

Stepping Out on Faith: Lillian Haydon Childress Hall, Pioneer Black Librarian

By Michele T. Fenton



As the fourteenth session of the Indiana Public Library Commission Summer School for Librarians commenced on Saturday, July 24, 1915, 37 new graduates (all women) were to enter the world of librarianship. One of them, Lillian Haydon Childress Hall, would make history as the school's first African American graduate and the earliest known formally trained African American librarian in Indiana

(NAACP, 1915; Jones, n.d.; "Summer School 1915," 1915; "Hall, Mrs. Lillian Childress," 1944).

Lillian Haydon Childress Hall was born Lillian Sunshine Haydon in Louisville, Kentucky on February 24, 1889. She was the youngest child of George and Elizabeth Wintersmith Haydon ("United States Census, 1900," n.d.). Hall attended Fisk University, a historically black university founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee by the American Missionary Association. She was a student in the university's Normal School Division, taking classes to become a teacher. Hall also studied voice ("Hall, Mrs. Lillian Childress," 1933; "Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1905-1906," 1906). While at Fisk, she met William Hobbs Childress. The two married on February 8, 1910 in Nashville, Tennessee and moved to Washington, D.C. that same year. The couple's son, William Jr. was born on April 6, 1911 ("Tennessee Marriages, 1796-1950," n.d.; "United States Census, 1910," n.d.; Robinson, 1998). After William, Jr. was born, Hall and her family returned to Nashville, Tennessee where William, Sr. worked as a chemist at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Pure Food Laboratory (he had received a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry from Fisk University in 1909). The family later moved to Evansville, Indiana ("Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1908-1909," 1909; "Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1911-1912," 1912; "Childress, Lillian H.," 1922).

In January 1915, Hall began work as an apprentice at the Cherry Street Branch of the Evansville Public Library (now Evansville-Vanderburgh County Public Library) under the supervision of Fannie C. Porter, the branch librarian. This branch was a Carnegie library built to serve Evansville's African American residents. In June 1915, Hall was sent to the Indiana Public Library Commission's Summer School for Librarians in Indianapolis (Evansville Public Library, 1915; Evansville

Public Library, 1916; Goldhor, 1962; Fenton, 2011). She was the first African American student admitted to the school (NAACP, 1915; "Hall, Mrs. Lillian Childress," 1944). Classes were at Butler College (now Butler University) that year and taught by staff from the public library commission and the Indiana State Library. College Residence, a woman's dormitory, served as housing for the students ("Summer School," 1915). Hall's attendance made her one of a handful of African Americans during that period to receive a formal education in library science. Fourteen years earlier, Edward C. Williams became the first African American to receive a formal education in library science and was the first African American graduate of the New York State Library School (the school merged with the Library School of the New York Public Library in 1926 to become Columbia University School of Library Service) (Josey, 1969; Latimer, 1994; Dawson, 2000; "Williams, Edward C.," 1936; Wilcox, 1951).

After graduation, Hall returned to the Evansville Public Library and was promoted by director Ethel McCullough to manager of the Cherry Street Branch (Fannie Porter had resigned) (Evansville Public Library, 1916). As the new manager of the Cherry Street Branch, Hall worked very hard to provide the best service possible to the library's patrons. Part of her service included outreach to the community and helping those in need. Each year Hall and her staff held a Christmas party at the library for the poor residents of the neighborhood. She also reached out to the teachers of the schools through invitations to visit the library, and with the help of student volunteers, contributed to the War Fund which aided soldiers during World War I. Hall also helped start a literary club for girls and a club for boys called the Sons of Daniel Boone (Evansville Public Library, 1919).

On May 18, 1919, tragedy struck. Hall's husband, William, Sr. died in Chicago, Illinois from peritonitis following surgery for appendicitis. He was only 30 years old. After this, Hall stayed with her aunt and uncle, Robert and Maggie Franklin who also lived in Evansville. Her son, William Jr. stayed with his paternal grandparents, John B. and Mattie Hobbs Childress, in Nashville, Tennessee where he attended private school. He went on to graduate from Fisk University, fought in World War II, and served one term in the Kentucky General Assembly. William, Jr. passed away in 1993 ("United States Census, 1920," 1920; "Illinois, Cook County Deaths, 1878-1922," n.d.; Robinson, 1998).

