Battle Cry: the American Library Association and Its Southern Chapters during the Civil Rights Movement

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The historiography of civil rights and libraries tells us little about the desegregation of the profession. During the Civil Rights Movement librarians in the American South encountered barriers to their professional participation due to Jim Crow cultural restrictions in the region. Despite activism by a few individuals, the American Library Association was not successful in compelling state and regional affiliates of the Association to integrate their ranks. Four state associations (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgie) actually severed their ties with ALA. Only after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were the cultural barriers removed to permit the southern associations to open their membership to all librarians. Soon after the signing of that legislation, ALA readmitted those southern chapters.

The historiography of civil rights and libraries has told us a great deal about both African-American librarianship and the desegregation of libraries, but little about the desegregation of the *librarian*, collectively or individually, Rosemary Du Mont's "Race in American Librarianship" being one of the few examples of this topic in our scholarly literature.¹ This deficiency in the record is probably representative of the general cultural imprecision found in all considerations of libraries versus librarians. Examinations of libraries are often conflated with librarians; the practice of librarianship is often documented through the physical evidence of libraries. In the history of librarianship, this is problematic because we are presented with, on the one hand, segregated libraries, and then, after a period of social turmoil, integrated libraries. Occasionally, we might see, as though peering through a window, some elements of that turmoil

and the transition that followed, but rarely are we introduced to the professional or personal conflict within librarianship itself that contributed to the social change.

This paper deals specifically with professional library organizations, especially the American Library Association (ALA) and its affiliates, during the American Civil Rights Movement, and the conflict those organizations experienced brought about by the struggle for racial equality. The title "Battle Cry: ALA and Its Southern Chapters during the Civil Rights Movement," makes a rather flip civil war reference that is, nonetheless, apropos. **[Add a note of reference to James M. McPherson's book and George Frederick Root's patriotic song.]** Several of ALA's state chapters did secede from the Association during the Civil Rights Movement. The analogy does begin to break down in the particulars; a "war" was fought about these issues within the profession, but forces largely outside of ALA brought about the conditions for final reconciliation. ~~In broad summary,~~ many members of ALA did express great concern about access to libraries for African Americans throughout the country (but especially in the South) as well as the rights of African-American librarians to participate fully in professional organizations. In practice, however, ALA mostly exhibited conciliation to local practice and culture. Southern librarians, on the other hand, while exhibiting widespread concern about opening libraries to all the citizens within their jurisdictions and providing, as best they could, some level of service, were, nonetheless, mostly hand-tied by local laws and fear of reprisal, and therefore did not participate to any great extent in the civil rights activism that marked the 1950s and 1960s in America.

In discussing ALA's relationship with its Southern membership, it is important to keep a few historic touchstones in mind:

- The Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896: which was the culmination of eroded civil rights that had begun immediately after the Civil War and continue throughout Reconstruction. The case established “separate but equal” as the hypocritical law of the land throughout the first half of the 21st century.²
- The Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954: which is thought to have overturned “separate but equal,” and is widely recognized as the pivotal event in bringing about the end of segregation. Certainly, it was the galvanizing event of midcentury that inspired many people with hope for better things to come, but I think its role in desegregation, outside of public education, is largely overstated. *Brown*, it must be remembered, also galvanized opposition to desegregation and inspired the countermovement known as Massive Resistance. *Brown* alone did little to desegregate public libraries or the library profession.³
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964: the Act actually made most *de jure* discrimination and segregation in the public arena illegal, including public libraries. Professional organizations, however, as private entities, were not directly compelled to integrate under the Act.⁴

In their time, these touchstones neither necessitated a segregated library profession nor later brought about its integration. They simply established the culture within which librarians were compelled--or chose--to operate.

