

The American Library Association's Quest for a Black Library School

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When Dan O'Connor told me that my application for an ALISE research grant had not won the prize but had been so well received by the judges that he wanted me to report on it at the 1993 ALISE meeting, I was flattered. Someone had agreed that the problem I proposed would have some general interest to the ALISE membership and perhaps some importance to the library community. The question I had proposed for consideration is an important one but on the surface is not a complex one. The recruitment of members of minority groups into the library profession has been, since the 1960s, a major concern of the library education community. Today, every accredited library school is making efforts to recruit black librarians for admission to its program, but the great majority of black librarians are still trained by two historically black institutions, Atlanta University and North Carolina Central.

The program of the library school at Atlanta University began in 1941 with the support of the American Library Association after the closing of the library school at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia in 1939. From its beginning in 1925, the library school at Hampton was operated under the sanction and almost direct control of the American Library Association. The reasons for the interest of the ALA leadership in the problem of black librarians in the South are obscure. Further, the location of the school at the Hampton Institute was hotly debated through the 1920s by people vitally interested in Southern librarianship and in promoting opportunities for black librarians.

I became aware of the controversy through my work on Louis Shores. Shores was hired as librarian by Fisk University in 1928, when he graduated from the School of Library Service at Columbia. He was hired not only because he had the Columbia degree but also because of his master's degree in education from the City University of New York. The president of Fisk, Thomas Jones, had become convinced, when Shores first came to Fisk a few years earlier, that a school for training black librarians was needed and that Fisk University was the place for such an effort.

In 1925, when Louis Round Wilson toured the South for ALA to report on likely sites for the new school, Fisk University had been a strong contender. Of the four institutions under consideration (Fisk, Howard, Tuskegee, and Hampton), Fisk was almost perfect. It was centrally located, had by far the strongest academic program, and had strong community support. The problem with Fisk at the time was that the president had just resigned because of a student uprising and Wilson thought the situation too volatile to consider the university as the home of a new library school. When Shores came to Fisk, the decision to open a library school at the Hampton Institute had already been made by ALA and supported by the foundations. The debate over the placement of the school had only tentatively been settled by the Hampton choice, and Shores and Jones sought to reopen it. Consequently Louis Shores began planning courses in librarianship when he started at Fisk in 1928. One of his first acts was to approach Sarah C. N. Bogle of the Board of Education for Librarianship (BEL) for advice on curricular matters. By January of the next year, Shores was writing the BEL that he fully intended to begin an ALA-accredited program at Fisk and wanted to know what he needed to do to obtain BEL sanction. His first intention had been to prepare school librarians, but that limited mission had quickly expanded. In May 1928 Shores directly approached Frederick Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation about moving the Hampton school and, of course, the Carnegie funding from Hampton to Fisk.

Shores and Jones had support for the move, notably from Mary Utopia Rothrock of the Lawson McGhee Library in Knoxville and Edwin Embree of the Rosenwald Fund, but Shores had also made some powerful enemies. In his enthusiasm, he began contacting the funding agencies, the Rosenwald Fund and the Carnegie Corporation, directly for money to begin the program without clearing his activity with the BEL and Carl Milam, ALA executive secretary.

Shores planned a "Negro Librarians Conference" to be held in November 1931 in conjunction with the dedication of the new library building at Fisk University. He had obtained five hundred dollars from the Carnegie Corporation to fund travel expenses for the participants to bring prominent black librarians from around the country to Nashville for a discussion of library problems. Adam Strohm was invited as president of ALA, but Carl Milam heard about it only when he received the call-to-conference notice from Shores.

Milam was nonplussed. In organizing a conference of librarians with national significance and implications, Shores had ignored completely the white leadership of the library profession and had made an end run around ALA to secure foundation funding. Milam wanted to ignore the whole affair but was forced to do something because the foundations were involved. He called in the newly appointed ALA southeastern field representative, Tommie Dora Barker, who summoned Shores to meet with her in Atlanta, where a program for the conference that was acceptable to ALA, to the white Southern librarians, and to Shores himself was constructed.

The Negro Librarians Conference was something of an anticlimax, filled with papers on library services, circulation work, and various platitudinous presentations. But the event did convince the leadership of ALA and the BEL as well as most southern librarians that Fisk with Shores was not a safe place to institute the training of black librarians.

When submitting the proposal to ALISE, I listed four research questions that I thought worthy of investigation:

1. What was the role of the foundations (i.e. Carnegie, Rosenwald, and the General Education Board) in the formulation of an ALA policy and program to establish education for black librarians at the Hampton Institute?

It is evident that the foundations with an interest in Southern library development had agendas of their own and that each was willing to an extent to work through ALA in achieving its goals. However, the foundations did not feel bound to accept Milam's program and attempted to coordinate their own efforts among themselves.

2. What factors led Wilson and the ALA leadership to favor the Hampton Institute over other black institutions that may have been more appropriate or acceptable places?

