

Celeste Hatcher, born in 1905 as the youngest of eight children from the tiny town of Graniteville, South Carolina, served as the director of the Carnegie Colored Public Library in Savannah. In her 50 years of ALA membership, she worked to build a collection of books by and about the Black experience at that library, and guided it through the period of library integration. After she died in 1998, the reading room in Savannah's Dixon Park Library was named in her honor.

### Celeste Hatcher and the Carnegie Colored Public Library

[Savannah has one of the twelve Carnegie libraries](#) intended for use by African Americans, and it is one of only two that are still open. As essentially all southern libraries were segregated, Blacks rarely had access to the books, even though Carnegie specifically called for libraries to be built for the "[industrious and ambitious; not those who need everything done for them](#), but those who, being most anxious and able to help themselves, deserve and will be benefited by help from others." When individuals reached out to Carnegie seeking support for libraries to serve Blacks, Bertram treated them like all other applicants and requested the same sorts of information (specifically, whether the applicants could provide a lot for the library and whether taxpayers would support it). The city of Savannah offered the library \$1,200 of annual support, so Carnegie provided the library a \$12,000 grant. (Savannah's library serving whites received an \$87,000 Carnegie grant.) Although demographic data for Savannah are not available, at the time of the grants about [45 percent of Georgia's population was Black](#) and 55 percent white. The African Americans in Savannah received about fourteen percent of the Carnegie funding in that town.

Known as the [Carnegie Colored Public Library](#), it served the Black community in Savannah from 1915 until 1962, when it was subsumed into the Savannah Public Library system as the town's libraries were integrated. Among its many patrons were Supreme Court Justice Clarence White and Pulitzer Prize winning Civil War history author James McPherson. One might say they were industrious and ambitious.

One of its notable librarians was [Celeste Hatcher](#), whose words were fortunately preserved through an interview in the "[Words of South Carolina Librarians](#)" project. Celeste was born in Graniteville (a "census designated place") in 1905, the youngest of eight children. Her five sisters became teachers but "I didn't want to be a teacher." Her parents were "not educated people...they made it on their own by being very thrifty and using a lot of common sense." Her parents insisted that their daughters go to college:

We had to go. We had to...follow the rules and regulations of the family, they were not ours. We had a-plenty to eat, we had good clothes and we had a comfortable home, a very comfortable home, but all of that was made on my daddy's paycheck because my mother...you know didn't have any time for anything but children...and she took care of a little garden

After completing 10th grade, she enrolled in South Carolina State College because

one of the professors from SC State told my brother-in-law, he said "I think she can make it...go off to school...go off to SC State, she can make it if she can handle the arithmetic, the math, and English," he says, "And I know she can handle the English..."

While at school there,

I used to visit the library, I don't know why I was so attached to the library, but I just, you know, that's where I spent a lot of my own hours. I used to say when the rest of the kids were out on the campus courting, I was in the library. So while I was there working in the library — they gave me a job working in the library. I remember writing home to my Mama, telling her, you don't have to send anymore money 'cause I got a job now and it pays a part of my expenses, you see. So I took that responsibility to help with them, so I worked in the library. The librarian was there — her name was Mrs. Williams, by the way...

[T]he director of the school of library science from Hampton came for a visit...and...she started to talking and finally she said, "Would you be interested in library work?" And I said, "No M'am. I don't have any money and my parents don't have any money." So anyhow, she didn't say anymore about it and when she...went over to the president's office and talked to him. And I understand — he told me afterwards — that she asked to see my scholastic record and she looked at it and about three weeks later he called me and said, "Come over here, I want to talk to you." And I went over and he said, "You know the lady that was here the other...week or so ago?"...and I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, she was impressed with your record and she wanted to give you a scholarship — offer you a scholarship — a Rockefeller Scholarship, to study library science."

After completing her degree in library science at the Hampton Institute, Celeste began her library work at the State College and then continued working at academic libraries as the Librarian at Hampton, Paine College (in Augusta, Georgia, for "\$187 month, and that was way beyond what anybody else was getting") and Langston University (in Oklahoma, and America's westernmost HBCU).

