

## Bertha Pleasant Williams: Fierce Community Activist

In 1948, Bertha Pleasant Williams (1923-2008), a graduate of Atlanta University's library school, became the first certified African American librarian in Montgomery, Alabama. Williams enjoyed a long career in both public and academic libraries, and her work to acquire acceptable resources and advance library services greatly impacted the Black community. Williams was instrumental in advocating for civil rights and was one of countless other lesser-known activists whose efforts helped secure these rights for the Black community in Montgomery.

When most people think of Montgomery, Alabama, they think of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. They think of the famous civil rights activists marching from Selma, Alabama, to the state's capital in Montgomery and of Rosa Parks' arrest. The general notion is that the fight for civil rights in Montgomery was spontaneous and seemingly happened overnight. However, that could not be further from the truth. Black people have adamantly pursued civil and human rights since they were forcibly removed from their homeland and enslaved in this country to the present day, putting their livelihoods and lives at risk.

As in every other American city, African Americans in Montgomery had been resisting and struggling against racist laws, civil servants, and vigilantes long before Rosa Parks refused to get up from her seat on the bus to allow a white person to take her seat instead. The struggle for civil rights was an ongoing one that extended beyond segregation on public buses. Civil rights were pursued regarding every aspect of African American life, including not only the opportunity to have access to public libraries but also to have adequate resources in them.

On April 15, 1947, the same day that Jackie Robinson became the first African American since the 1880s to play in Major League Baseball, scholar William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.)

Du Bois's criticism of an African American library in Atlanta appeared in the *Chicago Defender*. After perceived blame was directed towards the librarian at the library, Du Bois wrote another piece for the newspaper to ensure that he did not fault the librarian for the state of the library's outdated resources. He was mainly calling attention to the subpar resources that existed in libraries for African Americans, as opposed to the new and current materials that were available at libraries that were only for white patrons.<sup>1</sup>

By 1947, several cities had libraries designated for African Americans to use and it was well past time that Montgomery followed suit, especially since the white people in Montgomery had the opportunity to use the city's library since 1899. In 1947, Dr. V. E. Daniel, a dean at the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes (now Alabama State University), went into the library in Montgomery reserved for white people.<sup>2</sup> He requested service and was denied. A short time later, a white librarian noted in a library report that, over the course of two weeks in June of that year, around sixty African Americans came into the library requesting service that they were also denied.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of a library for African Americans could no longer continue. Many of them began discussing this issue, and just as in other Black communities, they banded together to plan a way to obtain a library. That same year, in 1947, the Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association spoke with the director of the Alabama Public Library Service Division about a library for African Americans. The director responded by telling the association that the only thing that he could offer was a loan of some state library books if they started their own library.

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Battles, *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South Or, Leaving Behind the Plow* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Battles, 94.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The association also discussed the opening of an African American library with the director of the Montgomery Public Library. That director also stated that she would provide some books but indicated that the library board would most likely deny funding to support the start of an African American library. Thus, the Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association decided to form a group called the Friends of the Library to organize the start of a library for the African American citizens of Montgomery.<sup>4</sup>

Members of the Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association were not the only citizens concerned about providing access to library resources and services. Other community members had long advocated for the use of the public library. For example, in 1908, four years after funds from the Carnegie Endowment were used to build the Montgomery City-County Public Library (formerly the Carnegie Library of Montgomery), Mrs. S. S. H. Washington advocated for funding that would support a library for African Americans in Montgomery.<sup>5</sup> Washington, a member of a women's club called the Sojourner Truth Club, sent a letter to philanthropist Andrew Carnegie asking for financial support for a library since Black Montgomery citizens were prohibited from using the services of the city's library. After a long struggle between Washington, along with other African American community members, and the city council, the request to provide or accept funding to build an African American library was denied by the city council.<sup>6</sup>

With no access to the public library, African Americans in Montgomery, just as in many other cities, made their own libraries. One such example is that of Reverend Ralph A. Daly, a local pastor of Parks Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Montgomery. Daly publicly

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 94.

vocalized continually that African American residents needed to be able to have an opportunity to use the library. Unfortunately, Daly's attempts to obtain support from the Montgomery city council regarding the issue were unsuccessful. So, in 1942, he created a small library in his church.<sup>7</sup>