Throughout the early twentieth century, because of *de jure* and *de facto* institutions of segregation, library services to African Americans were very limited, especially in the South.⁵ Many communities offered no services whatsoever. Others offered some form of segregated

service. In the best cases, like the Louisville Free Public Library, there was an entire well-staffed and well-stocked branch available to African Americans. In other cases, access to branch libraries was limited by day and time, and black customers were generally not welcome or entitled to the full range of services that whites enjoyed. Often, African Americans only had access to bookmobile service and even that was from a separate (and not very equal) vehicle from the white bookmobile. In almost all cases where integration of library services had already taken place (before the main actions of the Civil Rights Movement) it was affected in a “quiet” way, which is to say it was not publicized in either the black or the white community.⁶

Because there were few library services offered and because educational opportunities for African Americans were also limited, there were very few African-American librarians, North, South, East, or West. In no cases the author can identify in the South during the time of *de jure* segregation were there African-American librarians working in otherwise integrated library services. Librarians were white, except in segregated branch services, in black elementary schools, and in historically black college libraries. Even in the latter, many faculty, librarians, and administrators were white. As an example: the “Libraries for Negroes” column of the *Bulletin of the Louisiana Library Association*, published during the 1930s and 1940s, was edited first by a librarian from the historically black Xavier University and later by a librarian from Dillard University, also historically black. Both of these librarians, however, were white.⁷

Thus, even while striving to overcome unequal library services, professional activities for African-American librarians were essentially separate. This is illustrated in many ways by the ALA’s “Work With Negroes Round Table,” not least of which is the name of the organization, which, aside from being clearly offensive to our ears today, speaks of exclusion rather than inclusion of African-American professionals. The primary mover of this group was Ernestine

Rose, whose concern and knowledge, as the head of the NYPL Harlem branch cannot be questioned, but she was, nonetheless, white. The Round Table existed for 3 years, 1921-1923, but, as Louis Shores notes, “inter-sectional feeling ran so high that no further attempts at organization were made.”⁸

Education for librarianship was also typically segregated. For African Americans, library education was often through certification programs like that at the Louisville Free Public Library. The historically black Hampton Institute established a library program in 1925, which offered a bachelor’s degree. Despite the success of some African-American librarians like Eliza Gleason and Dorothy Porter at graduate programs outside the South, others were not especially encouraged or welcome to attend. The director of the Michigan program, in response to an inquiry about the admission of Negroes, responded that “their presence is a distinct embarrassment”.⁹ ALA did have a hand in the founding of Hampton and, when that program closed in 1939, in the founding of the graduate program in librarianship at Clark Atlanta University in 1941. No doubt, ALA was right to encourage the education of African Americans in the South at institutions close to home, but this plan came about in part because the will did not exist within the organization to encourage the admission of African-American students to library programs outside the South.¹⁰

Professional organizational activities were obviously, though not necessarily, segregated in the South. No law or statute in the South actually compelled the segregation of professional organizations. The use of any public facilities, however, was constrained by *de jure* and *de factor* segregation. Though many library organizations in the South claimed to have no restrictions on membership, African-American librarians were rarely made to feel welcome at committee meetings, conferences, or, especially, social activities. Hotels, restaurants, schools, and public

buildings were all operated under strict Jim Crow cultural norms. Little if any effort was made by organizations to hold meetings in places where segregation did not hold sway. Under these conditions, most African-American librarians chose not to participate in the “white” library association.¹¹ In some states there were separate library organizations for Blacks, but in several states African-American librarians organized themselves within their respective segregated education associations. In Louisiana, for example, the Louisiana Colored Teachers’ Association (later, though still segregated, called the Louisiana Education Association) had a “libraries” division in which public, school, and academic librarians were members. Georgia and Virginia had similar arrangements within the black teachers’ organizations.¹²

