

Black History Month: Remembering Civil Rights Leader Samuel Tucker

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A few blocks from Virginia Tech's location in Old Town Alexandria stands a neglected monument to the American Civil Rights movement.

The library entrance at 717 Queen Street looks almost as it did 1937 shortly after it was constructed with New Deal labor and funding. Like the society around it, today's Kate Waller Barrett Branch Library was transformed by the intervening years. But the entrance at 717 Queen Street stands as a reminder of the first nonviolent sit-in of the American Civil Rights movement, an August 1939 protest organized by a 26-year-old attorney named Samuel Tucker.

On a Monday morning August 21, 1939, five young African-American men ages 18 to 22 entered the Queen Street library. One at a time, four approached the front desk and asked assistant librarian Alice Green for a borrowers' card. The new Alexandria Library was for whites only, so assistant librarian Green gently refused. Each of the young men then picked a book from the library stacks, sat down alone at a library table and began reading. In the heat of the moment, the fifth protester Buddy Evans went straight to the stacks, neglecting to request a card, and like the others he sat at a separate table to read in silence.

Green pleaded with the young men and the library's page William Adam was dispatched to summon head librarian Katharine Scoggin. Arriving at her home, Adam reportedly cried out to her, "Oh mercy, Miss Scoggin, there's colored people all over the library!" In one of only a handful of detailed published accounts, S.J. Ackerman (2000) continues:

Outside the library, the authorities found about 300 spectators, including a suspiciously timely press contingent. Scoggin entered and requested that the renegade readers depart. Their reply was the polite rustle of turning pages. Police officer Jack Kelley seconded Scoggin's request. Nobody budged.

"What would happen if we don't leave?" William "Buddy" Evans, age 19, finally asked.

"Then I would have to arrest you," Kelley replied.

"Well, we are staying."

The officers reluctantly did their duty. Everybody walked out together into the soggy sunlight in orderly fashion, without handcuffs or a straggle.

The grainy black and white photo shows five young men as they emerge from the library with an Alexandria policeman; the young men are sharply attired, exuding confidence and discipline. The architect of the 1939 sit-in was civil rights pioneer Samuel Wilbert Tucker. Tucker was born just a few blocks away at 916 Queen Street. Scarred by the injustices of segregation-era Alexandria, Tucker remarked, "I got involved in the civil rights movement on June 18, 1913. I was born black."

When Tucker was ready for high school, the closest Virginia school open to African Americans was in Manassas. Like many others he rode the trolley into DC and walked two miles to Washington's Armstrong Manual Training School, a famed school for African Americans founded in 1902 around the ideas of Booker T. Washington. Tucker went on to Howard University where he learned from among others law professor and NAACP attorney Charles Houston and theologian Howard Thurman. While traveling in India, Thurman observed first-hand the non-violent protest movement lead by Mahatma Gandhi. Thurman and his wife visited with Gandhi in Bardoli, remembering that Gandhi sat with them, set down his silver watch face up and remarked, "We have three hours to talk; let us not waste a moment" (Burden 1953).



August 21, 1939 – The *Alexandria Gazette* reported five men arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct, "Otis L. Tucker, 22, 916 Queen Street; Edward Gaddis, 21, 335 North Patrick Street; Morris Murray, 22, 813 Prince Street; William Evans, 19, 610 S. St. Asaph Street; and Clarence Strange, 807

With great prescience, Gandhi encouraged Thurman to carry the message of nonviolent resistance to those participating in the American civil rights movement.

When Tucker finished his undergraduate education at Howard University, no Virginia law schools were open to African Americans. Tucker studied independently and passed the Virginia bar exam at the age of 20. As a young attorney, Tucker opened an office at 901 Princess Street and, by 1939, was challenging racial segregation in Alexandria on a number of fronts. He was particularly galled by the whites-only Alexandria Library, built only a few years earlier with federal resources.

Meeting secretly in his office, Tucker trained 11 young men in the tactics of nonviolent resistance. Under pressure from their families a handful dropped out. Six participated on August 21. Five were arrested; a sixth, Bobby Strange, returned to Tucker's office reporting the arrests.

In court, Tucker fought Alexandria's city attorney to a draw. Reluctant to rule on the case, the judge permitted a series of continuances and simply never recalled the case before his court. No ruling was ever made. Meanwhile, world events loomed. The same newspapers that reported the arrests of five protesters in Alexandria, the same day announced the non-aggression pact Hitler-Stalin marking Europe's march to war.

The City of Alexandria also capitulated – not by desegregating the whites-only library at 717 Queen Street – but by constructing a public borrowing room for the city's African American residents to use. The Robert Robinson Library was housed in a small building that is now part of the Alexandria's Black History Museum at 902 Wythe Street. Smaller and less-well-resourced, this Jim Crow library was a bitter pill for Tucker, who continued to protest segregation at the Queen Street library.

After World War II military service, Tucker continued to fight for Civil Rights through the courts. He led the NAACP's challenge to segregation in Virginia, moving his family to the counties of rural southern Virginia where he was commonly the only African-American attorney. Tucker ultimately filed suits in 50 cities and counties pressuring local officials to comply with Supreme Court rulings (Ackerman 2000). Tucker even argued several civil rights cases before the Supreme Court, including the landmark case *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968).

Tucker passed away in 1990. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. His legacy is remembered, among other honors, by the Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in Alexandria named after Tucker in 1999. A plaque at the entrance of the Kate Waller Barrett branch library commemorates the extraordinary events of August 21, 1939. Yet, as we commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Greensboro, NC lunch-counter sit-ins that helped spark a revolution, the Alexandria sit-in two decades earlier is largely forgotten. It reminds us that America's fight for racial equality is story of resistance not in a few dramatic cases, but by millions of Americans over many decades.

Last fall, participants in my applied research methods course (PAPA 6514: Policy Inquiry) in Alexandria took part in the "Second Annual Samuel Tucker Walk." We walked past Tucker's boyhood home, his office, and the Queen Street library where we discussed that day's events. One of the points I emphasize in the course is the problem of "missing" observations or sample selection is among the fundamental issues students of public policy encounter. Sometimes what we DON'T observe tells us something important about the story as a whole.

Sources

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