The move to Oklahoma did not come easy to Celeste, and her return to the South was a happy coincidence.

My mother didn't want me to go [to Oklahoma], she said, "That's too far away from home." [While in Oklahoma ] I'd had an offer...to go to Texas and she told me when I was going to OK that it was too far away from home and then when I had this offer to go to Texas, I knew that was plum out of the question, as far as she was concerned...I got this [the Savannah] job by pure accident. A friend of mine had a friend in Augusta and I was at home deciding what I was going to do, you know. And so she said to me, "Celeste, let's drive down to Savannah." And I said, "Okay." So we took off for Savannah, for her to visit her friend.

A series of fortunate events took place, and Celeste was ready for a change.

I had not had any experience with public library work, and I think it influenced me...[A]ll my life I had been in college work...I said I want a change and to see what it's like to, you know, be in public work. Because in college work, it isolates you.

She accepted a job at the Carnegie Colored Public Library and moved to Savannah in 1940. The library was not flush with cash. In response to the question as to whether the library was well supported, Celeste replied "It was supported by the city about the same way they supported everything else. If they had any change left. (laughs.)" She reached out to librarians at the white library to develop a working relationship.

[T]he first thing I did when I got to Savannah was to visit the Savannah Public Library [the library for whites], and I mentioned to the librarian at that time if we could have a sort of association, since I knew that it was segregated. And she said, "Well, I don't know about that...because that question has never come up, but I will talk with some of my board members, and see what they think about it." So, sometime later, she came back to me. She was a very nice person. She was for it 100%, but you know, with the city, you [can't] bite the hand that feeds you. She knew what the attitude was here, between races...But she did say that if I had a request from anybody, and I didn't have the material to meet that request, that they could come over there.

Many of Celeste's library's patrons were children. The Carnegie Colored Library was not, for some reason, in an area accessible to many of the Black neighborhoods, so Celeste arranged with a local Boys Club (a national organization) to put some books in its center, and she scraped enough books from her library to do so. She later opened up the Hitch Village Library in a housing project, and then another one in the Caton Housing Project. It seems that she got Savannah to provide for staff in these branch libraries. A representative of the Library Bureau in Washington paid her a visit and informed her

that, based on her work, libraries were going to be put in federally-funded housing projects. [I found no confirmation that this actually happened.]

Celeste worked to build a collection of books by and about the Black experience. When efforts were increasing to integrate the libraries,

We had a mayor...he talked to me several times and I said something about serving, you know, the people who couldn't get what they wanted at that colored library. And I said now there are other towns that have... that would serve the blacks, and I don't see why we couldn't either. And he said, "Well, that's a good thought. I'll see what we can do about it." So he finally came back and asked me what I thought about it and I said, "Well, I'd just like to open the doors, and let anybody that wanted to come in, come in." And so he told me that he'd go back and talk to the Council, and he'd let me know what the Council thought about it. He came back one day and told me that the Council was in favor of the idea. He said, "You send a card to all the members of your board, and tell them to meet me here at the regular board meeting, and we will talk about it." So, from that moment on the door was wide open.

Did this cause any problems? "Absolutely not a single problem that I know about."

Were the libraries truly integrated?

After we integrated, we had a joint sort of a thing. I made my own rules and regulations, and she made her own rules and regulations, and we had a separate budget. Yes, my staff followed through on whatever my plans were and her staff did the same. I mean, it was done in an agreeable satisfactory manner.

Interviewer: "This must have been a twenty-four hour a day job."

Celeste: "You bet your life."

Celeste was proud to have received a membership card from the ALA celebrating her fifty years of membership. After she died in 1998, the reading room in Savannah's Dixon Park Library was named in her honor. As my colleague and friend Bill Gormley noted in commenting on a draft of this manuscript, "Celeste's story is a tribute to her pluck and perseverance and good nature and optimism."