

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

The Negro Branch of the Carnegie Library:
Nashville's First African-American Public Athenaeum 1916-1949

In April of 1912, the Nashville City Council approved the acceptance of a \$50,000 gift by Andrew Carnegie for branch libraries. Eleven years earlier, he had given the city \$100,000 for a library building on the condition that "a site be provided and provisions made for maintenance and books...annually." In 1912, the same year that the council accepted Carnegie's gift, the Nashville Negro Board of Trade (NNBT) was organized. The NNBT replaced the inoperative Negro Business League as the accepted voice of the city's "business, professional, and industrial colored men."

Andrew Carnegie, who made his fortune in steel, believed that the wealthy had a duty to act for the public benefit. His sense of noblesse oblige is demonstrated by his being the benefactor of some 3,000 public libraries. Carnegie's 1912 beneficence stipulated that "\$25,000 shall be used as a branch library for the white citizens... and \$25,000 for a branch library for the colored citizens..." and that the mayor and City Council "shall appropriate \$2,500 annually" for each branch. The African-American public library branch was not the first time that Carnegie bestowed his munificence upon Nashville's

African-American community. In 1905, at the behest of Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington, Carnegie donated \$20,000 for the first library building on the Fisk University campus which is known today as the Carnegie Academic Building.

In 1913, the NNBT raised \$1,000 in the African-American community for the city's first public library for African Americans. The funds were applied toward the purchase price of the Nenon property on Hynes and Twelfth Avenue North, the library's proposed site.

On February 10, 1916, the Negro Branch of the Carnegie Library opened its doors on Hynes and Twelfth Avenue North. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of the NNBT and the Carnegie Library Board of Nashville with Dr. G.H. Bradley, president of the NNBT, presiding. Addresses were made by G.H. Baskette, president of the library board; A. N. Johnson of the NNBT; Marian Hadley, librarian of the Negro Branch, and Margaret Kercheval, head librarian. Music was provided by singers from Fisk and Roger Williams universities and Pearl High School.



*(photo courtesy of the
Metropolitan Government
Archives of Davidson County)*

This publication is a project of the 1997 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. The authors compiled the information. Tennessee State University's College of Arts and Sciences edited the materials. The Metropolitan Historical Commission completed the design.

A two-story Classical Revival structure, the building was designed and equipped according to approved library specifications of the period. It contained two large reading rooms (one for adults and one for children), a large auditorium, and smaller meeting rooms. Books, salaries, and maintenance of the building were financed by the City of Nashville. Marian M. Hadley and Hattie Watkins served as librarian and assistant librarian respectively. Both women were trained in library methods by librarian Margaret Kercheval in the city's main library.

Patrons of the Negro Branch of the Carnegie Library included persons from every walk of life. During its years of operation, the Negro Branch served thousands of people, and its facilities were available for meetings and other activities, including literacy programs. Between 1930 and 1933, this public athenaeum circulated some 57,410 books and in 1934 had registered 5,248 patrons. In 1935, only 83 of 565 public libraries in thirteen southern states reported rendering library service to African Americans.

The original registration book of the Carnegie Library's Negro Branch contains the names and addresses of 54,381 Nashvillians of African descent. Some of the most well-known names include: Emma, Lee, Nannie, and Sallie Stone; Millie (Mrs. John H.) Hale; Minnie Crosthwaite; Dr. Josie Wells; the Reverend Preston Taylor; J. Frankie Pierce; Josephine Holloway; Ford Greene; Hulda M. Lytle; Z. Alexander Looby; Dr. Matthew Walker; and members of the Boyd, Hadley, Hemphill, Keeble, McKissack, and Work families.

The Negro Branch of the Carnegie Library closed in 1949 and was succeeded by the Hadley Park Public Library branch in 1952. The only extant pieces of Nashville's first African-American public library are the door lintel and cornerstone which are in the courtyard of Nashville's downtown Ben West Library.

- Linda T. Wynn