HOW DID NONVIOLENT PROTEST FOSTER
PUBLIC LIBRARY DESEGREGATION IN
THE JIM CROW SOUTH DURING THE
CIVIL RIGHTS ERA OF THE 1960S?

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Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor: it must be demanded by the oppressed.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

In his book, *Searching for Whitopia* (2009), journalist Rich Benjamin packed his bags and went on a journey through the heart of white America to explore predominantly white small towns. A person of color, Benjamin undertook this epic voyage because of what he saw as a backlash against Barack Obama’s historic election to president in 2008 and what he saw of the real America, a country segregated on economic and racial divides. As he traveled around the nation, he couldn’t help but notice that, “America remains a highly segregated society in which white, Latinos, and blacks inhabit different neighborhoods and attend different schools of vastly different quality (p. 5).” This trip took place between 2007 and 2009 but what Benjamin found was not a far cry from the America of the 1960s during the civil rights era.

This segregated America has its roots in the aftermath of the Civil War when a period known as Reconstruction began, the rebuilding of the Southern States. At the end of the war, the South was decimated so the President at the time, Andrew Jackson, put forth the idea that money and effort should be centered on rebuilding the Southern States since their main source of economy, the slave trade, and the free labor it brought to pick cotton was gone. The South needed help in transitioning to a new economy. The Southern States saw it differently. They saw this as Northerners occupying their territory and forcing them to adhere to a different ideal.
Problem to be investigated

The notion that some people are just not suited to be readers was a generally held assumption by whites in the Jim Crow South of the 1960s. Jim Crow was a derisive slang term for a black man. It came to mean any law passed in the South that established different rules for blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws were based on the theory of white supremacy and were a reaction to Reconstruction. Jim Crow laws touched every part of life including schools, colleges, hospitals, restaurants, public restrooms, public transport, and public libraries. Segregation was so complete that whites did not see blacks except when being served by them.

Therefore, providing a space that should be open to all, a place that is the fountain of free knowledge, a place called the public library, should be prevented by any means necessary, including violence, imprisonment, and humiliation.

The use of the public library as a tool of oppression is something that has not been overly studied. In fact, it has hardly been investigated at all. In the Southern States prior to the desegregation of all public facilities, the people who were in control, the governors of the individual states, and the white residents, used their power to subjugate the African-American population. The controllers wanted to control access to knowledge so they could control the population.

A way of achieving this was by way of the Separate but Equal policy that means that blacks could be segregated if they were granted equal opportunities and facilities. This phrase was used to support the principle of segregation and was based on an 1896
United States Supreme Court decision that stated segregation was legal provided separate facilities for black people were equal to those of white people.

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, African-Americans protested and publicly opposed the fact they were treated as second-class citizens, even though they allegedly had the same rights to freedom and liberty that white Americans enjoyed.

Separate and unequal access to knowledge is the antithesis of library ideals so libraries became targets for sit-ins because they were a symbol of the state as well as a symbol of democracy and opportunity for all.

**Significance of problem and justification**

So, why is this an important topic? Why study this? In today’s society, specifically the United States and Western Europe, we take for granted the fact that many of us, if not most of us, have access to a public library within our own town. This institution is available to us and we can, or not, take advantage of its services whenever we want. What if this wasn’t the case? What if you weren’t allowed inside that library? What if you did go inside you’d be arrested or be threatened with violence? If that’s the reality of your situation, what does it say about the society you live in? Is it free? For all? Or just a select few? To have access to free knowledge, to be able to educate yourself, fundamentally changes a person, and opens up a door to lifelong learning, a way to continually improve oneself along the road of life’s journey.

Some would argue that the public library should be viewed as a neutral space, that it should not be politicized, but isn’t there something political in the fact that to disallow a whole race of people access to the public library is a political statement? How can it
not be? And what does it say about a society when the simple action of reading a book in a public space is seen as an act of rebellion.

In his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1998), the author, Richard Wright, takes the reader into what life was like for a black man in the Jim Crow South and his experience using the public library in Memphis, Tennessee. Wright explains that the only way a black man was allowed inside the library was if he was picking up books requested by white patrons.

When he was seventeen and working in a factory, he saw an article in a newspaper condemning the author H. L. Mencken and decided that if the South didn’t like Mencken’s books then he must be doing something right so he made up his mind that he wanted to read anything that had ever been written by the author. He knew the public library was closed to blacks so he found a white man, a catholic who lived in his town who was persecuted by the townsfolk because of his religion, and got up the courage to ask him if he could borrow his library card. The man agreed but on condition that if Wright was caught, he would take the blame.

