

## Community Jegna: Reynolda Motley and Library Services in a Jim Crow Town<sup>1</sup>

Reynolda Motley was the sole librarian at the segregated Brown Street Branch Library in Thomasville, North Carolina, located in Davidson County from 1951 to 1968. From 1947 to 1951, the public library for African Americans shared space with the library at Church Street School, the school in the town designated for African Americans for elementary, middle, and secondary students. In 1968, the Brown Street location closed, and Motley joined as a staff member at the city's main library branch. She retired in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

Information on Motley's career as a librarian would be limited to different variations of this account if all there was to depend on was the scant amount of information available from the county library system. The primary purpose of this post is to provide a more complete and layered account of Motley. At the same time, however, this work is also about the preservation of local Black histories and institutional memory. While archival records are not flush with information about Motley, what is available offers a thread of a consistent advocate for literacy and a proponent for the support and uplift of African American communities.

Librarianship as a career was a goal of Motley at least as early as her late teens, if not before. Donald Motley remembers his mother telling the story of a pact she made with a close friend during her senior year of high school in 1935 that they would both become librarians. He also described his mother as an avid reader of wide-ranging nonfiction.<sup>3</sup> Motley was a part of a

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<sup>1</sup> A jegna is a person who is a leader, teacher, mentor, or in some translations a warrior. Toure, I. (2015). Jegnoch: an African example of human excellence reclaimed in North America. In M. Shujaa, & K. Shujaa (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of African cultural heritage in North America* (pp. 511-512). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346373.n171>

<sup>2</sup> "Thomasville Public Library Timeline | Davidson County, NC." Accessed November 6, 2021. <https://www.co.davidson.nc.us/970/Thomasville-Public-Library-Timeline>.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Motley, Phone Interview.

ten- student graduating class at Church Street School, the segregated public school for all Black students in Thomasville, North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Motley's teachers were alumni of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). What follows are the names and institutions of the teachers Motley would have engaged with during her final year of secondary education. It is appropriate to do so as it situates her within the context of a larger Black education tradition and institutional legacy before the desegregation of public schools in the United States. Mainstream narratives often gloss over or completely ignore the robust Black educational experience that preceded the integration of public schools—focusing more heavily on inequities in school resources and school structures. As Motley completed her senior year, E.H. McClenney, a graduate of what was then Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, was her principal. C.F. Hunt was Motley's history teacher and a graduate of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. H.R. Holden was Motley's math teacher and a graduate of Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama. Lucile Dockery was Motley's English teacher and a graduate of Knoxville College in Tennessee. Aside from connecting Motley to a rich community of educators, these names are also counter-narratives to false, regional, and state-sanctioned accounts where Black teachers and administrators at institutions such as Church Street School were deemed "incompetent," only to be displaced, demoted, or lose their jobs in education altogether.<sup>5</sup>

From this educational lineage and tradition, Motley herself would go on and attend the State Normal School in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which is now Fayetteville State University, from 1935 to 1937. When Motley entered in the fall of 1935, the institution offered a two-year track which led to certification for teaching “primary grades” and a three-year path which led to

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<sup>4</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Division of Negro Education et al., “High School Principals’ Annual Reports: Dare - Davie, 1934-1935,” <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p16062coll13/id/51697/rec/7>. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Percy. Murray, *History of the North Carolina Teachers Association* ([Washington, D.C.]: NEA, 1984).

certification in teaching “grammar grades.”<sup>6</sup> Motley attended the institution as it was in transition. In the fall of 1936, the State Normal School would officially become a “four-year teachers college offering Grade-A teacher certificates.”<sup>7</sup> After Motley’s second year at the State Normal School, she would return to Thomasville. Roughly seven years later, she began working for the Davidson County Library System in 1947 when the public library for African Americans in Thomasville shared space with the school library at her alma mater Church Street School. She would first be listed as Assistant Librarian, then ultimately Head Librarian once the location on Brown Street Brown Street officially opened.<sup>8</sup>

People who grew up in Thomasville and regularly interacted with Motley mention her emphasis on literacy. She facilitated several initiatives to encourage reading, such as programming for Black History Month, summer reading incentives, and book clubs hosted in the library.<sup>9</sup> A lifelong resident, Larry Kirby, recalled the summer reading program that Motley facilitated each year.<sup>10</sup> Aside from Motley’s role in the library, she also was an event planner. Reflecting on Motley planning and directing his wedding, Ralph Harper described Motley as a quiet person but firm and direct.<sup>11</sup> Motley also engaged with the community in other ways. Donald Motley reflects on his mother and father emphasizing African-American history by way of books and in general conversation.<sup>12</sup> As early as 1960, Motley organized a group that ranged from six to a dozen Black women in Thomasville who visited each other’s home weekly to analyze readings where the topics may have centered on current events, history, politics, and

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<sup>6</sup> State Normal School (Fayetteville State University). State Normal School Catalog: 1936-1937, n.d.

