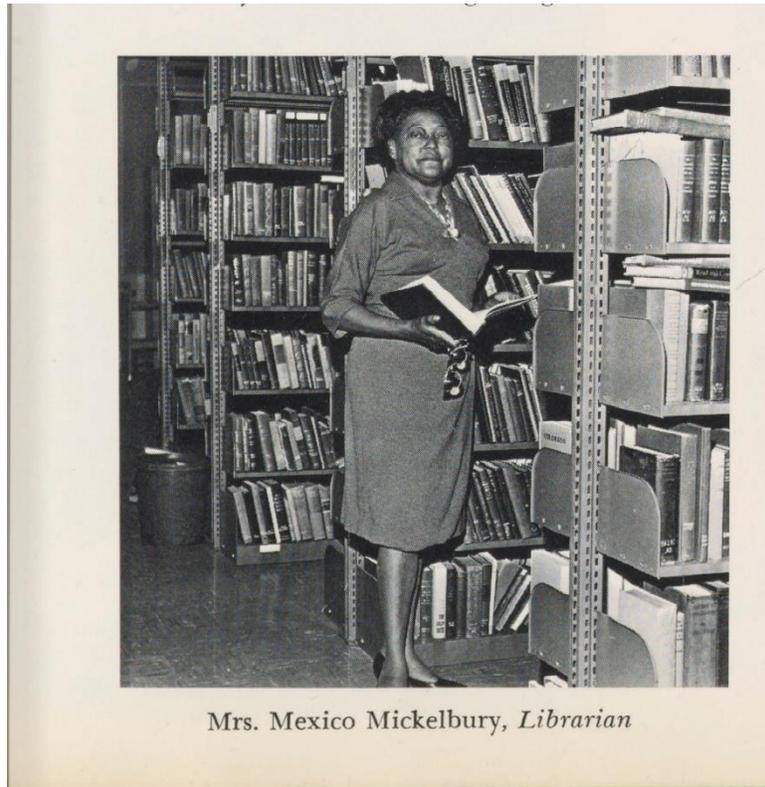


Mexico Hembree Mickelbury: A Force for Good



Mexico Hembree Mickelbury was a force on Spelman's campus. Serving as the college librarian for nearly forty years, she helped craft library collections amplifying Black history and culture and educated students at the largest consortia of historically Black colleges and universities. Mickelbury stands in the tradition of a generation of Black women librarians dedicated to fostering literacy, learning, and growth primarily in Black communities.

An Atlanta native, Mickelbury was born in 1915 on Mitchell Street, right around the corner from her future alma mater and employer. Her mother, Mexico S. Hembree, was a school principal and very active in the community, serving as president of the Teacher's Union and a member of the local NAACP Chapter. Her mother's involvement in civic institutions and causes undoubtedly impacted the young Mickelbury as she would go on to be heavily involved in several community organizations in Atlanta. She attended the historic Booker T. Washington High School, still an education icon in the surrounding Black

communities of Atlanta's West End. Her application to Spelman shows that she was a very involved student - president of the Red Cross Council, editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, and member of the honor society. She noted in her application she "wished to attend Spelman because of the rating and the ideals of the institution."¹

Mickelbury entered Spelman in 1933, following her mother's footsteps into the noted Black women's historically Black college. Founded in 1881 as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, Spelman College had (and continues to have) the mission to educate women of the African Diaspora. The early school curriculum emphasized courses in teacher training, missionary work, high school, and college academic subjects, as well as nurse training. Alumnae frequently wrote back to the college, sharing pictures of family and news of their careers, some of whom traveled to the Congo and other countries in West Africa. Mickelbury entered this legacy of Black women's educational opportunity and would go on to serve a critical role in perpetuating this legacy. She continued her involvement in extracurricular activities, serving as President of the Freshman Class, singing in the Glee Club, and acting with the University Players. Mickelbury was also an artist, winning the prestigious Jerome in 1938 for two terracotta figurines she created, "Dancer" and "Madonna with Child." That same year, iconic sculpture Nancy Elizabeth Prophet even wrote Spelman president Florence Read to see if Mickelbury could come back to campus to do some modeling.²

After graduating in 1938 with a double major in English and Fine Arts (with a minor in History), Mickelbury would teach for a few years, including at Fort Valley State (another Georgia HBCU), before returning to Atlanta to enter the Atlanta University library science program. Her time at the University of Chicago in 1940 may have influenced her decision to pursue this career path. The summer of that year, she took a summer quarter at the university and researched the relationship between reading and its impact on college library service.³ Mickelbury entered the new library school at Atlanta University, a

program that would educate numerous Black librarians during its sixty-three year tenure and provide support for numerous discussions about the information needs at historically Black colleges broadly.

