



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Samuel Tucker's 1939 library sit-in

*Alexandria Times, February 14, 2019*

*Image: On August 21, 1939, Tucker sent five young African-American men to stage a peaceful protest at the whites-only library at 717 Queen Street in Alexandria, VA.*

This year's Black History Month holds special meaning to Alexandrians as we celebrate two seminal moments in local black history. Aug. 21 will be the 80th anniversary of the library sit-in, a precursor to the events and tactics of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. In September, our city celebrates the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Freedmen and Contrabands Cemetery Memorial. This week's "Attic" will focus on the 1939 sit-in.

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 Bobby 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 than 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.

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.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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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 the 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.

Celebrations of the 1939 sit-in will be organized by the Alexandria Library, which is also running its own Black History Month events. For more information, please check out [https:// alexlibraryva.org](https://alexlibraryva.org).

*“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.*