It was under these conditions that ALA held its annual conference of 1936 in Richmond, Virginia. After the conference, many non-Southern attendees were struck by the segregated nature of the event. Although there were African Americans in attendance, they were made to sit separately in most auditoriums and meeting rooms and they were not allowed to attend any meal events. An editorial from outside the profession posed the question, “Why should any civilized association, with Negro members, undertake to hold such a convention in Virginia or any other state that makes such distinctions?” Members of the Association raised objections as well, voicing their disapproval in the *Library Journal* and other professional publications. The result was the formation of the ALA Committee on Discrimination. Based on a report of the Committee, a resolution of ALA Council was passed later that year which required that conference facilities recognize the “full equality” of all members. The resolution, in essence, forbade the use by the ALA of facilities or locations that would require observation of Jim Crow laws. (See Du Mont, for an extended examination of these events.)¹³ Although this made a statement about the rights of African-American librarians within the ALA, it said nothing about

the rights in general of those librarians within their own communities or local library associations, thus maintaining some element of acquiescence to local practice. ALA would avoid those conference locations that clung most particularly to Jim Crow, but it did not speak out about the provision of library services or the treatment of librarians within those segregated communities.

It was almost 20 years before ALA made any additional efforts to enforce a level of equal rights within the Association. In 1954, a revision of the bylaws restricted states to a single ALA chapter organization. This meant that both white and Negro chapters would not be permitted to serve as affiliates of ALA in representing a single state. The Negro chapter in North Carolina dissolved itself to allow the historically white NCLA to seek ALA chapter status.¹⁴ (I do not think the story has yet been fully told of the level of equality African-American librarians held after that action.) Alabama and Georgia could not come to any agreement about a single state chapter, and, thus, chose not to seek recertification of their chapter status.¹⁵ Some states like Louisiana, although their state chapters were not truly integrated, did not have separate associations for Blacks, and thus flew under the radar of ALA for several more years.

As *Brown v Board* and the growing level of protest in the Civil Rights Movement began to infiltrate the national consciousness, librarians too became more sensitive to inequalities within the profession. As the 1960s dawned, a smoldering letter-writing campaign was going on behind the scenes between African-American librarians demanding rights and various organizational leaders within both state associations and ALA itself. One result was that the Library Bill of Rights was amended by the Association in 1961 to include the statement, "The right of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridge because of his race, religion, national origins or political views." Here, the ALA was finally making a statement

about the provision of library services on a national scale, and not making allowances for local practice. But, of course, the ALA had little power to enforce the right, and in truth did little to persuade member libraries or organizations to integrate their services.¹⁶ In 1960, the ALA executive board also directed the Intellectual Freedom Committee to inquire more pointedly whether Southern ALA chapters were, in fact, fully open to all librarians. The IFC got tepid responses from the states. Ironically, in the Fall of 1961, Florinell Morton from Louisiana took office as the President of ALA. The survey of black participation had revealed that the Louisiana Library Association (the state ALA chapter) was not truly integrated. The executive board and the IFC went to some pains to insure that Morton was not *too* embarrassed during her Presidency by any ALA demands that her own state association integrate. In fact, the board report to ALA Council in January of 1962 continued to recommend a cautious and deliberate approach to chapter desegregation. The Council response was immediate and negative. (Note of emphasis: the differences between the executive board and ALA Council is somewhat analogous to the differences between a national presidential cabinet and that nation's elected legislature.) Lawrence Powell called the report "monstrously cynical." Jerome Cushman, from New Orleans, however, warned that a "social legislation" policy would result in the secession of Southern chapters. At the Annual conference of 1962 in Miami, the Council issued a "Statement on Chapters and Institutional Members," which specified the particular rights all members of these organizations must be granted in order to maintain ALA affiliate status, and gave no more than a three-year grace period for implementation. The LLA executive board asked for an indefinite extension, to which they received a firm "no."¹⁷

Both the Louisiana Library Association and the Mississippi Library Association were unable to meet the requirements of ALA chapter status and officially withdrew.¹⁸ The library

associations in Alabama and Georgia had already withdrawn during the “single state chapter” process of 1954, but were also unable to meet the new ALA requirements of equality for all members. Again, it must be said in all these cases, that it was not that any state or local law required that the associations be segregated, but that Jim Crow made it virtually impossible for African Americans to participate in these organizations. By this time, the forces of Massive Resistance had also become so strong and visible, that many librarians feared to be the object of its wrath. New Orleans public schools, for example, had just recently been the object of widespread mob violence in 1961 after a court order for integration had been issued. The story was the same across the Deep South. Public attempts at integration were met with angry resistance.