The following year, the Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs purchased a two-story antebellum house, built in 1853, near the state capitol. The large house, known as the Community House, was intended to provide a permanent meeting space for the twenty-three adult and five youth clubs, one of which was the Sojourner Truth Club. Over the years, the house accommodated many more clubs that were added to the Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.<sup>8</sup>

The Sojourner Truth Club, which was comprised of thirty African American women, became a federated club in 1946. The women of the Sojourner Truth Club created the Free Reading Room, a space for African American women and children in the community to gather and utilize the resources that were available to them. Through the women's determination and dedication to the establishment of a library, the Free Reading Room contained approximately five hundred resources for residents to check out. Over the following few years, resources continued to grow at both Daly's church and the Free Reading Room. Consequently, when the Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association's Friends of the Library was formed in 1947, Daly,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>8</sup> Sherri Taylor, "Jackson Community House & Museum." Voices of Alabama. Accessed April 05, 2021. <https://voicesofalabama.org/sites/jackson-community-house-museum/>.

Dean V. E. Daniel, and Zenobia Johnson, a leader of the Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, were among the members of the small, committed group.<sup>9</sup>

The Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs generously provided space for a city library for all Black Montgomerians in their facility at 409 South Union Street. The Friends of the Library agreed to supply the labor and funds that were necessary to assist with the opening of the library. Additionally, African American civic leaders successfully secured partial funding from the Carnegie Foundation to open a library for Montgomery's African American community. Moreover, the City of Montgomery finally agreed to contribute some financial support on the condition that the Friends of the Library group identify a professional librarian to head the library, even though a library degree was not mandatory for white librarians.<sup>10</sup>

There was one such librarian, a young Montgomerian and new graduate of Atlanta University's recently formed library school. Bertha Pleasant, daughter of Reuben P. and Mary Green Pleasant, was the first and only degreed librarian, Black or white, in the entire state of Alabama at the time. She was born in Montgomery on June 29, 1923. Twenty years later, in 1943, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in library science from Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes where she had met her future husband, Robert H. Williams.<sup>11</sup> After being racially discriminated against and denied admission to the University of Alabama, she

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<sup>9</sup> Michele T. Fenton, "Bertha Pleasant Williams (1923-2008) and the Union Street Library, Montgomery, Alabama." *Little Known Black Librarian Facts* (blog), May 30, 2020. Accessed April 05, 2021. <http://littleknownblacklibrarianfacts.blogspot.com/2020/05/bertha-pleasant-williams-1923-2008-and.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Battles, 94.

<sup>11</sup> "Bertha Pleasant Williams." Wikipedia. May 29, 2021. Accessed August 01, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha\\_Pleasant\\_Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha_Pleasant_Williams).

went to Atlanta, Georgia, where she earned a master's degree in library science in 1946 under the tutelage of Dr. Virginia Lacy Jones, Dean of Atlanta University's library school and the second African American to earn a doctorate in library science after Eliza Atkins Gleason.<sup>12</sup>

Pleasant was one of the founding members of the Women's Political Council (WPC).<sup>13</sup> The WPC is notable for its many initiatives and accomplishments, as well as for one prominent member, Jo Ann Robinson. Robinson, an English instructor at Alabama State University, along with a colleague and two college students, made thousands of copies of handbills that urged the African American community to participate in the legendary Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>14</sup>

Pleasant's first job was as an elementary teacher at Snow Hill Institute, where she taught every subject.<sup>15</sup> However, when the librarian position became available, she was hired as the first African American librarian in Montgomery. With the help of the Montgomery Negro Ministerial Association's Friends of the Library group, the Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and other Black residents, two rooms at the Community House were designated as the Union Street Branch Library, which opened in December of 1948.

In 1950, she married Robert H. Williams, and they had one son, Richard Williams.<sup>16</sup> In 1954, in addition to running the library, she served as the president of the Montgomery alumnae chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority for two years. She worked the next twenty years to spearhead Montgomery's first and second segregated public libraries and proactively sought out

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<sup>12</sup> Battles, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Vicki L. Crawford, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941 – 1965* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press., 1993), 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Hilton, "Bertha Pleasant Williams / Rosa Parks Branch Library Historical Marker," Historical Marker, May 15, 2021. Accessed April 05, 2021. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=71388>.

