



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Samuel Tucker's 1939 library sit-in

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On Aug. 21, 1939, five young men walked in separately to the new Kate Waller Barrett Branch Library on Queen Street and asked for a library card. Their names were Otto Tucker, William "Buddy" Evans, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray and Clarence "Buck" Strange. Fourteen-year-old Bobby Strange kept a lookout for the leader of the group, the lawyer Samuel W. Tucker.

Each of the five men were told that they would not be issued a library card because they were Black. Each one then went quietly to a shelf, pulled out a book and read quietly. When asked by the library staff to leave, they asked as they had been instructed, "What would happen if we don't leave?"

Tucker waited to call the local press until Strange informed him that the police were on their way to arrest the young men. He notified The Washington Post, The Times Herald, The Washington Tribune and The African-American. The five men were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, probably because they couldn't be charged with anything else.

In court, Tucker made two points. First, that the young men had been anything but disorderly. Second, that it was illegal for the Alexandria Library to deny residents library cards, regardless of race. Rather siding for or against Tucker, the judge avoided issuing a ruling, which prevented Tucker from declaring a victory, but also saved the young men from fines or imprisonment.

Following the 1939 sit-in, rather than allow African Americans to use the new library, the all-white Library Board hurriedly built the Robert Robinson Library. Samuel Tucker refused to ever set foot in the library his legal arguments built, insisting that having a library to read in wasn't the same as being treated equally. The letter where Tucker states his reason for refusing to use the Robert Robinson Library is part of the collection at Special Collections, as are the annual reports for the Robinson Library.

On Oct. 21, 2019, the City of Alexandria presented the descendants of the five men with a dismissal of the charges for disorderly conduct, which the Commonwealth Attorney requested. Library staff discovered that the judge in the case never issued a ruling and the charges were still outstanding 80 years later. The City of Alexandria asked the Commonwealth Attorney to dismiss the charges, an admission decades later that the five men were in the right.



Otto Tucker, William "Buddy" Evans, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray and Clarence "Buck" Strange depart the Kate Waller Barrett Library following their arrest for refusing to leave the then whites-only facility on Aug. 21, 1939.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Unlike Tucker, many African Americans went to the Robinson Library to utilize the only library they had access to. Some of the library patrons surely used it as a starting point in order to insist on greater rights in the decades to come, despite the humbleness of the hastily constructed building.

Gladys Davis, who retired from the library system with more than 50 years of service, was one of the early librarians at the Robinson Library. In 2007, City Council honored her for her 60 years of service to Alexandria Library System.

Today, the Robinson Library is a gallery in the Alexandria Black History Museum. Like the young men whose brave actions created the city's demand for a segregated library, the Robinson Library saw big changes in Alexandria's Black history over the coming decades. It remains a reminder of Alexandria's segregated past, and the brave men and women who worked to end it.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.