Another product of the 1962 conference in Miami was that ALA undertook a study to evaluate access to libraries throughout the country. The “Access Study,” published in 1963, became something of a hot-button topic for the association. It actually identified widespread abridgement of access based on race, including discrimination in many cities of the North and West. The authors of the report employed an interesting GIS-like methodology to point out that the placement of public libraries in many communities was segregated and racist, regardless of whether the facilities themselves were integrated. The study was roundly criticized by the profession from all points of the compass. In the end, no concrete actions were generated by the report, but it did serve to further highlight equal access as a national issue.¹⁹

The secession of the four Southern library associations (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi) continued throughout 1963 and 1964. In 1964, the Mississippi Library Association actually won an ALA award for its National Library Week program. How this was possible is not clear, being unaffiliated, but it stimulated a great deal of resentment about the

hypocrisy of ALA. Georgia librarian E. J. Josey became further distressed when he learned that ALA officers had recently attended the Georgia Library Association Conference, which Josey himself, as an African American, could not attend. He presented these issues to the ALA Council at the 1964 annual conference and a resolution was quickly fashioned, which prohibited ALA officers from taking part in segregated activities.²⁰ Although Josey and others remember this as the last stand of segregation in Southern library associations, segregation actually continued to exist in the Southern associations throughout the fall of 1964 and into 1965.

Interestingly, during the ALA conference of 1964, a civil rights bill had finally worked its way through the U.S. Congress and was signed into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on July 2 by President Lyndon Johnson. This bill was certainly applauded by many librarians who were interested in the spread of equality throughout the profession, but the full import for Southern librarians may not have been immediately apparent. The law made the segregation of public accommodations and public spaces, including libraries, illegal. There were still lingering fears, however, among Southern librarians. ALA officers immediately began writing to the leaders of the Southern associations expressing belief that the “obstacles” to chapter status had been removed, but most of the officers of the Southern associations did nothing throughout the Fall of 1964.²¹ Finally, in the spring of 1965, the separate Southern associations recognized the new order, and began to submit requests to ALA for chapter recognition. The Civil War of Librarianship was over at that point.

Most librarians, including those in the South, have always been public employees, serving at the will of the public, as it were. Therefore, local Jim Crow laws always exerted great force over library services in the South. Although segregation did not directly govern professional organizations, librarians were loath to behave professionally in ways that ran

counter to local custom. This became even more evident as the violent spasms of Massive Resistance rose in the late 1950s. Thus, librarians' places of employment in the South were segregated and their professional organizations remained so as well. Although many worked behind the scenes to improve the provision of library services to African Americans, few white librarians in the South stood up in public to declare their opposition to segregation. In this, librarians were no different than other professionals, including educators, lawyers, and doctors. What the Civil Rights Act accomplished was the removal of the culture of segregation. The law forbade segregation in the places where librarians were employed, but it also forbade employment discrimination itself. Another carrot (or stick) it held out, was that federal money would be denied to entities that continued to discriminate.²² When the culture of segregation was toppled, the need to maintain professional segregation also came down. All of this change did not happen instantly, of course. The presidential elections of 1964, immediately after the Civil Rights Act had been signed, saw the states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi (the same states that had seceded from ALA) cast a majority of their votes for Barry Goldwater, who ran on a platform, essentially, of outrage over the Act. Even in 1966, there were still segregated public libraries in Louisiana, in complete defiance of the Law. After a civil rights protest in 1964 (*before* the Civil Rights Act was signed), one Louisiana public library actually closed down altogether, rather than offer integrated service. But at last, with the ability to conduct organizational business in none-segregated ways, Southern library associations gradually saw an increase in African American membership. All the psychological barriers took longer to dissolve and perhaps have not yet completely disappeared. As with many aspects of American culture, the degree to which full integration and true equality have developed within the library profession remains to be seen.

Notes & References

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