Louis Round Wilson was the preeminent southern librarian, and his recommendation had the force of fiat in the southeast. His recommendation of Hampton over other institutions in 1925 was reasonable, but his continued opposition to Fisk after Thomas Jones became president seems less so.

3. What factors led ALA and the foundations to withhold and ultimately withdraw support for the effort from the Hampton Institute?

Among the foundations there was considerable discussion about the most appropriate solution. For most of its existence, the Hampton school was forced to operate with minimal funding and no promise of its continuation. The actual reasons for the demise of the Hampton library school are obscure. Though the retirement of Florence Rising Curtis and the failure of the Hampton Institute to come through with significant financial support has been cited by Gunn as reasons, I suspect that there is more to the story buried in the correspondence among the foundations.¹

4. What arguments against the ALA proposal for library education were made and what was the result? The question of why a library school for Southern blacks became a central focus of the ALA and the foundations rather than other alternatives has not been satisfactorily answered. For example, a plan for the foundations to fund scholarships for black students to Northern library schools seems to have had support from members of all interested factions but failed to receive serious consideration.

When Dan O'Connor asked me to present my research idea, he said, by way of inducement, that I would at least establish my claim on the topic. I must confess that I have no basis on which to stake such a claim. Others are tunneling into the same mountain from other directions and each has some claim to the territory.²⁻⁶ Furthermore, this research idea is part of a much larger problem on which I can still lay no claim. By the early 1920s, the ALA's Enlarged Program was an acknowledged failure. Attention was refocused from a national drive to promote library development to a regional effort. As part of this move, Tommie Dora Barker was appointed ALA regional field representative in the Southeast in 1930. It was Barker herself who perhaps paved the way for this appointment when she proposed biennial regional meetings of ALA alternating with national meetings in 1922. This began ALA's "southern strategy," of which the Hampton school was an important component.⁷

The relationship of the ALA and the foundations in the articulation and development of this southern strategy is the real focus of the proposed research, and I stake no claim on this because it is simply too big. When Dan O'Connor told me that the judges had declined to fund the proposal, he softened the blow by telling me that they simply did not think that it could be done in accordance with my proposal. My original proposal called for research trips to the Louis Round Wilson papers at Chapel Hill, the Tommie Dora Barker papers at Emory, the ALA Archives at the University of Illinois, the Fisk archives, the Rosenwald papers and the Peabody archives in Nashville, and the archives of the General Education Board in Tarrytown, New York. A thorough study might also necessitate a trip to the Hampton Institute archives and to the Carnegie Corporation archives, but I did not ask for funding for these. Gunn's dissertation contains a great deal of information on the Hampton school and much of the pertinent material may be obtainable through the help of the Hampton archivist, Friz Malval. It is my understanding that much of the Carnegie archives has been microfilmed and may also be available without an actual visit.

When the judges ruled that the proposal was too ambitious, they were quite right. It is the sort of project that could keep several doctoral students productively occupied. It is a project also, like most historical areas of investigation, that calls for not only collecting the facts but interpreting them in the context of individual motives and institutional reactions. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that we do not have a substantial enough body of literature in library history to allow us the luxury of reassessment. No one in our English departments lays claim to John Milton or even Joaquin Miller. No patent in American history has been granted on Huey Long. And even such a minor altercation as the War of Jenkins' Ear has intrigued a number of investigators. By contrast, library historians seem to have taken the position that a topic can be owned and that once published, the possibilities are exhausted. Peggy Sullivan has done Carl Milam. Ed Holly has done Charles Evans. Bill Williamson has done William Frederick Poole. I am finishing a book on Louis Shores. A few months ago, I was in Tallahassee and talked to Bill Summers, who observed that now that the project was near completion, probably no one would touch the Shores' papers again. I started to object that there was much important material in the collection that I did not use. No biographer uses more than a small portion of the material uncovered during research, and I certainly have not begun to exhaust the usable and useful material in Louis Shores' papers, not only on Shores but on other topics. But I realized that Summers was right. Shores will be "done," and the probability of anyone opening that tunnel again is negligible. We have far more topics available than skilled people to tackle them. I may, as opportunity presents, delve further into this particularly complex problem. But I lay no claim to it and would look forward to reading anything produced on the topic.

References

1. Arthur Gunn, "Early Training for Black Librarians in the U.S.: A History of the Hampton Institute Library School and the Establishment of the Atlanta University School of Library Science" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1986).

2. Rosemary Du Mont. "The Educating of Black Librarians: An Historical Perspective," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 26 (Spring 1986): 233-49.
3. Gunn.
4. James V. Carmichael, "Tommie Dora Barker and Southern Librarianship" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1988).
5. Robert S. Martin, "Louis Round Wilson at the University of North Carolina, 1901-1932" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1988).
6. Nancy Louise Becker Johnson, "Sarah C. N. Bogle: Librarian at Large" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1991).
7. The term "southern strategy" was used by Jim Carmichael in his dissertation on Barker.