Wright forged a note and entered the library and handed it over to the librarian in charge who carefully scrutinized it and asked if he was planning to use the books himself to which Wright responded, “oh, no, ma’am, I can’t read.” Wright thought he’d been busted, and after a gut-wrenching moment, the librarian walked off and came back with two Mencken books.

Wright used the library card as a visa to the world of books. He was amazed that people actually had the courage to say the words that were in the books and as he
describes it, “it would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself.”

For Wright, a whole new world had opened up to him but he had to be careful so as not to make the white men that he came in contact with get suspicious, for one thing, he didn’t want it to be taken away. An example of this fear happened at work one day when he became involved in a conversation with his white supervisor who called him ‘boy.’

“Boy, what are you reading those books for?”

“Oh I don’t know, sir.”

“That’s deep stuff you’re reading, boy.”

“I’m just killing time, sir.”

“You’ll addle your brains if you don’t watch out.”

As we can see from the above conversation, the simple act of reading a book could be viewed as an act of rebellion.

Exploring the current literature on the topic of library desegregation in the Southern states, specifically access to public libraries for African-American patrons, nonviolent direct sit-ins of the early 1960s, Freedom Libraries in 1964 Mississippi, and a Supreme Court decision, a story will emerge as to how public libraries slowly became integrated.

Literature Review
The literature that describes the desegregation of public libraries in the Southern States is limited. Most of the current research is historical, tracking the history and development of public libraries for African-Americans. Some literature relates to the last days of Jim Crow Southern Libraries and much of it relates to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s compared to the desegregation of public schools.

For the purpose of this research paper, we will focus in on some general information about the numbers of public libraries in the South that were available to African-Americans, the sit-in movement, Freedom Libraries, and a Supreme Court Case.

To get an idea of how many public libraries there were in each state in the South, a Ph.D. dissertation of 1941 by Eliza Atkins Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library: A Study of the Government and Administration of Public Library Service to Negros in the South*, provides us with some numbers to look at which is represented in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern State</th>
<th>Total Number of Public Libraries</th>
<th>Total Number of Public Libraries Open to African-Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It’s astonishing to realize that very few public libraries in the South allowed African-American’s access to their collection. As a result of this reality, Gleason found that Black Colleges opened their doors and served as community centers making their library services available to locals to bridge this gap. Gleason was the first African-American to receive a doctorate in Library Science and asserts that to organize their own lending libraries, African-Americans were under the threat of physical harm from local whites.

Of the literature that specifically discusses public library desegregation, Michael Fultz’s, *Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation*, notes that, “the desegregation of library services presents a variety of intriguing complexities (2006, p. 346).” Fultz explains that desegregation happened both as a result of tried and true methods of the wider civil rights movement such as sit-ins but also that it moved at a much more rapid speed than the integration of other public institutions such as schools (2006, p. 346).

One reason for this was that whites did not view public libraries as places to socially interact whereas public schools were cultural institutions. To illustrate this, Fultz gives the example of a response to a 1948 survey conducted by the director of the local public library in Birmingham, Alabama. The respondent states:

I have come to the conclusion that it would be much better for all concerned if we removed segregation laws in libraries…only the more educated Negroes would be involved, and their numbers would be too small to endanger the status quo. I am a Southerner (and) it hurts me
to see vast amounts of money spent…to duplicate services just to satisfy

This idea that to desegregate public libraries would not destabilize the race
hierarchy was not an isolated one. Fultz offers up another response from the same
survey:

People get all up in arms when their children have personal contact with
children of another race…we have shopped with Negroes – in the library

By “shopped” the respondent is referring to the fact that whites and blacks had
been integrated within grocery stores for some time. The reason for this was that many
African-Americans earned their money by working in white homes cooking and cleaning
and taking care of white children. A grocery store was not viewed as a place to socially
interact so it was a non-threatening environment where the two races could mix with
white people feeling as if their socially superior status was not in jeopardy.

This view of grocery stores was not the same when it came to lunch counters
where food was eaten or schools where education was happening and the interaction was
in a social manner.

In an effort to force desegregation, African-Americans utilized nonviolent sit-ins.
In 1960, the most famous sit-in took place in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four
African-American college students – David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr
and Joseph McNeil – walked into a Woolworth’s Department Store and took a seat at the whites-only lunch counter ordering coffee.

Refused service, the young men patiently waited, suffering threats and intimidation from white bystanders. The four returned to protest every day for five months until Woolworth’s agreed to serve black customers at its lunch counters. The sit-in movement had begun.

