Preserving the future by (Re)living the past: Black librarians and social change

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Introduction

● Black librarians have steadily decreased or remained stagnant
  ○ Only 4.3% of librarians are Black (BLS, 2022)

● Black librarians more strategic in managing their careers than white peers
  ○ Prove greater competence for promotion

● Black leaders disproportionately handed “glass cliff” assignments
  ○ Elevated to positions of power when things are going poorly. When they reach the upper ranks of power, they’re put into precarious positions and therefore have a higher likelihood of failure — there’s a greater risk of failure
History

● The need for Black librarians

● The building of HBCU academic libraries

● The Negro Teacher- Librarian Training Program

● Library schools for training Black librarians
Hampton Institute Library

The main room at the Hampton Institute Library School.

THE SOUTHERN WORKMAN 56, no. 6 (June 1, 1927), p. 273.
Atlanta University Library

North Carolina Negro Library Association (NCNLA)

African American Librarians have served as pillars to the community by forming libraries and library associations catered to their African American community. In the early 1900’s black libraries and library associations were non-existent. At that time black librarians and library workers could not join the segregated NC Library Association so in 1934, the North Carolina Negro Library Association was formed.
North Carolina Negro Library Association

Mollie Huston Lee

A.P. Marshall
North Carolina Negro Library Association

by Mallie Houston Lee

The North Carolina Negro Library Association, which celebrated its 20th Anniversary in Raleigh, on November 8, 1934, had its beginning at Shaw University. The gesture at this institution felt that there was a very definite need for some type of organization which would give encouragement and stimulation to Negroes in the field which so completely wed to their Library were sent to all available libraries to ask their opinions of such an effort. The response was encouraging. Some replied that there were too few Negro librarians in the state and suggested that it be a national association. Others felt that we should ask assistance like white state library associations while still others believed that a Negro state library organization would be the best beginning.

At this meeting there were representatives from school, college, and public libraries present to cooperate as far as appropriate, membership of 228 today. Of this number, five had bachelor's degrees in library science, one a doctorate and the others some in book professional training. The charter members present were:

Miss Florence Byrd, Miss Mallie Duquesne, Miss Rosemary Eanes, Mrs. Mary Eaton, Miss Alberta Ford, Miss Edeline Grayson, Miss M. M. Harmon, Miss Clarice Hall, Miss Ollie Hawkins, Mrs. Irene Hardwick, Missie Jeannie Hicks, Missie Johnson, Mrs. M. M. Johnson, Misses M. D. LeBour, Miss Alma Minorow, Miss Roberta Nielsen, Misses Louise Powell, Misses Mamie May, Misses. Mae Sherwood, Miss Mabeline Shepard, Mrs. Josephine Smith, Miss Pearl...
1927, March 15-18: The first Negro Library Conference is held at the Hampton Institute Library School in Virginia.
Pioneers in Librarianship
Edward C. Williams
Edward C. Williams (1871-1929)

Edward C. Williams is known as the first professionally trained Black librarian in the United States. He began his career in 1892, working as an assistant at Hatch Library of Western Reserve University. In 1898, William’s pursued a master’s degree in librarianship at the New York State Library. He was a social activist, author, and translator during the time of segregation.
Rev. Thomas Fountain Blue (1866-1935)
Photo: Thomas Blue and staff of Western Branch, Louisville Free Public Library, Louisville, Kentucky, 1927. Caufield and Shook (photographer)
Ida Mary Lewis

Photo: Apprentice librarian Ida Mary Lewis holding book in Carnegie Library, Northside branch
Ida Mary Lewis (1924-2011)

Ida Mary Lewis was an African American librarian at the University of Pittsburgh. She was also the first African American junior library apprentice at the Carnegie Allegheny Library. She was a pioneer for women and minorities in Pittsburgh education, history and culture.
Clara Stanton Jones

Photo: American Library Association (ALA0002856)
Clara Stanton Jones
(1913-2012)

In 1970, Clara Stanton Jones became the first woman and first African American to serve as director of a major public library system in the U.S.

