Monteith, resigned in March.⁷ Replacing her as board president was Carl F. Stuebing. Young, a strong supporter of Mayor Holcombe, died in late April.⁸ In June Mayor Hofheinz appointed Jack Valenti as her replacement. A native Houstonian, Valenti had distinguished himself as a pilot during World War II and had earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Houston before completing his M.B.A. at Harvard in 1952. He had returned to Houston and was a partner in the political consulting and advertising firm of Weekley and Valenti at the time of his appointment to the library board.⁹

At Valenti's first library board meeting on July 21, 1953, library services to African Americans appeared on the agenda in two different but telling ways. Billy B. Goldberg, chair of the library board's expansion program

committee, suggested that the library hire a consultant or work with staff in the city's planning department to create a coherent expansion program. The board agreed that he should work with the planning department on a study that would inform such a program. Goldberg also raised the idea of selling both the Colored Carnegie Branch on Frederick Street and the Carnegie Branch on Henry Street, since circulation statistics were decreasing at both locations. In the context of a proposed program of expanding library collections and services, the board members' interest in freeing themselves from the burden of upkeep on declining properties made sense. They had approved more than \$1,000 in roof repairs at the Colored Branch in the past couple of years. Although it did not come up at the July board meeting, they also probably recognized that the demographics of the neighborhood around the branch had changed after World War II. The location that had seemed convenient to many black Houstonians when the Colored Branch opened no longer did. And because other library buildings were off-limits to African Americans, the consequences were more pronounced than would otherwise have been the case. In the context of increased civil rights activism, the decreasing level of library availability rankled.

At their July 1953 meeting, the board also discussed the matter of implementing the mayor's desegregation policy.¹⁰ Library Director Reynolds outlined the library's policies and practices regarding African Americans. Only the Colored Carnegie Branch and three deposit stations allowed black readers to borrow books. If a black person asked for service at another location, the staff would refer that person to the Colored Branch. A black patron who needed to use reference materials or the card catalog not available at the Colored Branch would be served at the central library, under certain conditions. The patron was not allowed in the front door but had to use a side entrance. The patron was not allowed to use the reading rooms or the card catalog but had to sit in a designated area of the mezzanine and wait for staff to bring the requested reference works or catalog drawers.¹¹

Reynolds told the board that she was concerned about desegregating children's services. She pointed out that library service to children involved far more than the reference and circulation functions typically used by adults. The library offered children story hours, sponsored clubs, and fostered other group activities that could be construed as having a social component. Some white parents would object to such activities if black children participated, Reynolds said. Therefore, she recommended, the library should take an incremental approach to desegregated service by expanding access to adults. Black adults would be allowed to use the central library's adult collection and reading rooms. The discussion that followed touched on what the board members saw as related issues, such as whether whites and blacks would be allowed to use the same toilets, water fountains, and club rooms. Board members considered the definition of "adult." The board also talked about the administrative problems that might arise as

library staff attempted to deal with restrictions that applied to some of their clientele but not others. Board member Waldo Bernard moved that they approve Reynolds's recommendation to desegregate adult services. But no one seconded the motion. Valenti moved that the issue be considered at a subsequent meeting, and everyone agreed.¹²

Back in June, soon after Mayor Hofheinz told the board to desegregate the library, Reynolds had written to the city attorney for guidance. She asked whether the library board could act alone or whether the city council would have to approve its decisions. She asked whether there were laws requiring segregation, either of the library itself or of facilities such as toilets and drinking fountains within the library. The reply from the city attorney is dated July 21, the day of the board's meeting, and the minutes do not refer to it, so it seems unlikely that Reynolds had seen it before the meeting took place. What City Attorney Sears told her was that the board had full authority and responsibility for governing and managing the library, according to the City Code. He also noted that constitutional law required that any segregated facilities or services the library might offer would have to be "substantially equal."¹³

At the board's next meeting in August, Valenti moved "That all adult facilities at the central library be opened to Negroes; and, that for this purpose, an adult is defined as anyone of senior high school age and up." Waldo Bernard seconded the motion and all seven board members approved. Mrs. Roland Ring, board secretary, recorded in the minutes that Valenti, Bernard, and Billy Goldberg agreed that the board's decision represented progress. Board members agreed that they would monitor developments and consider expanding access later. Ring also noted for the record that adult reading rooms, adult collections, and adult clubrooms were open for use by African Americans as of August 21, 1953. In keeping with the mayor's wishes, the library would not announce the policy change to the public.¹⁴

On paper, the change made some 200,000 library books and the central and branch libraries available to Houston's black adults. But without a public announcement, black adults learned of their availability only slowly. The first to register did so on August 28, only a week after the official decision. A Texas Southern University for Negroes (TSUN) student, he apparently expected to be turned away when he asked to borrow books. Library staff reported that the library's willingness to issue him a borrower's card took him by surprise. By the end of the year, fewer than fifty blacks had registered as borrowers at the central library; most were TSUN students. The library's annual report for 1953 noted that they returned the borrowed books on time, with only one exception.¹⁵ That the librarian thought this noteworthy suggests that some white staff members may have assumed that black readers would be irresponsible. But this small piece of data may have been offered in support of Mayor Hofheinz's expressed belief that because only serious and courteous blacks would take advantage of their

new library privileges and would follow the rules, whites had nothing to fear from opening the library to them.