<https://tinyurl.com/normalschool>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Miller’s Thomasville, N.C. City Directory: 1949-1950*. <https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/25111?ln=en>

Miller, *Miller’s Thomasville, N.C. City Directory: 1954-1955*. <https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/25113?ln=en>

<sup>9</sup> Motley, “Celebration of the Life of Mrs. Reynolda Black Motley.”

<sup>10</sup> Larry Kirby, Personal Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Harper, Phone Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Motley, Phone Interview.

other types of nonfiction. While Donald Motley had no recollection of specific works read by the group, he remembers vividly that his mother hardly read novels or different kinds of fiction.<sup>13</sup>

These examples provide a glimpse of how Motley's role as an information professional extended outside of the library's physical space.

In terms of her working relationships with other librarians, it is likely—although speculative—that Motley had working relationships with her counterpart, Lucille Bingham, who was another librarian within the Davidson County Library System at the segregated branch in nearby Lexington, North Carolina. However, no information encountered during the research for this article indicated that Motley was a member of any library organizations such as the North Carolina Negro Library Association. In addition, it appears as though Motley did not attend a formal library school. However, it must be noted that many of Motley's white contemporaries at that time within the library system also had not attended library school. This includes Mary Crouse, who would later become head librarian, Motley's supervisor, and eventually librarian emeritus in Davidson County.<sup>14</sup> If it was true that Motley did not belong to any professional organizations and did not attend library school. It may appear as though Motley was somewhat disconnected from broader issues within the LIS and how these topics were discussed among African Americans—but subtle hints from within the archives indicate otherwise. For example, in the mid-1950s, the State Library of North Carolina, in partnership with what was then referred to as the Bureau of Audio-Visual Education at the University of North Carolina, began a program where public libraries from around the state could checkout and host gatherings to view “informational films.”<sup>15</sup> A footnote from a newsletter advertising one of these viewings stated:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Bob Burchette, “Librarian Found Her Calling Early in Books: Mary Lee Crouse's 58 Years at Thomasville Library Was a Monument of Service Across the State,” greensboro.com, accessed September 5, 2021

<sup>15</sup> North Carolina State Library, “Biennial Report of the North Carolina State Library, July 1 1956.”

“Negro librarians wishing accommodations may contact Mrs. Reynolda Motley, librarian, Brown Street Library, Thomasville.”<sup>16</sup> While the attendance among African American librarians for these programs is unknown, this footnote—aside from being exemplary of both the tragedy and absurdity of segregation and racism—also shows one way that Motley may have, at a minimum, developed contacts with other African American librarians across the state of North Carolina and beyond.

Motley also engaged with communities through the Black press. For instance, in May 1953, the newspaper *Baltimore Afro-American* published a profile of Thomasville. The piece described the small city as a place not ideal for Black people because of the lack of access to good jobs, adequate housing, and overall opportunity.<sup>17</sup> This depiction was not acceptable to one of the newspaper’s loyal readers—Motley. In a letter to the editor, she wrote: “Recent progress Thomasville has made was not mentioned in the article which appeared in your May 16, 1953 issue...Thomasville has a public library with approximately three thousand volumes. Our library is the only one in Davidson County at the present time which is conducting an American Heritage Project, a form of adult education.” Motley would go on to say, “as to employment in the furniture factory there are 257 colored workers employed at the chair factories alone and there are six other factories here, all of which employ *our people* [author’s emphasis].”<sup>18</sup> The American Heritage project was a project facilitated by the American Library Association. It provided materials and other kinds of support to public libraries with the intent of having adults work through contemporary issues through activities and discussion.<sup>19</sup> Here, Motley links

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<sup>16</sup> North Carolina State Library and North Carolina. Department of Cultural Resources, *Newsletter - North Carolina State Library*.

<sup>17</sup> “Thomasville, N.C. Called 'Chair Town'.” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*, May 16, 1953.

<sup>18</sup> Motley, “Our Readers Say: About Thomasville.” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*, June, 1953

<sup>19</sup> Jean Preer, “The American Heritage Project: Librarians and the Democratic Tradition in the Early Cold War,” *Libraries & Culture* 28, no. 2 (1993): 165–88.

specific programming offered by the library directly as uplifting for the African American population, along with providing data indicating an uptick in employment for Black workers.

The tentacles of Jim Crow touched Thomasville like all towns and cities across the South. However, as Motley states with specificity and detail, it was the resolve of the people to live full lives and narrate their own stories. However, the albatross of racism that was and is still very present in society was not lost on Motley. Her letter to the editor of the *Baltimore Afro-American* was more so about a deep conviction that these realities would not dominate, dictate or define the individual and collective character of Black citizens of Thomasville. There is no denying that the traumas of anti-Black racism are and were very real, but the articulations of living full lives are just as real and were not to be overlaid by a single-sided narrative that only emphasized the woes of an unjust system. For Motley, literacy and education were the essential tools to offset the people, policies, state structures, and corporate structures that sought to sustain social hierarchies.