The Atlanta University Library School was established in 1942 so that “Negro men and women may be trained to serve the needs of the colleges, secondary schools, elementary schools, and the general public.” Early correspondence notes Atlanta was recommended as a location because of the preexisting excellent academic reputation of Atlanta University, its geographic location as a city rich in Black culture with a large Black population, and being situated in the Atlanta University Center (AUC) Consortium, among other prestigious HBCUs. ⁴ A new library was built on the Atlanta University campus in 1932, and a 1937 pamphlet on the building notes the library contains reading rooms, exhibition spaces, seminar halls, and eventually capacity for 180,000 volumes.⁵ The facilities and collections were designed to support the diverse curriculum of the AUC consortium, with special attention taken to amplify works by and about communities of the African Diaspora. It was also to serve as a communal space for gathering and knowledge for students and the surrounding African American community. The Atlanta Library School would educate numerous Black memory workers who made pivotal contributions to the field, including Virginia Lacy Jones, Karen Jefferson, and Brenda Banks.

Mickelbury became the librarian for Spelman College in 1943 after graduating from the one-year course of instruction at library school. ⁶ As the college continued to grow, so did the need for Spelman’s Quarles Library (named for Rev. Frank Quarles, an early supporter of the college who allowed the first Spelman classes to be held in the basement of his church, Friendship Baptist) and its other various library collections. In 1928, the collegiate library collection had been moved from Packard Hall to the new Laura Spelman Rockefeller building. The High School Library had 748 volumes, and there were 309 books on reserve for different departments. Correspondence from that year also noted Spelman students had courses in library instruction and school library management during the semester and summer. ⁷

Mickelbury’s first report as the College Librarian during the 1943-1944 academic year notes part of the

library's continued development is related to "the fact that student and teachers alike are beginning more and more to expect real library services and the effort is being made to offer these expected services more." ⁸ She also enthusiastically notes, "Spelman girls read!" with 873 books circulating from the library for "home reading." She also mentions that the Atlanta University Librarian found "that the Spelman girls read more than any other group of students." She concludes the report with recommendations and needs, emphasizing her "earnest hope that the Spelman College Library will be able to strengthen its resources and broaden its activities so that it may take its rightful place as a representative library of the leading college for Negro women in the country" ⁹

Through Mickelbury's career, she demonstrated profound support for HBCU libraries and librarians, amplifying and celebrating their work on many occasions and continuing to advocate for the necessary resources for the AUC libraries and higher education institutions overall. A 1958 *Atlanta World* article notes her participation in a library conference held at Atlanta University in February. The two-day forum focused on college seniors interested in careers in librarians from institutions across eight Southern states. The students had the opportunity to connect with other African American librarians in different areas of librarianship and tour the Trevor Arnett Library at Atlanta University. ¹⁰ She also received her M.A. in Education from Atlanta University in 1956, serving as an Assistant Professor in Spelman's Education department. Mickelbury was active overall on campus, serving on Founders Day, Freshman Orientation, and Alumnae Association committees. Along with Library Assistant Hulda Wilson, Mickelbury ensured students, faculty, and staff would have a strong core of information professionals to support educational needs and personal enrichment. Wilson focused her 1962 Master's Thesis at Atlanta University's Library Science Program on evaluating the collections and future needs of Spelman's library. Including interviews with Mickelbury, Wilson's thesis provides an in-depth quantitative analysis of the book collection, general reference materials, periodicals, audio-visual items, and other non-book resources; it concludes with recommendations for continued cooperation with faculty for recommendations, financial resources for additional subscriptions, and continuing research into the needs to build the library

collection. This study is another example of the care of the Spelman Library staff to thoughtfully build collections to support the expansive campus community.¹¹