<sup>16</sup> "Bertha Pleasant Williams." Wikipedia.

resources for the African American community. Williams was determined to offer the best services and resources possible to the community. She was steadfast in her fundraising efforts, engaging the community to patronize the library. She also promoted the library to her community via the African American radio station and newspaper. Additionally, Williams collaborated with African American teachers and loaned them books for students to use. She was also ingenious in creating a book transporting system with the help of the African American community when the city denied funding for bookmobile service for African American library users.<sup>17</sup>

A few years after Williams took on the responsibility to head the first and only African American library in Montgomery, it was necessary for the library to expand as there was no longer enough space for all of the resources that had been accumulated. In 1960, the library moved to a new location and was renamed the Cleveland Avenue Branch. Then in 1963, twenty years after Williams received her bachelor's degree, the Montgomery City-County Public Library system was integrated.

Williams worked at the new branch library location on Cleveland Avenue as the head librarian for over nine years. In time, she decided to leave the public library system for academic librarianship, taking a position at her alma mater. Williams worked at Alabama State University's library for fourteen years, seven of which she served as head of the archives and rare book collection. In 1993, the university acknowledged her fifty years of service to education and the field of library science by bestowing her with a Golden Graduation Diploma.<sup>18</sup>

Librarian Bertha Pleasant Williams died on November 24, 2008, at the age of 85. Her funeral took place at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, a national historic

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<sup>17</sup> Fenton, Little Known Facts.

<sup>18</sup> Hilton, Historical Marker.

landmark, integral to the organization of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, where Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as the church's twentieth pastor. The funeral was attended by her son, Richard Williams and other family and community members.

Over time, the Cleveland Avenue library experienced another name change and became the Rosa Parks Avenue library. However, in 2012, the Montgomery city council and the library board agreed to rename the Rosa Parks Avenue Library the Bertha Pleasant Williams Library at Rosa L. Parks Avenue Branch in honor of the city's first African American librarian. That same year, a historic marker commemorating her work in libraries was erected by the Montgomery Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporation's Fortitude Foundation and the Alabama Historical Association for Bertha Pleasant Williams at the library branch that bears her name.<sup>19</sup>

On October 25, 2018, the Alabama Historical Commission added the Bertha Pleasant Williams Library at Rosa L. Parks Avenue Branch to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.<sup>20</sup> Then in 2020, the Montgomery City-County Public Library was awarded almost a half a million dollars to preserve the Bertha Pleasant Williams Library at Rosa L. Parks Avenue Branch.<sup>21</sup> The grant, administered by the National Park Service, was awarded to fifty projects for the purpose of preserving and/or restoring historic African American civil rights sites.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, Brian. "Montgomery officials honor national recognition of Bertha Williams Library with unveiling of historic marker," The Montgomery Advertiser (Montgomery, AL), April 14, 2020, accessed May 10, 2021. <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/04/14/bertha-williams-library-receives-nearly-half-million-dollar-grant-restoration-preservation/2988504001/>.

<sup>21</sup> MacNeil, Sara. "Bertha Williams Library Receives a Nearly Half-million Dollar Grant for Restoration/Preservation," The Montgomery Advertiser (Montgomery, AL), April 14, 2020, accessed May 10, 2021. <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/04/14/bertha-williams-library-receives-nearly-half-million-dollar-grant-restoration-preservation/2988504001/>.

<sup>22</sup> "Bertha Pleasant Williams." Wikipedia.

Bertha Pleasant Williams' name may not be well-known, but she was undoubtedly a fierce community activist. She is the perfect example of how we all can lead from where we are regardless of our title or position. Like Williams, we can each make positive impacts in the communities that we serve when we are truly invested in the people of the community. And although she may not be at the forefront of people's minds when they think of Montgomery's civil rights activists, Bertha Pleasant Williams was certainly on the front lines, ensuring that she provided the very best services and resources that she could offer to the city's African American community.

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