In 1921, Hall resigned from the Cherry Street Branch Library. The Indianapolis Public Library (now Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library) was opening its first branch in an African American neighborhood and wanted Hall to manage it (“Personals,” 1921; Rose, 1922). This branch was the Paul Laurence Dunbar Branch and was located inside Indianapolis Public School #26, an elementary school for African Americans on the corner of East 16th Street and Columbia Avenue (Downey, 1991; “Among Librarians,” 1921; “News from the Field,” 1922; Cain, 1933). In its early years, the Indianapolis Public Library had branches housed in some of the city’s public schools. These branches however, were for use by everyone, not just students. The Dunbar Branch served the residents of the Martindale-Brightwood area, a predominately African American neighborhood on Indianapolis’s east side:

“The Paul Laurence Dunbar branch, the first library in the city organized to serve colored people exclusively has opened in Indianapolis. It is located in one of the most thickly populated colored districts in a corner room of the largest, newest and most modern school for colored children in the school system. The room is on the ground floor, spacious airy and light, with an outside entrance of its own. It is simply but attractively furnished. The book collection, though small, is well balanced, particular attention has been given to books by colored authors and about the Negro race. Mrs. Lillian Childress, formerly of the Evansville Public Library, is branch librarian. The response so far has been most gratifying but a great deal of pioneer work among the grown-ups will be necessary before the branch will become as important as it should be.” (“News from the Field,” 1922)

In early 1927, Hall received and accepted an invitation to attend the First Negro Library Conference. The conference was held March 15-18 at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia (the school is now Hampton University) (“Personals,” 1927; “Prominent Woman Returns,”1927). Rev. Thomas Fountain Blue, the first African American public library director in the United States and the director of the Western Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library, was the conference organizer (Jordan, 2000; Dawson, 2000; Jones, 2002; Blue, 1920). A total of 40 librarians attended the conference. Hall’s conference expenses were paid for by the Rosenwald Fund, a fund created by Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist and businessman responsible for the success of Sears, Roebuck and Company (Dalín, 1998). The goal of the conference was to bring together librarians from across the country to discuss ways to improve library service to African Americans and to improve education and training for African American librarians. Keynote speakers included Edward C. Williams, the first professional African American librarian; Florence Rising Curtis, director of the Hampton Institute Library School; Herbert S. Hirshberg, state librarian of Ohio;

Louis Shores, Fisk University; and Rachel D. Harris, children’s librarian at the Eastern Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. The conference was such a success, that a second one was planned for the near future (Curtis, 1927).

In July 1927, Hall resigned her position at Dunbar to accept a new appointment at the newly built Crispus Attucks High School located at 1140 N. West Street (“Personals,” 1927; “News of Indiana Libraries,” 1927; Warren, 1998; “Mrs. Lillian Childress, Librarian,” 1929; “Help Comes from the Library, Clinic,” 1956). The Indianapolis Public Library decided to open a branch on the first floor of the high school and appointed Hall as the library’s first head librarian. Ruth Coleman was her assistant (“Library Has Formal Opening,” 1927; Downey, 1991). Coincidentally, Florabelle Williams Wilson, the first African American to head an academic library in Indiana, was a student at Attucks during Hall’s tenure. They more than likely knew one another (“Florabelle Williams,” 1944; “Black Librarian Heads Department at I.C.C.,” 1971; “Names in the News,” 1971; “Governor Names Wilson to Historical Board,” 1983; “Wilson, Florabelle,” 2008).

In June 1928, the American Library Association held its 50th Annual Conference in West Baden, Indiana. The West Baden Springs Hotel served as the conference headquarters. The conference had an estimated total of 2,000 delegates. Hall was among several notable African American librarians that attended (“West Baden,” 1928; “Fiftieth Annual Meeting Advanced Attendance Register, May 27-June 2, 1928, West Baden, Indiana”, 1928; “West Baden Conference May 28 to June 2, 1928,” 1928):

Lillian Childress Hall	Indianapolis Public Library	Indianapolis, Indiana
Hallie Beachem Brooks	Indianapolis Public Library	Indianapolis, Indiana
Othella Roberts	Evansville Public Library	Evansville, Indiana
Etka F. Braboy Gaskin	Gary Public Library	Gary, Indiana
Rebecca M. Bond	Chicago Public Library	Chicago, Illinois
Rev. Thomas Fountain Blue	Louisville Free Public Library	Louisville, Kentucky
Rachel Davis Harris	Louisville Free Public Library	Louisville, Kentucky
Elnora McIntyre Roy	Atlantic City Public Library	Atlantic City, New Jersey
Edward C. Williams	Howard University	Washington, D.C.

