

Alexandria Times

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The 1939 Alexandria library sit-in: 86 years later

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. Tucker waited until Bobby came to inform him that the police were on their way to arrest the young men to call the local press, including The Washington Post, The Times Herald, the Washington Tribune and the African-American.

The five men were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, likely because they couldn’t be charged with anything else.

Historian Brenda Mitch-

ell-Powell, author of “Public in Name Only,” provided a historic account of the event:

“The Alexandria Library sit-in demonstration, a local event with national implications, exemplified the 1930s protests that preceded those of the better-known 1950s and ‘60s Civil Rights Movement. It is the first-known and recorded library sit-in.”

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 than siding for or against Tucker, the judge avoided issuing a ruling, which prevented Tucker from declaring a victory, but also saving the young men from fines or imprisonment.

Tucker used a line of thought similar to George Ma-

son’s 1774 argument in the Fairfax Resolves: that taxation and rights were intrinsically linked. The Library Board accepted the argument that because African American Alexandrians paid taxes toward the libraries, they had a right to use them.

But 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.

Unlike Tucker, many Af-

rican Americans went to the Robinson Library to utilize the only library to which they had access. 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.

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 during the ensuing 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 provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.