In 1976 she was elected the first black president of the American Library Association.
EJ Josey  
(1924-2009)

EJ Josey was an activist, librarian, and first chair of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. He also served as the president of the American Library Association from 1984 to 1985.

In 1964, at the ALA Annual Conference, he authored a resolution that forced ALA to disallow Southern state library chapters from being part of the Association if they refused membership to Black librarians.
Tracie D. Hall

Photo: American Libraries
Tracie D. Hall

Tracie Hall is the first female African-American executive director in ALA’s 140+ year history. She was appointed in 2020. According to ALA President Wanda Kay Brown, “Her unique combination of philanthropy and library know-how position her to be the leader ALA needs today. She is optimistic, energizing, and innovative...”
Dr. Carla Hayden

Carla Hayden is the 14th Librarian of Congress, both the first African American and first woman to be appointed to this prestigious position. She is also the first professional librarian to hold this post since 1974.

In 1995, she was the first African American to receive Library Journal’s Librarian of the Year Award in recognition of her outreach services at the Pratt Library, which included an after-school center for Baltimore teens offering homework assistance and college and career counseling.
These are just a few of the pioneers and African American leaders in our profession who have made a difference. There are many more who we didn’t mention. They have all had a great impact on libraries in general and have paved the way for us to continue our fight for social change, inclusivity, and justice.
What guidance has your mentor provided?
Mentors

A mentor will support you, cheer you on, provide feedback, advice, and help you define and reach your goals.

Reasons for mentors:

● Kickstart your professional career
● Help you clarify and set goals
● Serves as a source of knowledge and inspiration
● Develop your leadership skills
● Expand your network and open doors
● Offer encouragement
Now let’s hear from African American Librarian Leaders...
How important is mentoring for other librarians to obtain leadership or administrative roles?

“We need sponsors and coaches more than we need mentors.”

“Sponsors go out of their way to create opportunities, get you on committees, provide nominations, promote your work.”

“...having mentors who are in leadership roles as these people can help you understand how to navigate the leadership landscape.”

“...not to suggest that you will become complacent in this system of oppression, but that you will be better able to understand how to be effective within it and then be able to effect change. Because I have had several mentors, I believe it is important for me to be a mentor, especially to librarians of color.”
Advice for Black librarians who want to work in a leadership or administrative role at a PWI?

“You can’t be a great leader if you can’t accept yourself & be unapologetic for who you are.”

“Seek out coaches and sponsors who will give you opportunities you can’t get on your own.”

“...definitely seek out mentors”

“Be very good at whatever job you have.”
“Libraries at PWIs are not built or designed for BIPOC staff to flourish much less lead.”

“...we try to ‘fix’ BIPOC people so we fit in, minimize ourselves, and assimilate to dominate white culture.”

“...hiring managers do not recognize the talent and contributions of Black librarians in the same way as they do those of white librarians.”

“If there is a desire to diversify the senior leadership at an institution, that has to be done with intentionality.”
How can we address the recruitment and retention of Black librarians?

“Libraries and their parent institutions need to commit to dismantling the oppressive systems.”

“...Recruiting is not that difficult; retention is difficult”

“We continue to do well with recruitment through programs like ALA’s Spectrum and the ARL’s Kaleidoscope, but these programs do not help with getting a job or with changing organizational cultures that will be welcoming of people from different backgrounds.”

“...the recruitment processes are not inclusive; there is generally not enough internal screening for biases”
We can, as librarians, preserve the authenticity of who we are as individuals and as librarians so that we may show up in spaces and continue to celebrate our history and create change for the future.

We need to remember those that came before us so that we may (or must) carry on with social change and activism. We must stand up and fight for what we believe and face any challenges and injustices head-on.
THANKS!

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Valerie the Librarian - the first Spider-Woman
Bibliography


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