Because of the segregation laws of the time, African Americans were not allowed to stay at the West Baden Springs Hotel. However, accommodations were available at the Waddy Hotel and Bath, a resort built in 1913 specifically for African Americans. The owners were George and Nannie Waddy, a prominent African American couple in West Baden. Although it can’t be confirmed (the hotel was destroyed by fire in the 1950s), African American attendees at the ALA Conference more than likely stayed at the Waddy Hotel and Bath. There’s also a possibility the attendees stayed in the homes of African American families in West Baden (this was a common practice during the Jim Crow Era) (Foster, 1999; DeBono, 1997;

"Waddy Hotel," 1949; Lane, 1991).

On June 6, 1929, Hall married widower and postal worker John Wesley Hall ("Childress-Hall Nuptial," 1929).

In 1930, Hall attended the Second Negro Library Conference ("Hall, Mrs. Lillian Childress," 1944). Approximately 71 librarians attended this conference. It was held November 20-23, in Nashville, Tennessee at Fisk University to coincide with the dedication of the university's new Erastus M. Cravath Memorial Library (Shores, 1931). This library was built with a grant of \$400,000 from the General Education Board (GEB), an organization founded by John D. Rockefeller, a philanthropist and entrepreneur. The mission of the GEB was to provide grants to academic institutions without regard to race or gender (Wheeler, 2004).

The Second Negro Library Conference's keynote speakers were Wallace Van Jackson of Virginia Union University; Tommie Dora Barker, regional field agent for the American Library Association; Robert M. Lester of the Carnegie Corporation; Arthur Schomburg of the New York Public Library; Monroe N. Work of Tuskegee Institute; Louis R. Wilson of the University of North Carolina, and Adam Strohm, president of the American Library Association. Returning lecturers included Thomas Fountain Blue, Rachel D. Harris, and Herbert Hirschberg. During the business portion of the conference, a proposal was made to request that the American Library Association establish a section for Negro library service (Shores, 1931). However, this section didn't become a reality until 1970, the year Dr. E.J. Josey founded the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) ("Black Librarians Caucus," 1970).

In 1932, Lillian made a visit to Evansville for a party given in her honor by Hallie Tidrington. Attendees at the party included: Anna Cowen Buckner (wife of U.S. Diplomat George Washington Buckner), Salena Buckner, Thelma Rochelle (wife of noted educator Charles Rochelle), Lillian Mitchell, Ruth Haynes, Mae Hendricks, Mayme Hastie, Bessie King, Agnes Mann, Buena Vista Bell, Carrie Long, Margaret Taliaferro, Pauline Cheeks, Alberta Fauntleroy, Georgia Williams, Vera Morpin, Fannie E. Snow, Rena Warfield, V.T. McElroy, and Mrs. Robert Arnett ("Naptown Society Matron Honored," 1938; "Guests at Mrs. Tidrington's Party," 1938; "Indianapolis Visitor Honored with Party," 1938).

In 1947, during the Conference of Public Librarians held at Atlanta University, Ms. Hall gave a lecture, "Administrative Methods Which Tend towards Better Services in the Combination School and Public Library." The Conference of Public Librarians was funded by the Atlanta University Library School and the Carnegie Corporation. Virginia Lacy Jones, the second African American to earn a PhD in library science and the director of the Atlanta University Library School, served as the conference's chairperson. Attended mostly by African American public librarians from the Southeast and some from

other parts of the United States, the conference provided a venue for minority librarians to share and discuss their expertise and concerns in relation to the needs of the libraries and patrons they served. Notable speakers at the conference included Dorothy G. Williams, Annie L. McPheeters, Charlemae Rollins, Hallie Beachem Brooks, Carrie Coleman Robinson, Sadie P. Delaney, Mollie Huston Lee, Ray Nichols Moore, and Annette Hoag Phinazee. Poet and author Langston Hughes was the speaker at the conference dinner (McPheeters, 1980; Dawson, 2001).

