

# Alexandria Library Sit-In, August 21, 1939 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Historic First

*BY NANCY NOYES SILCOX*

August 21, 1939—Five young African Americans who lived in Alexandria, Virginia, walked into the public library and asked for library cards. When they were refused, they took books from the shelves and sat down to read in the library's reading room. They were arrested.

In 1939, Alexandria was a typical segregated, “Jim Crow” city. The public library was only for white people. There was no library for Alexandria residents who were not white. This nonviolent sit-in, twenty years before the sit-ins of the 1960s, was an historic act of civil disobedience by ordinary people who sat down to stand up for justice, equal opportunities and the freedom to read at their public library. Today, public libraries are centers of communities where information is preserved, curated, accessed and made available equally to everyone in the community. On the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first sit-in, we remember the courageous young people who decided to make a difference in their world. Newspapers at the time called it a “sit-down” strike. “Sit-in” was not yet a common term.

Samuel Wilbert Tucker, a 26-year-old Alexandria lawyer, who passed the Virginia Bar exam without going to law school, lived one and a half blocks from the Alexandria Library at 717 Queen Street, now the Kate Waller Barrett Branch. Earlier in March 1939, he walked to the library to ask for a library card to borrow books. He was refused because he was black and the library had a “whites only” policy. He was irritated and decided to do something about it.

Coming back from an NAACP conference in Richmond, Tucker and his younger brother Otto got the idea of using nonviolent civil disobedience to call attention to the fact that Alexandria's public library was not open to African Americans. As a student at Howard University, Tucker learned about Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful protests of British rule in India. He also knew about recent labor strikes at auto plants in Michigan. He wondered if this strategy might be effective in a public library. Could black people sitting down and reading in a public library that was only open for white people call attention to the injustice of segregation? Otto recruited ten friends. The young men met with Tucker several times in his law office on Princess Street in Alexandria to plan the sit-in. Tucker told them if they did as he said, they would not go to jail. He asked them to wear clothes suitable for a library to show respect for a place of learning. He told them what to do in the sit-in. He said, “Be polite and respectful. Ask for a library card. As soon

as they say no because of your race, say ‘thank you,’ take a book, any book, from the stack and start reading. Sit at different tables so you can’t be talking to each other.”<sup>1</sup> He told them they would be arrested, but not to worry. He said he would defend them in court.

August 21, 1939 was hot and humid in Alexandria, even at 9 o’clock in the morning. Only five protesters showed up: William Evans, Edward Ghaddis, Morris Murray, Clarence Strange and Otto Tucker. Some were too afraid and stayed home. Some parents worried about trouble and kept their sons home. One overslept and missed the sit-in completely!

As the protesters gathered outside the library, the summer heat wasn’t the only reason they were sweating under their suit coats, hats and ties. They were nervous and a little scared. They knew challenging segregation with a sit-in had never been done before. What would happen? They talked about Tucker’s advice and his promise to keep them out of jail. Yes, they agreed. “It was something that had to be done and someone had to do it. If everybody would say no, it never would have gotten done.”<sup>2</sup> They were ready to put their plan into action. They were ready to sit down for justice.

Tucker had planned carefully. He knew he couldn’t be a protester. As a lawyer, his job was to defend the protesters in court. He waited in his office three blocks away. Before the sit-in started, he telephoned the newspapers to tell them what was going to happen so they would be ready to report news of the sit-in. Reporters and photographers were on their way to the library.

Otto Tucker walked into the Alexandria Library first. He asked for a library card. The librarian refused and explained the library’s borrowing policy. Otto said, “Thank you.” Then he walked purposefully to a library shelf, removed a book, and sat down at a table. He read silently.

One by one, the other protesters entered the library about five minutes apart. They each asked for a library card. As soon as the librarian said they couldn’t have a library card because they were black, the young men took a book from a shelf, and sat at different tables in the reading room. At eighteen, William Evans was the youngest and still in high school. Everyone called him Buddy. Buddy was so nervous he forgot to ask for a library card. Instead, he rushed past the librarian’s desk and grabbed a book from the shelves. When he sat down at a table by himself, he just looked at the book. He was too nervous to even start reading.