This nonviolent protest was an extension of the civil rights movements peaceful marches as led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, a Baptist minister and civil rights activist, the leader of the movement.

King was a proponent of nonviolent direct action protest. In 1963, King participated in a peaceful walk through Birmingham, Alabama’s downtown to protest the fact the town was the most segregated city in America.

The result, one thousand arrests, with the protesters being met with high-pressure water hoses by law enforcement. The protesters were not discouraged and eventually their efforts led to the desegregation of downtown businesses and public buildings in Birmingham.

The sit-in movement was a form of direct action that involved one or more persons occupying an area for a protest, to promote political, social or economic change. One of the first public library sit-ins was inspired by the events in Greensboro. In April 1960, sixteen students from John M. Langston High School walked into the whites-only Danville Public Library in Virginia with the simple goal of checking out some books. When they were refused service, the students sat at tables and worked on homework assignments. After twenty minutes, the head librarian closed the library (Robinson).
Like many cities and towns in the South, Danville had two public libraries, a whites-only main library and a branch library for black patrons. The Blacks-only branch, Gasty Branch Library, had only ten percent of the collection available to its patrons. This discrepancy in library service was not unique to Danville. Blacks-only libraries were often housed in buildings in need of major repair with collections consisting of secondhand books or discards from the whites-only library. Books that had been handled by black patrons were thrown in the trash if returned to the whites-only main branch. In an extreme case, the policy in Birmingham, Alabama, mandated that, “if in an unforeseen emergency a book was interchanged between the central library and the black branch it would have to be replaced, not returned (Fultz, 2006, p. 352).”

In the main library in Danville in 1960, the library sit-in would have to have consequences, so the local council decided to restrict access to the library allowing only library cardholders to enter the building. The students reacted by staging another sit-in but this time it was less successful as they were threatened with incarceration (Robinson, 2014).

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) stepped in and took the city of Danville to federal court winning an injunction ordering the desegregation of the public library. The Danville council hit back and held a referendum, the residents voted to close the library down so as to avoid having to comply with the federal order. Members of the white community raised money for a private library but were thwarted in their endeavor when the city attorney pointed out the fact that the public library’s book collection had been paid for by tax dollars. Eventually, the Danville Public Library reopened on an integrated basis, a sort of get-your-book-and-get-
out plan with a noticeable absence of tables and chairs in the reading rooms (Cresswell, 1996, p. 559).

This policy was known as vertical integration (Fultz, 2006, p. 346) which basically means that a public library can minimally integrate while deliberately lacking furniture such as chairs and tables so as to discourage library use by non-whites. The caveat in Danville was quite simple, just to make sure that no people of color used the facilities, if you wanted to use the library; you had to pay for a library card. The NAACP filed a lawsuit but the judge threw it out saying that he had already ruled on this and as far as he was concerned the library was desegregated and he had no jurisdiction on library policy.

Danville wasn’t the only nonviolent library sit-in that attracted the attention of the NAACCP, or resulted in a federal court decision, or had the threat of harm attached to it. In 1963, Anniston, Alabama, two young African-American ministers, Rev. Quintus Reynolds, aged thirty-two, and Rev. William McClain, aged twenty-five, attempted to enter the public library so as to sign up for a new card. As the two men approached the building they were met by an angry mob of twenty-five white men. Reynolds and McClain ended up in the hospital (Cresswell, 1996, p. 561).

Unfortunately, this was not the only time that peaceful protesters ended up on the wrong end of violence. The deep South states of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana saw the most difficult and long running battles in the name of desegregation of public libraries and public facilities (Cresswell, 1996, p. 560).

In Mississippi in 1964 to prevent needless bloodshed twenty-five “freedom libraries” were established by a group of librarian volunteers who were part of a larger
project called the Freedom Summer Project. The main goal of the Freedom Summer Project was to aid in the effort to secure voting rights and other services for African-Americans. Most of the libraries were housed in churches and old buildings and staffed by volunteers and provided library services and literary guidance.


Heinze was a member of the Council of Federated Organization’s (COFO’s) project workers who travelled to Jackson in 1964 as part of Project Mississippi to set up community centers housing public libraries. COFO recognized that African-Americans had been denied the opportunity to learn to read and write going back to the days of slavery. In 1964, Heinz didn’t see much improvement even though it had been one hundred years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln that freed slaves in the South. Heinz’s mission was to establish centers, “serving as a public library for adults, a school library for students…often the only library facility available to Negroes in the area…often (providing) the first real contact with books.” The centers also provided the only contact the locals had ever had with the outside world. Heinz talks about the closed society that was Mississippi at this time declaring that:

To appreciate the role of…libraries, we must understand the terrible
insularity of this state. More than any other area of the South, Mississippi is cut off from the mainstream of American society and culture. Many of the news media common throughout the rest of the country are virtually unobtainable in Jackson.

