

Considering Black Librarianship in 2022 through the Story of Pauline Short Robinson

The archives of Pauline Short Robinson broaden the scope of Black history in libraries. Robinson's achievements as a Black woman in librarianship center around her philosophy of community building and the importance of literacy. She is celebrated because of her commitment to access.

Even in their conception, libraries played a crucial role in perpetuating the injustices of white supremacy and imperialism in the United States. It's rare that we consider the early situation of Black people and public libraries in the United States. Eighteenth-century anti-literacy laws prohibited the education of marginalized groups, with some exceptions in northern and free states. Most often, the Bible was the foundation of Black literacy, and Sunday schools were a popular vehicle of education. Religious institutions developed some of the earliest lending libraries, such as the New York Female Union Society to Promote Sabbath Schools.¹ White middle- and upper-class women cultivated public libraries across the country; however, these spaces excluded Black people.² With de jure segregation of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Black people founded several library societies in northern cities, like the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons. The 1895 Civil Rights Act of the Colorado legislature ruled that all people are entitled to public accommodations, like restaurants, barbershops, theaters, and other spaces.³ Still, policymakers in the Jim Crow era believed restricting access to shared educational tools would limit the capacity of Black people to organize. By 1900, more than half of the US Black population still could not read or write, and the majority of libraries in southern states refused service to Black people.⁴ Pauline Short Robinson grew up within this context of public libraries and, through her leadership, challenged how Black people took up space in knowledge institutions not designed with them in mind.

Popular throughout the early 20th century, Black women's clubs were pivotal in generating leadership, social activism, and equality across the country. The clubs were comprised of middle-class Black women and grew out of the religious and literary societies which had responded to racism in the wake of the late 19th century. In Denver, these clubs were heavily involved in social activities for racial

uplift and also spent a significant amount of time engaged in art and literacy.⁵ In the 1940s, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority's Denver chapter played a role in the community. Its leaders included Robinson, Mae Adams, Mary Lou Blancard, Bernita Buckner, Carrie Wright, Marian Bailey, and Esther Nelson. They would conduct programming like the Young Adult Forum at New Hope Baptist Church during Negro History Week (as it was titled then).⁶ Club women's ethos revolved around supporting the unmet needs of community members with less social capital through self-improvement activities and fundraising.

Robinson learned to read before attending school from her father James Short (formerly enslaved) and her older siblings, who would practice reading to one another. In an interview with Steve Jackson, she recalled seeing a map of Colorado and reading about the geography of the region, promising herself she would move there when the chance arose.⁷ In nearby Hugo, Oklahoma, she visited a small library and became a voracious reader within those stacks. When the boll weevils arrived in 1927 and destroyed her family's cotton crop, they moved west. They could not bring much, but James Short made sure to bring books.

Robinson lived with her aunts in Denver, Colorado, and entered fourth grade. Upon returning to Oklahoma, she finished high school in Lawton, where her immediate family settled. Despite already having one diploma, she enrolled in the Emily Griffith Opportunity School to continue pursuing an education. After graduating from Emily Griffith in 1935, she earned a half-tuition scholarship to the University of Denver. She was unable to afford the total cost but secured funding through the National Youth Administration. She was one of five Black people in her freshman class. She met her husband, Howard Robinson, by frequenting a dance hall on the westside, The Beverly Gardens.

She worked at the Community Vocational Center library located upstairs from the NYA's cooking school at 2563 Glenarm Place. This library held books deaccessioned from Denver Public Library (DPL). It was the tail end of the Depression, and Robinson observed that mostly Black kids would visit in order to find some heat that their families could not provide in their homes. She engaged with them by reading stories after they helped reshelve books. She would visit local businesses to garner funding to buy

subscriptions to Black-oriented reading materials. She collaborated with the NYA to host a bake sale to raise more money for her initiative - she sold 150 pies and raised \$40.