Even the partial desegregation of Houston's main library put that agency ahead of many other institutions in the city. It was not until March 4, 1960, that black students in Houston, following the lead established at the first lunch counter sit-in a month earlier in Greensboro, North Carolina, began to stage sit-ins and take other forms of direct action that resulted in restaurants, train stations, buses, hotels, and other private businesses and public accommodations beginning to desegregate (Cole, 1997). It was not until September of 1960 that public schools in the city began incremental integration, six years after the *Brown* decision and one month after a federal district judge ordered desegregation of all first-grade classes (Hurley, 1966).

Despite the changed policy at the central library, the Colored Carnegie Branch continued its activities, with emphasis on services for children and young adults. The branch librarian, Anita Sterling, visited four elementary schools and one senior high in her efforts to interest young people in using the library. She organized a reading club for teens, held story hours for children, and hosted a variety of activities in observance of Book Week. She also submitted columns and information to local newspapers to publicize the branch. As at the central library, TSUN students were relatively heavy users of the branch's collections and services.¹⁶

The branch would continue to operate for a few more years, but by the late 1950s it had outlived its usefulness, and not just because it was a relic of Jim Crow. The forty-year-old structure needed constant repairs, circulation was dwindling, and the outdated collection suffered from neglect and abuse. The branch ultimately did not die because it was an offensive physical reminder of segregation days, nor was its demise caused by lack of use. In the nation's sixteenth largest city, the branch simply sat in the path of a major street extension. It was Houston's traffic problem that led the board to sell the building and the buyer to tear it down. Mayor Lewis Cutrer's office informed librarian Reynolds in the summer of 1959 that the Clay Avenue Extension project would begin in December. The extension of one of downtown Houston's main arteries would pass through the site of the library. The building would need to be moved or demolished in the fall. The board wanted to sell the building and property, but they were unsure of their legal authority to do so. An attorney in the city's legal department thought that if the building were no longer used as a library, it would have to revert to the ownership of the trustees of the Colored Carnegie Library Association. Reynolds checked the city directory and found that only two of the original trustees, W. L. D. Johnson and L. H. Spivey, were listed. She also checked the deed and found no reversion clause but merely the stipulation that the property was "for the use and benefit of colored people of Houston." Reynolds asked the board to consider the issue of how to serve black readers once the branch closed. Alice Stewart, supervisor of exten-

sion services, reported that the worn bookmobile, known as the Traveling Branch for Negroes, needed to be replaced.¹⁷

A few days after the meeting, Reynolds followed up with a letter to Charles Easterling in the city's legal department. She relayed some two dozen questions from the board's discussion regarding the fate of the Colored Carnegie Branch. Among their key concerns were how the library would be compensated for the loss of the property, and how that compensation might be applied to other library services. The trustees wondered how broadly they could interpret the phrase "for the use and benefit of colored people." They wondered, for instance, whether they could build a new branch elsewhere for use by whites and blacks and still adhere to the spirit of a stipulation written when the end of residential segregation was nowhere in sight. They also questioned how they would offer equivalent service to blacks once the branch designated for their use was gone. They expressed a desire to build another branch in a predominantly black neighborhood in exchange for the loss of the Colored Carnegie Branch, but because funding for such a project was not in the library's budget, they wondered about the possibility of providing additional bookmobile service or of renting space for the collections. Finally, they asked, "Will loss of major branch for Negroes affect de-segregation of library?"¹⁸ Six years after token integration of the central library, the board understood the implication of closing the black branch. It would no longer serve as a way to siphon off black library users in an attempt to keep them out of the system's other buildings.