To illustrate this, he states that all the national papers, like the New York Times, were hard to get and if you had a subscription then the paper often didn’t arrive. He also states that the local news did not report on anything national or international.

To illustrate the danger the Project Mississippi volunteers were subjected to he mentions the bombing of the Freedom Library in Vicksburg and how he witnessed first hand the policy of segregation describing Mississippi as:

…a police state (with) COFO workers (being) subject to continual harassment, arrest, and violence. For our attack on the economic and social structure of the state exposes the elaborate system of rationalizations on which it rests, and which is designed to prove the Negro inferior in every respect. A Negro learning anything at all is a threat to this carefully constructed set of beliefs. If we say, and demonstrate, that a Negro can learn, we shake the foundations of white existence. Threaten any man’s existence and you are open to reprisal. Because COFO seeks to demonstrate that this way of life is a lie, we have seen murder and destruction.
For Heinz, the sacrifices were real and worth it for the greater purpose of bringing the pleasure of sitting down and reading a good book to rural Mississippi so as to open, “a doorway to other avenues of knowledge.”

The sit-ins continued throughout the Southern states, the peak being from the beginning of 1960 until the end of 1964, but only one of them became a Supreme Court case, Brown v Louisiana, argued in December 1965.

According to the court documents, five African-American men walked into the Audubon Regional Library, a whites-only public library, and one of them, Mr. Brown, asked to borrow a book. At the time, nobody else was in the library just Mr. Brown, his fellow protesters, and the library assistant who informed him that they didn’t have the book he was looking for and asked the men to leave.

Brown refused and sat down in a silent protest, a sit-in, and the others did the same. They were peaceful and did not make any noise. The branch librarian also asked the men to leave, and they again refused.

The sheriff and his deputies arrived on the scene, asked the men to leave, they refused, and so they were arrested and eventually convicted of violating Louisiana’s breach of peace statute which makes it a crime to crowd or congregate in a public building and fail or refuse to disperse or move on when ordered to do so by a law enforcement officer or other authorized person. The whole incident lasted ten minutes from the initial entrance to the library to the arrest.

Writing on behalf of The Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Fortas, in overturning the conviction, stated that the regulation of libraries and public facilities must be reasonable
and nondiscriminatory and may not be used as a pretext for punishing those who exercise their constitutional rights.

This case was the only case ever argued in front of the United States Supreme Court that involved public libraries.

All of the above literature demonstrates that the fight to desegregate the public libraries of the Southern states during the civil rights era of the 1960s was not an easy one. From being denied access as illustrated in Gleason’s study, to the reality of what desegregation looked like, to nonviolent sit-ins, to the establishment of Freedom Libraries, to a Supreme Court case, the fight was a tough one.

**Research Design and Method**

The most logical would be to utilize the historical method which is an attempt to solve a problem arising from historical context, to investigate the problem by gathering, examining and analyzing historical data to determine a cause and effect, to also understand and explain and discover causal relations that arise from social factors and to study relationships among issues that influence the past and continue to influence the present and can affect the future. This method enables an understanding of and solutions to contemporary problems to be sought in the past. History is the root of all education, scientific and literary, as well as political and economic.

**Data Gathering Protocol**

The one problem is the fact that there isn’t much scholarly research into this area so there isn’t much to draw from in terms of primary sources. Not much in the way of
original documents except for hard-to-find newspaper articles and photographs that are held in some Southern University archives. It appears that desegregation of public libraries happened under the radar and was kept quiet so as not to alarm the local population who were already reeling from the fact that all public facilities were being integrated and sometimes with the assistance of the National Guard.

Another reason that literature is hard to find is that public libraries have received little attention in African-American history coverage.

**Conclusion**

Violent collisions between African-American’s and Southern Whites were a nightly television news story in the 1960s. When Whites outside the South saw the images of the sit-ins being held at public libraries in the quest to gain access, or images of people arrested for looking through card catalogs, or fellow citizens being jailed for asking to borrow a book, or being beaten on the front steps for wanting to sign up for a library card, these images caught the nation’s attention and sympathy.

The use of the nonviolent direct action sit-in to desegregate the public library in the Jim Crow South of the 1960s served the civil rights movement well and slowly but surely led to a quiet integration.
References


http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/black-high-school-students-sit-desegregate-public-libraries-danville-va-1960


Appendix A: PHOTOGRAPHS