While at the University of Denver (DU), Robinson experienced discrimination from both students and faculty, which, in addition to funding, decreased her capacity to attend classes. In the final quarter of her junior year, she considered leaving school completely. Her advisor, Elizabeth Fachkt, gifted her three new dresses - an unspoken plea to persuade Robinson to stay. The same year, she was accepted into DU's law school, but her advisor convinced her that she would experience less sexism if she chose library school instead. Her financial situation made her take a break from school, returning in 1941 to the Department of Education. As part of her studies, she chose to teach sixth graders at a Denver public school. This choice was initially rejected by the department head, who wanted her to choose Whittier School, the only school in Denver at that time that would accept Black educators. She demanded that she teach at the school of her choice as per the assignment or have her entire tuition refunded. She was assigned to teach ninth-grade algebra thanks to her outstanding scores in the subject at Grant Junior High School. A white male student also assigned to Grant offered to carpool with her to their work. Her success at this position incited a change in the department head, who then permitted Black students to teach at any Denver Public School (DPL) location of their choice. In keeping with tradition and against her intuition, she met with the superintendent of DPS, who expressed his disdain at her ability to transcend a system built to discourage Black students from succeeding. He went on to say, "there will never be another Negro teacher in the Denver Public School System." She challenged him by pointing out that his personal preferences had little standing in the face of a tax-supported DPS.

Shortly afterward, Robinson met Cora Cook, supervisor of all DPL branches, who shared the same sentiments as the superintendent. However, using Cook as a reference, she was accepted into DU's library school and became the first Black person to graduate from the program in June 1943. During her time at the Community Vocational (CV) library, Robinson's boss resigned, and she helped keep it open part-time. Between 1943-1945, Robinson left CV because her husband enlisted in the Army. Upon her return, she discovered that circulation at CV had drastically decreased, the students were no longer

engaging with the library, and all the programs she initiated had ended along with the closure of the library. Principals of local elementary schools raised money to build a new library at 2563 Welton Street, called the Cosmopolitan branch. Robinson became the first librarian at the location and the first Black librarian in DPL.

In 1947, a magazine organized a “Negro History Week,” which inspired Robinson to create the first such event in Denver. The same year, she was approached by the Lyle Fellowship Group (composed of white college students) to participate in political action against segregation. At the Elitch Gardens theater, where Blacks had limited entry and could only sit in the balcony, Robinson and nine white members of the fellowship attempted to enter the theater together. She was refused entry, causing the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People to take the case to court in *Robinson v. Elitch Gardens Company*. It was settled out of court, and Elitch’s was desegregated. In 1953, the Cosmopolitan library closed, and Robinson took a position at the Warren branch library (34th Ave and High). She continued to promote children’s literacy and volunteered at the Samaritan House Guild, the New Hope Baptist Church and joined the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Her graduate studies were completed at Western Michigan State University and Columbia University. In 1964, Robinson was appointed coordinator of children’s services for DPL. In 1970, she received the Nell I. Scott Award, recognizing her service to children from Friends of the Denver Public Library.⁸ Following a car accident in May 1979, Robinson resigned from the library in the name of self-care and devoted the rest of her life to reading. On February 15th, 1996, the library commission unanimously named the library branch at 33rd Ave & Holly St. the Pauline Robinson Branch Library.⁹

Much can be gleaned from the legacy of Robinson. While her story is certainly unique and remarkable, common threads can be found in the narratives of Black women currently working in libraries across the nation. According to the Department for Professional Employees, 82.3 percent of graduates in Master of Library Science (MLS) programs in 2018-2019 identified as women. However, Black women only accounted for 4.5 percent of all MLS graduates. Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander women made up 7.8 and 2.5 percent of the 2019 class, respectively. More work must be done to remove

the barriers that prevent Black women from entering and staying in the profession. We can learn from Robinson's story by focusing more attention on ways to support and intentionally retain Black women librarians.

Notes

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