

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Thomas Fountain Blue

(March 6, 1866 – November 10, 1935)

"First Black Man to Head a Public Library"

Thomas Fountain Blue was born March 6, 1866, in Farmville, Virginia. His parents were former slaves. He graduated from Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in 1888. After college, he taught school in Virginia. He attended Richmond Theological Seminary and graduated in April of 1898 with a Bachelor of Divinity. During the Spanish American War, Thomas served in the Sixth Virginia Volunteers and was stationed in Camp Poland in Tennessee and Camp Haskell in Georgia. In 1899, after the war, he moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where he oversaw the Colored Branch of the Louisville Y.M.C.A. (Young Men's Christian Association). He also served on a number of civic associations, including as a charter member of the Louisville Chapter of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History later named Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 1973.

On September 23, 1905, Thomas, now referred to as "Reverend Blue" was chosen to head the Louisville Western Colored Branch Library, the first public library in the nation to serve black patrons with an all-black staff. This "library" consisted of three small rented rooms located in a private residence.

In 1908, the library moved into a larger space in the Carnegie Building, located at 10th and Chestnut Street. In 1914, Thomas opened the 2nd Carnegie Branch Library, in Eastern Louisville.

In 1919, a "Colored Department" was created in the Kentucky public library system, the first of its kind organization in any public library system in the United States. The department covered two Carnegie locations, two junior high schools and 29 additional locations filled with books to be checked out in Louisville and Jefferson County. During the 1921 Joint District Meeting of Indiana and Kentucky Librarians and Trustees, Rev. Blue and his assistant Rachel D. Harris gave attendees a tour of the library's Western Colored Branch. Rachel D. Harris went on to become the first black woman to manage a Public Library.

With the growing number of locations, Thomas saw the need for library apprenticeship classes for future librarians. In 1922 at the Annual Meeting of the American Library Association in Detroit, Michigan, he presented a paper titled, "Work with the Negro Roundtable". In his paper, he talked about the librarian training class he started at the Western Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. His training class was the first library training program offered in the South for black students interested in working as a librarian, and was in operation from 1912 until 1931. His class drew the attention of aspiring black librarians from as far as Houston, Texas and as close as Virginia. The growing interest in library service led to the establishment of the Hampton Library School at Hampton Institute in Virginia in September 1925, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. At the time, there was only one other accredited library school in the South, Atlanta (now Emory University Library School). Thomas married Cornelia Phillips Johnson in 1925. Together they had two sons.

Rev. Thomas F. Blue served the Louisville Free Public Library, from 1905 until his death on November 10, 1935. His achievements in library services garnered him national recognition as a pioneer in the field of public service.

In December 2023, the Louisville Free Public Library Foundation launched the Thomas Fountain Blue Innovation Fund in honor of Thomas. The fund provides support for librarians and local branches for reading programs, resources, books, maintenance of library spaces and to combat budget cuts that impact the availability of the resources. The fund also covers a \$10,000 grant to support specific areas such as Innovation, Access and Equity, Awareness and Engagement, and Capacity Building for the system.

When Thomas and his wife Cornelia were buried, they were placed in an unmarked grave. On July 16, 2022, a headstone identifying their gravesite was installed. Their granddaughter and great-granddaughter were present for the installation.