Mickelbury was also very active in community organizations. Articles in the *Atlanta Daily Word* take note of various parties and events held at the home she shared with her husband Arthur and their three children, Penny, Arthur, Jr., and Crawford. Like her mother, she was involved with the NAACP. She coordinated the 1970 March of Dimes campaign, was a lifelong member of Delta Sigma Theta, and served in the American Library Association as well. ¹² In her professional work, Mickelbury continued to build up materials highlighting the lives and work of Black women. In 1971, she helped organize the opening of the Margaret Nabrit Curry Collection on Women, to be housed at Spelman's Quarles Library. Spelman Alumna Clara Stanton Jones, who had recently been appointed the first Black woman director of the Detroit Public Library, made remarks at the opening. Curry (Class of 1946) sent a heartfelt letter expressing her appreciation for the recognition, stating, "It is indeed rewarding...in the decision of this class of 1946 to create and dedicate to my memory a collection of books, the trademark of my profession, and the companions of a lifetime."¹³ The Curry collection and volumes from the Quarles Library still reside in the Spelman Archives and serve as a testament to the significance of library collections centered at HBCUs.

When Mickelbury retired in 1981, an era ended at Spelman. During her retirement celebration, Spelman President Donald Stewart remarked, "[Y]ou have watched the AU Center grow and develop in your 38 years of service and we know that we can turn to you again and again for your advice and wisdom, for your insights as we take this next step."¹⁴ That year was indeed a time of profound change for library instruction and resources—the new Atlanta University Center Robert. W. Woodruff Library opened its doors and still serves the AUC Consortium and external researchers. Mickelbury continued to stay very active in alumnae affairs until she passed away in 1987. Mickelbury had overseen the growth of the Spelman library collections through decades of immense change on the campus and influenced numerous

students, some of whom went on to careers in the library profession. She was a champion of library instruction and resources at historically Black colleges and universities, seeing them as critical sites of inquiry and research that supported the broader Black community. Mickelbury stands in a long tradition of Black women librarians and memory workers supporting diverse communities and amplifying the lives and works of Black authors - making the library profession more equitable and inclusive overall. ¹⁵

Endnotes

1. Application for Admission to Spelman College, September 6, 1933, Mexico Mickelbury Alumnae File (hereafter cited as Alumnae File), Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
2. Letter from Dorothy Clark to Florence Read, June 4, 1938; Letter from Elizabeth Prophet to Florence Read, June 16, 1938, Alumnae File, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
3. Letter from H.H. Bond to Rufus Clement, March 20, 1941, Alumnae File, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
4. Letter to Dr. Koppel (this letter was likely drafted by Atlanta University President Rufus Clement, outlining need and parameters for proposed Atlanta University Library School), c. 1938-1939, folder 52, box 8, Florence Read Papers, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, Ga
5. "The Atlanta University Library: An Architectural Interpretation," 1937, folder 12, box 12, Florence Read Papers, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, Ga
6. Faculty Notes, Spelman Messenger, November 1943, Alumnae File, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
7. Margaret Griffin, Report of the Librarian to the President and Trustees of Spelman College, March 1928-March 1929, folder "Library (Spelman)- Annual Reports On," box 139, Albert Manley Papers, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.

8. Mexico Mickelbury, Librarian's Report of the Spelman College Library for the School Year 1943-1944, Folder "Library (Spelman)-Annual Reports On," box 139, Albert Manley Papers, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
9. Ibid.
10. "Librarianship Conference at Atlanta U. Feb 21-22," *Atlanta Daily World* (Atlanta, Ga), February 12, 1958.
11. Hulda A. Wilson, "An Evaluation of The Materials Collection of the Spelman College Library" (Thesis, Atlanta University, 1962), 10-12; 28-29,
http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/cau.td:1962_wilson_hulda_a
12. "When Members of the Young Married Contingent..." *Atlanta Daily Word* (Atlanta, GA), September 21, 1943; "Mrs. Mickelbury Coordinates March," unidentified newspaper, c.1939-1940, Alumnae File, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
13. "Women's Collection To Open At Spelman," *The Atlanta Inquirer* (Atlanta, GA), April 4, 1970; Letter from Margaret Nabrit Curry to Mexico Mickelbury, et al., April 9, 1970, Alumnae File, Spelman Archives, Atlanta, GA.
14. "Spelman Librarian Honored," *The AUC Digest* (Atlanta, GA), January 25, 1982.
15. For additional information on the life and work of Mexico Mickelbury, please see the oral history conducted with her by Winifred Stoeltig (November 1976) in the Hale Woodruff Collection:
<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/auc.062:0012>