A month later three board members met and heard the city attorney's confirmation that there was no reversionary clause in the deed but that the library had to comply with the "for the use and benefit of the colored people" covenant. Easterling urged them to ask the mayor and city council for full compensation for the loss of the building and property and full authority to use that compensation as they saw fit, within the bounds of the covenant. The three members present passed a motion to implement Easterling's recommendations, and the four members not present assented by telephone. They were determined to realize the full value of the real estate under their authority and to retain control over expending it.¹⁹ By August board members had begun discussing in which predominately black neighborhood they should situate a new branch. They included the proposed branch along with other branches, work on existing buildings, and construction of a storage facility in a five-year capital improvement plan.²⁰ A bond election for library expansion passed in September. In October Reynolds reported to the board the availability of \$312,000 in library bonds and another potential \$550,000 when all of the library bonds had sold. She also reported that the city would grant the library \$52,335 to compensate for the Colored Branch.²¹

At its meeting in July of 1961, the board voted unanimously to close the Colored Carnegie Branch as of July 31, with no public announcement.²² Reynolds sent a memorandum to Mayor Lewis Cutrer informing him of the fact and noting that the branch circulated a mere ten books daily. She assured the mayor that a bookmobile would continue to visit predominately black neighborhoods on a regular schedule. And then she acknowledged the significance of the board's act. "With the closing of the Colored Carnegie Branch," Reynolds wrote, "the library system is for all practical purposes integrated."²³

Several months before the branch closed in mid-1961, the library had launched its capital improvement program, which would involve the construction of branches all over the city through the 1960s. The city auctioned off the original Colored Carnegie Library building in February 1962. The highest bidder demolished it immediately, saving only the cornerstone.²⁴ The library that was considered a replacement for the Colored Branch opened at 3511 Reed Road, in a predominately black neighborhood. City and library officials dedicated the new facility, named the W. L. D. Johnson Sr. Branch in honor of one of the founders of the original Colored Carnegie Library, on June 16, 1964 (Houston Public Library, 1966, p. 17).

NOTES

1. Quoted in "The Houston Library Fight," *Houston Informer*, March 25, 1953, clipping in the HMRC.
2. Herman Wright to Mrs. Roy L. Arterbury, November 17, 1950; Harriet Dickson Reynolds to Wright, November 21, 1950, HPL Minutes, v. 10, 1948–1950.
3. Harriet Dickson Reynolds to Herman W. Mead, November 24, 1950, HPL Minutes v. 10, 1948–1950; Board Members visit Mayor (undated typescript), HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953.
4. H. D. Reynolds, untitled (undated typescript), HPL Minutes v. 11, 1951–1953.
5. Minutes, Meeting of Board Members, February 20, 1953, HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953.
6. Notes on Mayor Hofheinz's talk at Board Meeting, May 18, 1953 (undated typescript), HPL Minutes v. 11, 1951–1953).
7. "Mrs. Arterbury's Library Service," *Houston Post*, March 25, 1953 (clipping), HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953.
8. "Mrs. Young, Club Woman, Dies Here," *Houston Post*, April 29, 1953 (clipping), HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953.
9. *A Look at Jack Valenti*, retrieved December 19, 2000, from <http://www.mpa.org/about/jack/index.htm>. Valenti met Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1955 and later served under President Johnson as his special assistant until 1966, when he resigned to become head of the Motion Picture Association of America, a post he held until mid-2004.
10. Minutes, Meeting of Board Members, July 21, 1953, HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953.
11. *Ibid.*, 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
13. Harriet Dickson Reynolds to Will G. Sears, June 2, 1953; Sears to Reynolds, July 21, 1953, HPL, Minutes v. 11, 1951–1953.
14. Minutes, Meeting of Board Members, August 21, 1953, and July 21, 1953, HPL Minutes v. 11, 1951–1953.
15. Minutes, Meeting of Board Members, July 21 and December 11, 1953, HPL Minutes, v. 11, 1951–1953; HPL Annual Report 1953 (typescript).

16. A. Sterling, HPL Colored Carnegie Branch Annual Report 1953, (typescript), HMRC.
17. Minutes, Regular Meeting of Board Members, June 12, 1959, HPL Minutes, v. 14, 1958–1960.
18. Colored Carnegie Branch: Demolishment: Questions brought out at Board Meeting of June 12, 1959, HPL Minutes, v. 14, 1958–1960.
19. Library Board Committee meeting minutes, July 10, 1959, HPL Minutes, v. 14, 1958–1960.
20. H. D. Reynolds to Mayor Lewis Cutrer, August 28, 1959, HPL Minutes, v. 14, 1958–1960.
21. Regular meeting of Board Members minutes, October 14, 1960, HPL Minutes, v. 14, 1958–1960.
22. Regular meeting of Board Members minutes, July 14, 1961, HPL Minutes, v. 15, 1961–1962.
23. Harriet Dickson Reynolds to Mayor Lewis Cutrer, July 22, 1961, HPL, Minutes, v. 15, 1961–1962.
24. Minutes, Regular Meeting of Board Members, February 23, 1962, 4; Minutes, Regular Meeting of Board Members, October 13, 1961, 3, HPL Minutes, v. 15, 1961–1962.

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