

*More Southern cities realize
that knowledge won't segregate*

The Color Line In Libraries

By Anna Holden

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IN 1941 Dr. Eliza Atkins Gleason's careful survey of the *Southern Negro and the Public Library* revealed that only sixteen communities in the South gave any type of service to Negroes through their main public libraries. Four of those—Covington, Ky., Brady, Pecos and El Paso, Texas—offered full service; the other twelve limited Negro patrons to separate reading rooms, partial privileges, or service in the summer months. Mrs. Gleason's comment on the situation in the early 1940's suggests the state of public thinking on Negro use of regular public library channels at that time. "That full privileges are extended to Negroes anywhere in the Southern region," Mrs. Gleason stated, "is a most interesting development."

In the twelve years since 1941, Negro use of the main library has grown from an isolated phenomenon to an increasingly acceptable practice in certain areas of the South.

A Southern Regional Council mail survey of librarians, state library commissions and associations indicates that by January 1954 public library "integration" in the South had gone this far:

- 1) In sixty-two cities and towns Negroes have free use of the main public library.
- 2) Twenty-four communities give limited service to Negroes at the main library.
- 3) In eleven localities in the South one or more branches give service to patrons regardless of race.
- 4) Three library systems have Negro representation on their boards.

Comments from the librarians testify that main libraries which claim to serve Negroes freely actually do. The librarian at the downtown public library in Burlington, N. C., for example, states: "Since the middle forties this library has been open to Negroes on the same basis as the whites. A resolution of the Board of Trustees set this as a policy. I can truthfully say that they have had this service in actuality as well as in the letter of the law during the past four years." Similarly, the librarian in Miami's new million-dollar central library writes: "Negroes use the library freely, children's room, as well as the adult department. Negroes also attend programs."

Four of the fifty-nine libraries on the "full service" list—Little Rock, Ark., Knoxville and Nashville, Tenn., and Bryan, Texas—do not serve Negro children.

"Limited service" to Negroes in main libraries may mean anything from

regular use of all facilities but the reading room to special service on "rare occasions." The librarian at Gastonia, N. C., reports that "all resources of books, periodicals, audio-visual materials, reference facilities are open to Negro use, but the main reading room is not open." A conference room is made available for Negroes who wish to use these materials in the Gastonia Library. The New Orleans central public library admits and serves Negroes in the main library building, but sets separate reading tables aside for Negro use. Lake Charles, La., follows the same practice.

Where "limited service" is more restrictive, Negroes may borrow directly those materials which do not circulate through inter-library loan, or apply for reference service not available at the branch. A few librarians stipulate giving main library service to professional Negroes or college students. Still others serve Negroes who seek service in the main library, but do not "encourage" Negro patronage.

Successful experience in opening the downtown library to all citizens has paved the way for a small number of formerly "white" and "Negro" branches to begin serving patrons regardless of race. Six or eight years after the main library in Burlington, N. C., dropped racial barriers, one of the "white" branches voted to serve Negroes. According to the chief librarian of Miami's central library, which opened on a non-segregated basis, there is a "Negro" branch on the border of a white residential district which both whites and Negroes use. Chattanooga, Tenn., opened its main library to Negroes in 1949 and now plans a new branch in a predominantly Negro neighborhood which will be open to any resident of the area. It will not be called a "Negro" branch.

Integration of the white and Negro divisions of the University of Louisville was influential in the Louisville library board's decision to open all the city libraries to patrons regardless of race. The resolution adopted by the board in 1952 noted the necessity for "complete freedom of interchange between the students of the University of Louisville and the patrons of the Public Library" and demanded "that the agencies of the Louisville Free Public Library be opened to all citizens." Negroes were admitted to the main library in 1948.

A new policy regarding Negro patrons in the main library does not always precede or accompany integration of the branch libraries. The Secretary of the Florida State Library Association reports that certain "white" branches in one of Florida's leading cities are used by Negroes through special arrangement between the branch libraries. The downtown library is still limited to white use.

Though Southern libraries are opening doors while many other public agencies are duplicating separate services, libraries in the South have lagged behind the public schools, city government bodies and social service agencies in Negro board representation. Just three Southern cities have Negroes on their library boards—Louisville, Ky., Roanoke, Va., and Winston-Salem, N. C. Yet Negroes sit on public school boards in at least nine communities and on city councils in at least ten towns in the South.

For some time Negroes have had unofficial representation on advisory committees of the public libraries. Special committees of Negroes and whites often play an important part in expanding Negro branches and in opening up the main library to Negro use. Many Negro branches and independent libraries

have their own Negro boards. This, however, is not the same as full voice and vote on the city library board. As the Birmingham branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People recently stated in a letter to the Mayor concerning the appointment of a Negro advisory committee:

We acknowledge this to be a step forward and for that we commend your board for recognizing and beginning to meet a need. We take the liberty of suggesting, however, that the problems in this, as in all other areas of common interest, are so many and so complex . . . that solutions will be unattainable unless and until representatives from the various segments of the population in the community can sit down together as human beings with a common interest and the opportunity for full discussion and consideration . . . We trust that in the not too distant future, action will be taken to have Negro representatives as an integral part of the Library Board. Through such positive participation, we are certain that there will be greater mutual understanding and both human relations and library science will be improved.

Population figures show that public library integration is taking place chiefly in areas where few Negroes live. Nearly four-fifths of the localities extending full library privileges to all their citizens have Negro populations making up less than 20% of the total. Many are located in the hills of Kentucky and the flatlands of western Texas, where Negroes compose 3%, 10%, perhaps 12% of all residents. Towns such as Harrisonburg, in the mountains of Virginia, feel they can no longer justify operating a branch for the six to seven hundred Negroes in the population.

Not all the localities giving Negroes full service in their main libraries have small Negro populations or are found in "border" states. Eleven have Negro populations ranging upwards from 21% to 44%. "Southern" cities like Chattanooga, Tenn., with a 30% Negro population; Newport News, Va., 43% Negro; and Little Rock, Ark., 24% Negro, have come to realize that a separate library system is prohibitive if any attempt is made to accompany the separateness with equal facilities.

While cities the size of Chattanooga, Nashville, and Norfolk often have branches set up in both white and Negro neighborhoods, the task of providing two reference centers with special collections, films, and records seems too costly an undertaking for serious consideration. The board of trustees of the Little Rock Public Library announced its decision to admit Negroes to the main public library with the statement that, while the branch could "supply many library needs and has a particularly good collection of children's books, the main library contains reference books and periodicals which are too expensive to duplicate and which are needed for research."

As yet no communities in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have extended full service to Negroes in their main libraries. Librarians in these areas express the same concern for present inadequacies of Negro service as librarians in the rest of the South. Their concern, however, has so far been directed toward expanding separate services, with extension of partial service at the main library in some instances. Increased demands for service will no doubt change this situation, for as one South Carolina librarian comments, Negro service in his community "is as unequal as the demand for it."