People in the library stared. Colored people sitting down at tables, silently reading in the library for white people! Nothing like this had ever happened



Army Press, 366th  
Infantry Regiment Yearbook  
**1941, 1st Lieutenant Samuel  
W. Tucker**

before. Bobby Strange, who was only fourteen, tagged along to the library with his older brother Clarence, one of the protesters. Clarence told Bobby he was too young to be a protester and take a chance of going to jail. He made him wait outside. Bobby knew he was old enough to do something. He would be the lookout, Lawyer Tucker's eyes into the library. During the sit-in, Bobby peeked through the library windows, anxiously waiting and watching. Several times he ran back and forth to Tucker's law office to tell him what was happening. With the five young protesters silently reading at tables inside the library, the librarian called the police. Soon, uniformed police officers walked into the library. They went to where the protesters were sitting. Officer John F. Kelley told the protesters to leave the library. The protesters didn't move. Officer Kelley said again, "You'd better get up and leave."

"What will be done if we don't leave?" Otto asked.

"I'm sorry, but I will have to arrest you," Officer Kelley replied.

"We are not leaving" Otto answered.<sup>3</sup>

The police arrested the protesters. Morris Murray said he was so interested in what he was reading he didn't want to stop. Before leaving, the protesters put the books back on the shelves. Almost two hours after the sit-in started, it was over.

Bobby ran the three blocks to Tucker's office to tell him the protesters had been arrested. Lawyer Tucker was ready. News of the sit-in traveled fast. By then about 300 people were outside the library watching and waiting to see what would happen next. Newspaper reporters wrote down what they saw. Photographers took pictures. The crowd watched as Officer Kelley walked the protesters down the library steps to take them to the police station. There the protesters were charged with "trespassing." Under "Jim Crow" laws, it was



Alexandria Black History Museum

**William Evans, Otto Tucker, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray and Clarence Strange arrested by Officer John P. Kelly.**

illegal for African Americans to be in the public library. They were released to their parents, who were Alexandria residents and taxpayers, and told to come back to court the next day.

In court, Lawyer Tucker defended them saying, “These tax-paying citizens have as much right to be in the library as anyone else.” The judge agreed and changed the charge to “disorderly conduct.”

Tucker was ready for this too when he began to question the witnesses. He asked the police officer, then the librarian, the same questions, “Were these men destroying property?”

“No.”

“Were they properly attired for the library?”

“Yes.”

“Were they making any noise?”

“No.”

“If they had been white would they have been arrested for disorderly conduct?”

“No.”

“Then they were disorderly only because they were black,” Lawyer Tucker asked.

“Yes,” both the police officer and the librarian agreed.<sup>4</sup>



Alexandria Library, Local History and Special Collection

Alexandria Library, 1957.



Alexandria Black History Museum

**Robert Robinson Library, 1940.**

Judge James Reese Duncan delayed the case several times, and in the end, never made a ruling. The protesters were never convicted. They never went to jail, just as Tucker promised. But, the sit-in did not change the library's rules.

Alexandria quickly built a new and separate library for its black citizens. On April 24, 1940, nine months after the sit-in, the Robert Robinson Library at 638 North Alfred Street in Alexandria opened. It was smaller than the Alexandria Library and cost half as much to build. The books were old. The furniture was used. The librarian was paid half as much as the librarian at the Alexandria Library.

Some African American parents were happy to have a library where their children could borrow books and listen to the librarian read stories. Others were disappointed. The Robinson Library was separate, and definitely not equal.

Samuel Tucker was disgusted. A separate library for blacks, that was not as good as the library for whites, was not what he wanted. He wrote a letter to Katharine H. Scoggin, the Alexandria librarian, saying, "I refuse and always will refuse to accept a library card at the Robinson Library."<sup>5</sup> He wanted everyone in Alexandria to use the same public library. That wouldn't happen for another twenty years!



Alexandria Library, Local History and Special Collection

**Inside the Alexandria Library, 1957.**

The 1939 Alexandria Library sit-in did not have the immediate result Samuel Tucker and the protesters wanted. The sit-in was reported by local newspapers and in African American newspapers in Chicago, New York and Pittsburg, but headlines changed when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 and World War II began.

Without the result they wanted, Tucker and the protesters went on with their lives. Several protesters joined the U.S. Army and after the war, took government jobs in Washington, DC. In a 1985 interview, Buddy Evans said he was disappointed the library protesters never got the recognition for their brave act of civil disobedience that he felt they deserved. He said, "I was proud that I did it, that I was one of the five to do it, [but] it wasn't publicized as much as I thought it should have been."<sup>6</sup> Some people believe World War II put the momentum of the civil rights movement on hold while African American soldiers fought for freedom in far-off places. When they returned, they were ready to fight again for equal rights at home.