Though Hall was recognized as a trailblazer among African Americans in the library profession, she was also known for her generosity and desire to see others succeed. Hall demonstrated this as she passed on what she learned to ten library assistants she referred to as "her girls" ("Hall, Mrs. Lillian Childress," 1944; "Lillian C. Hall, Former Librarian, Succumbs in Home," 1958). One of these "girls" was Hallie Beachem Brooks. Ms. Brooks was born October 7, 1907 in West Baden, Indiana to Hal and Mary Bowden Beachem, and was an alumna of Shortridge High School in Indianapolis ("Brooks, Hallie Beachem (Mrs. F.V. Brooks)," 1955; Miller, 1977; "United States Census, 1930," n.d.; LeMon, 1932). In 1922, Ms. Brooks was hired as a library assistant at the Paul Laurence Dunbar Branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library. Ms. Brooks, like Hall, was a graduate of the Indiana Public Library Commission's Summer School for Librarians ("Summer School Students Accepted for 1924," 1924; Miller, 1977). Brooks later served as manager of the Dunbar Branch. During her tenure as branch manager, Brooks along with Hall hosted a tea for poet Countee Cullen when he visited the Dunbar Branch in 1927 ("Gives Tea for Mr. Cullen," 1927; "News of Indiana Libraries," 1927).

After leaving the Dunbar Branch, Ms. Brooks attended Butler University, Clark College (the college later merged with Atlanta University to become Clark-Atlanta University), and then the University of Chicago, where she earned her Master of Library Science (MLS) in 1947. She was also a library science professor at Clark-Atlanta University, retiring in 1977. Ms. Brooks passed away in 1985 (Totten, 1980; Woodson, 1991; "Indianapolis Girls Leaves for Positions in South," 1930; "Social Security Death Index," n.d.).

Besides her duties as a librarian, Lillian Hall was also a community activist. She helped organize the Indianapolis Chapter of the American War Mothers; was president of the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.); served on the boards of the Cancer Society and the Alpha Home (formerly the Alpha Home for Aged Colored Women); worked with the Indianapolis Interracial Committee; and was president of the Book Lovers Club ("Local Chapter War Mothers Organized; Lillian Hall, President," 1943; Hall, 1939; "Y.W.C.A Notes," 1935; "Society and Club Notes: Club Notes," 1930; "Alpha Home Sponsors Annual Open House Tea Sunday; Program," 1941; "Clubs," 1932; "Booklovers Observe 16th Anniversary, Guest Day,"

1939). In addition, Hall was a lover of music and was a friend of Lillian LeMon, former president of the National Association of Negro Musicians and noted director of the Cosmopolitan School of Music and Art (McGinty, 1997; "National President," 1930; "Noted Music Teacher's Rites Held Here Wed.," 1952; LeMon, 1932).

After 29 years of service, Hall retired as head of the Attucks Branch Library in 1956 (McGuire, 1956). Betsie Lou Baxter Collins, a graduate of the Atlanta University Library School, was her successor (Downey, 1991; "Collins, Betsie L.," 2008; "Main Office, Clinic, Library Give Aid," 1957; "Collins, Mrs. Betsie Lou Baxter," 1955). On May 27, 1956, the Indianapolis Public Library Staff Association honored Hall with a retirement tea. The tea was held on the campus of Butler University at the Holcomb Garden Home. Three other retiring librarians from the Indianapolis Public Library were honored as well: Wilma E. Reeve, Frieda Woerner, and Florence B. Schad. Together the retirees had a combined total of 151 years of library service ("Tea Party Sunday to Fete 4 Retiring Librarians," 1956).

On April 23, 1958, Lillian Sunshine Haydon Childress Hall passed away at her home ("Lillian C. Hall, Former Librarian, Succumbs in Home," 1958; "Necrology," 1958). A funeral service was held on Saturday, April 26th at Second Christian Church where she was a member (the church is now called Light of the World Christian Church) (Hale, 1994; "Mrs. Hall Succumbs; Ex-Attucks Librarian," 1958).

Ms. Hall is buried next to her second husband, John Wesley Hall, at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis (her gravestone incorrectly shows her birth date as 1892) (Crown Hill Funeral Home and Cemetery, n.d.).



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