

Helen Virginia Steele, West Tampa (Florida) Branch Library; Annie McRae and Mattie Carter Mirror Lake Library (St. Petersburg, Florida).

When the West Tampa Free Public Library (now the West Tampa Branch Library) opened in 1914, it was the first library in Hillsborough County. When the citizens of West Tampa had the chance to vote to tax themselves to support the library, they approved it by a tally of 352-1, according to an unreferenced statement in Wikipedia. There's always that one.

By 1917, [Helen Virginia Steele](#) was brought in to lead it. Born in Illinois, Helen went to college in Brooklyn, and then she had directed libraries in Illinois and Wisconsin before making the move south. Under her leadership Tampa expanded its library system to include eight branches. She also initiated the town's bookmobile system in 1930. She continued to serve the library even when her health was declining and, shortly after she celebrated her thirty year term at the library, she died in 1947 at the age of 63.

Helen's leadership carried far beyond the doors of her library. She founded the Florida Library Association and served as its president for two terms, nine years apart. She was selected as the vice president of the Southeastern Library Association in 1930 and president of the Southwestern Library Association in 1934. Her professional memberships included the Tampa Woman's Club, the ALA, the American Association of University Women, the Tampa Art Institute, and she was a congregant of the First Presbyterian Church.

Annie McRae, a promotional writer for the Board of Trade (aka the Chamber of Commerce), along with Councilman Ralph Veillard and W.L. Straub (the owner of the *St. Petersburg Times*), were the driving forces behind the Mirror Lake Carnegie Library across the bay in St. Petersburg. In trying to mobilize support for the library, [McRae published stories in the *St. Petersburg Times*](#) urging the city to pledge tax dollars to fund the library. (Her views on the subject are detailed in her article "[St. Petersburg's New Library and Something About Those Who Made It](#)," the banner headline in the paper's December 20, 1914 edition, and also "Will St. Petersburg Finish Its Library Undertaking" inside the next page.) [McRae was offered the position](#) as the first librarian, but she turned it down as she was serving as the secretary of the library board and believed that would put her in a conflict of interest. Emma Moore Williams and Margaret Jenkins accepted the offer instead. McRae remained a passionate advocate of the library for the rest of her life.

When the Mirror Lake library opened in 1915 it was segregated, of course. Not until 1944 were Blacks allowed in, and then only in the basement. To address this inequity, Mrs. S.M. (Mattie) Carter, the wife of the First Baptist Institutional Church minister, formed an interracial committee to lobby the city for funding to build a separate, blacks-only library. Mattie's lobbying included meetings with *The Evening Independent*

and the *St. Petersburg Times*. As a later librarian noted, “Mrs. Carter was the guiding light for the project, and her determination to get a library was influential in the city’s action to make an appropriation,” as reported in *Remembering St. Petersburg, Florida* by Scott Taylor Hartzell. In part through Mattie’s efforts, the James Weldon Johnson Community Library opened in 1947. James was a distinguished writer and civil rights advocate, as well as (among other accomplishments) President Theodore Roosevelt’s consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua and the first African American professor hired by New York University.