Samuel Tucker served in the Army's 366<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, a segregated unit, unique because it had black officers. He was one of the officers, rising from First Lieutenant to Major between 1941 and 1946. Near the end of the war, he was stationed in Northern Italy as the Executive Officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Headquarters Company.

Returning to civilian life, Tucker resumed his legal practice in Emporia and Richmond, Virginia. In his fifty-year career, he argued hundreds of school desegregation and discrimination cases all over Virginia. In the 1960s, he was a partner in the Richmond law firm of Hill, Tucker and Marsh, Virginia's leading black civil rights law firm. In 1964, he helped reopen Prince Edward County, Virginia schools that the school board closed for five years rather than desegregate. In 1968, fourteen years after their *Brown* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Tucker's *Green v. New Kent County*, that school boards could no longer delay public school desegregation with vouchers for private schools and freedom of choice plans. School Boards across America had to show immediate progress desegregating public schools.

Tucker was a brilliant legal strategist, and also a practical realist. In a 1985 interview, reflecting on the continuing struggle for equal rights for all, he knew that eliminating racial discrimination would take time. He also faced the reality that those resistant to this change would put up roadblocks to impede progress. He urged future generations to persevere by saying, "We need to keep what progress we've made and keep fighting to get more. We've got to keep our story told."<sup>7</sup>

It took many years and many people who didn't give in and didn't give up to pass laws that outlawed racial segregation in America. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v Board of Education* that public schools must be desegregated. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation in public places and banned discrimination in employment. With these and other laws, progress was made, but there is still much work to be done to realize freedom and justice for all Americans.

Today, the Robert Robinson Library is a permanent gallery in Alexandria's Black History Museum. The museum preserves and shares the history of Alexandria's African American residents, enslaved and free, through exhibits and its research archives. Tucker's trailblazing sit-in and determined persistence to fight for justice and equal opportunity were recognized in September 2000 when Alexandria City Public Schools named their new school Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School to honor a hometown hero and inspire today's young people.

In 1960, the Alexandria Library integrated the Queen Street library and opened its doors to everyone. On anniversaries of the sit-in, the library holds special events to remember this historic first and honor the courageous protesters

who sat down to stand up for justice and equal opportunity. For the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the sit-in was reenacted by local actors and filmed for a documentary about this little-known peaceful act of civil disobedience. On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sit-in, third graders from Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School performed a play about the sit-in they created when they were in first grade.

The original Alexandria Library building on Queen Street is now the Kate Waller Barrett Branch of the Alexandria Public Library. In addition to regular library collections and services, the branch has a resource and research room for Local History and Special Collections. Inside the library's front door is a plaque commemorating the sit-in and remembering the young protesters who challenged segregation on August 21, 1939. In part, it reads, "The act of these five men in defying a discriminatory regulation was one of the earliest examples of a tactic successfully employed by a later generation to undermine racial segregation across the nation. This plaque is placed here so that the names of these five courageous citizens--William Evans, Otto Tucker, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray and Clarence "Buck" Strange—will forever remain a part of the collective memory of our community."<sup>8</sup>

Eighty years after the Alexandria Library sit-in, we remember these ordinary Alexandria citizens whose nonviolent act of civil disobedience and arrest for wanting to read in a public library is an historic first in American civil rights history.

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### **About the Author**

Nancy Noyes Silcox is the author of *Samuel Wilbert Tucker: The Story of a Civil Rights Trailblazer and the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-in*. History4All, Inc., 2014. Silcox learned about Tucker and the library sit-in when she was the first librarian at Alexandria's Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School. She knew this was a little-known story that needed to be told and wanted young readers to be inspired to continue the pursuit of equality for all. Information in the book and this article came from primary sources – interviews, newspaper articles, letters and public records. She lives in Arlington, VA and is working on a picture book about the library sit-in for young readers. Her website is <https://nancynoyessilcox.com>.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Samuel Wilbert Tucker and Otto Tucker, January 18, 1985, part 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "5 Arrested For Using City Library In Virginia; Case Puzzles Judge." *Chicago Defender* 2 Sept. 1939: 1.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Samuel Wilbert Tucker to Katharine H. Scoggin, 14 Feb. 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with William Evans, 18 Jan. 1985, part 2.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Samuel Wilbert Tucker, 18 Jan. 1985, part 5.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Waller Barrett Branch plaque, Alexandria Library.

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