

[Spring 1957]

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
GREATER ATLANTA COUNCIL ON HUMAN RELATIONS

FROM: WHITNEY M. YOUNG, CONSULTANT

SUBJECT: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON LIBRARY SITUATIONS

The Atlanta Public Library is supervised by a Board of Trustees appointed by the City Board of Aldermen, and includes one person from each Ward in the City plus two members from the Board of Aldermen who are chosen from their Library Committee. This Board of Trustees has final authority on the operating policies of the library and also the authority for recommending budgetary needs of the library to the Board of Aldermen.

Library services to Negro citizens in Atlanta are available only through the three "Negro branches" located on Hunter Street, Auburn Avenue, and in the University Homes, a public housing project. Services are not directly available to Negro citizens at the main or central building which in many cases is closer to Negro citizens than any of the "Negro branches."

There is no law in the city of Atlanta which gives a legal basis to this practice but rather it is a policy which the Board of Trustees admits it adopted for what it considers to be in the best interest of all concerned. The Atlanta Public Library and all its operations are financed by tax money collected from all citizens. Negro citizens have never questioned the using of their tax money in this way even though much of it is being used to maintain facilities which are denied to them. In fact Negro voters supported almost unanimously the recent Bond Issue to improve library services with the hope of changing the present policies.

While the library Board contends it is only following the "Southern way of life" in its policy of segregation, actual studies now reveal that many public libraries in the South, some farther South than Atlanta and certainly in cities less progressive than Atlanta have quietly desegregated their library facilities. Among these cities are: Austin, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Charlotte, N. C.; Chattanooga and Knoxville, Tennessee; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Norfolk, Virginia; Miami, Fla.; New Orleans, La.; Little Rock, Arkansas, and others. Several of these cities have Negro citizens on their library Boards.

Over the years, a number of individual efforts have been made by Negro citizens to use the main library and at least two organized group efforts. One of these groups, the local chapter of the American Veterans Committee, an interracial group, actually met with the Board of Trustees in 1956, and presented materials and arguments to supplement their request that all public libraries in Atlanta be opened to all citizens. Their request was taken under advisement and subsequently a letter was sent them stating that the board felt it had been very generous in its services to Negro citizens and that these citizens were not fully utilizing the facilities provided. The letter concluded by stating that the Board's decision was to continue their policy of separate library facilities. The other organized group was a committee on Interracial Cooperation which made a study of library facilities in the South for Negroes indicating how public libraries were opening their doors to all citizens. This material was sent to the Staff and Board of Trustees of the Atlanta Public Library and other interested groups and citizens. There was no response to this effort.

The present mood of Negro citizens is increasingly hostile to the practices and policies of this institution. They have been advised by their leadership that the

present library Board nor staff have the foresight courage or convictions to undertake voluntarily as other southern cities to quietly change their policies. In fact, there is a very definite feeling that some individuals on the Board and Staff are racists who have deep prejudices and who are influenced more by the Klan and White Citizens Councils than by sound efficient and democratic practices of running a public library.

Specifically the grievances of Negro citizens are:

1. The very existence of segregated facilities themselves even if equal (which is impossible) is insulting, embarrassing and tends to stigmatize.
2. Inability to use the main library makes impossible the opportunity to browse, to use the large Union Card Catalogue, both of which are important in any kind of research effort.
3. The use of certain technical books, specialized encyclopedias, recordings, prints, back issues of newspapers and magazines, as well as some histories and novels not found in Negro branch libraries, and which are restricted and at best causes the borrower an inconvenience of waiting from three to five days before he can get the material.
4. The inconvenience of having to go considerable distances to use the "Negro branches" when there are branches much closer to where some Negro citizens live.

Negro citizens have been advised that since the Board refuses to cooperate in some quiet efforts to change its policies then the only alternative is a law suit which could be instigated either by an individual or a group. The group of ministers who tested the bus segregation policies have expressed an interest in going as a body to the public library until forced out or arrested.

One need not be a librarian to realize the loss of efficiency and the waste of money which develops in trying to operate complete library facilities on a segregated basis related only to color. Any white person no matter how illiterate, dirty, or undesirable may use the main library, while the most learned, cultural and immaculate Negro citizen is denied.

This practice is a violation of the American Library Association Bill of Rights, which states that "as a responsibility of Library service there should be no discrimination based on race or nationality."

The professional status of the Atlanta Public Library and its ability to attract competent professional help will be affected as long as the present policy continues.

PRESENT MEMBERS OF THE LIBRARY BOARD:

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