In 1968, the Brown Street Library Branch would close, and Motley would become a staff member at the main library branch in Thomasville. In all references to Motley during her entire time leading the segregated branch in the city, she was noted by title as a librarian or head librarian. In all references to Motley at the primary library branch alongside her white colleagues, she was referred to as a staff member. Language matters. This demotion in status provides a glimpse into some of the adversities Motley faced once the branch she led closed and she was relocated. As her son Donald Motley would move throughout his professional career as a teacher and later as a computer and technology professional, Motley would often discuss her experiences with him. Donald Motley summarized the treatment and encounters that his mother had after 1968 as being “racist and nasty.” So much so that he believes that her experiences

contributed to the deterioration of her health. In 1975, Motley retired from the public library in Thomasville. The city's paper documented Motley's retirement ceremony held at the library. The article frankly states that Motley was retiring due to bad health. The county library director presented Motley with a silver tray. However, another more profound tribute would come from Ms. Maxine Oliver. Oliver presented Motley with a charm bracelet as a token of thanks from the "Black Community."<sup>20</sup> As she often did, Motley expressed her gratitude publicly in a letter to the editor. In the opening lines, she wrote: "I wish to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all of you in the black community for the lovely engraved charm bracelet presented to me on your behalf by Mrs. Maxine Oliver at the tea...I shall wear it with pride for it will always remind me of your cooperation, encouragement, and guidance in helping plan better service to the community".<sup>21</sup> Motley would go on to express her gratitude to "both communities," once again acknowledging the reality of the racialized divisions.

Concluding, it is fitting to quote a passage from the publication *A Directory of Negro Graduates of Accredited Library Schools 1900-1936* compiled by The Columbia Civic Library Association: "It should be stated, however, that the names of a large number of Negro librarians now employed throughout the country are not listed, because these librarians are not graduates of accredited library schools."<sup>22</sup> Motley's career attests to the fact that the "large number" of Black librarians that were not included deserve to have their stories told as they made contributions to their respective organizations. Motley was a librarian—full stop. But librarians like her are often obscured in LIS histories either due to not having formal library training by way of a degree from a library school or to location. Thomasville is not a city well known outside of the

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<sup>20</sup> "Tea Held at the Library: Mrs. Motley Honored," *Thomasville Times*, June 25, 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolda Motley, "Mrs. Motley Responds," *Thomasville Times*, June 26, 1975.

<sup>22</sup> *A Directory of Negro Graduates of Accredited Library Schools, 1900-1936*. United States: Columbia civic library association, 1937.

Piedmont region of North Carolina other than by the furniture industry. It is easy to conflate the notion of being lesser-known with being non-influential. Librarians like Motley do not meet the current standard of a “mover and shaker” in the field. However, LIS professionals like Motley were nearly iconic within their communities. To foreground individuals like Motley is not only informative but also empowering to those who may seek community-first models of librarianship. Motley’s career trajectory and so many others can also empower those who have a talent in one or more areas of LIS but have little-to-no awareness of those who came before them from their respective locales.

Looking forward, Motley’s career in librarianship is also instructive. Her experiences historicize the conclusions that have been gleaned from the work of Ettarh in regards to her framing of vocational awe and Kendrick’s work on morale in LIS.<sup>23</sup> Both Ettarh and Kendrick show how the performative acts of neutrality and service at-all-costs ethos that have become synonymous with libraries and librarianship have obscured the long histories of discriminatory practices that are baked into LIS and are directly tied to toxic environments and the literal health of library workers. Foregrounding the experiences of people like Motley supplements the works of these scholars and others who interrogate similar themes by adding temporal, gendered, and geographical specificity. Motley died on April 4, 2001. She was 84 years old. In retirement, Motley distanced herself from librarianship and was active in the community through several programs at her church, First Missionary Baptist Church in Thomasville, which is a local Black historic institution in its own right.

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<sup>23</sup> Fobazi M. Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves – In the Library with the Lead Pipe,” accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.  
Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, “The Public Librarian Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study,” *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 15, no. 2 (January 4, 2021): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i2.5932>.

To end, the phrase in the title “in a Jim Crow town” is inspired by a statement made by labor organizer George Johnson, who lived in Thomasville in the 1950s. Johnson provides a glimpse of the social and economic hierarchies that existed in the lives of furniture workers in an article in Paul Robeson’s and Louis Burnham’s publication *Freedom*.<sup>24</sup> This article is recommended for those who would like additional insight into Thomasville's racial, social, and economic hierarchies in the 1950s. Last but not least, the problem of suppressed histories is often mediated by those who have firsthand knowledge of individuals, events, and organizations. This is especially true in regards to African Americans. A massive debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. Hilda David, the sister of Motley, who provided the news article noting Motley’s retirement from the public library in Thomasville and her response. Donald Motley, Motley’s son, spoke with me by phone on three occasions. Larry Kirby and Ralph Harper both generously shared their memories of Motley. Dorothy Harper-Leak leveraged community contacts and made necessary introductions to the Motley family. A special note of thanks goes to the University Libraries at George Mason University for providing research leave to complete this research.

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<sup>24</sup> George Johnson, “N.C. Furniture Workers Blaze Union Trail,” *Freedom*, June 1952, [http://dlib.nyu.edu/freedom/books/tamwag\\_fdm000018/](http://dlib.nyu.edu/freedom/books/tamwag_fdm000018/).