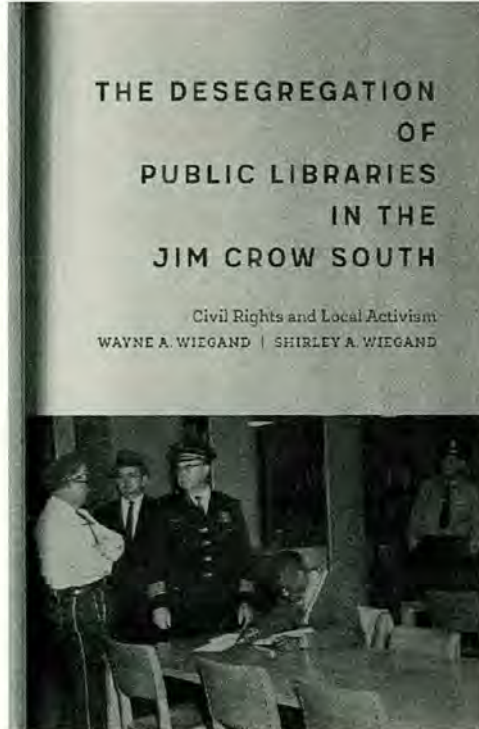


## NOTES

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## The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South: Civil Rights and Local Activism

By Wayne A. Wiegand and Shirley A. Wiegand

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REVIEWED BY JOSEPH BAGLEY

Wayne and Shirley Wiegand, professors of American Studies and law, respectively, recount the history of "read-ins" in public libraries in the South in the 1960s. *The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South* is a useful compliment to Cheryl Knott's *Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow*,

which devotes a brief concluding chapter to desegregation, and Patterson Toby Graham's *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900–1965*. The Weigands argue that southern public libraries functioned as "sites for trial



and error desegregation” that often sparked wider efforts to desegregate public accommodations (205).

Though CORE, the NAACP, and SNCC coordinated local efforts, it was local black youths’ “energy, courage, and determination” that “allowed those organizations to achieve their goals” (14), and local activists often acted independently. This book shines a bright and direct light on those actions in places like Memphis, Danville, Jackson, Hattiesburg, Columbus, and rural Louisiana. Read-ins and subsequent jail-ins are nothing new to civil rights historiography, but—then and now—coverage has been sparse, despite the sometimes seminal or central role that they played at the local level.

The authors indicate that read-ins and the white reaction to them varied significantly from place to place, but the typical experience saw small groups of local black activists enter the whites-only main branch of a city or town library system and attempt to check out books, receive library cards, or to just grab books or newspapers and sit down to read. They were rebuffed and told that they could use the black branch or black bookmobile. If they elected to stay upon being told to leave, they were arrested for breach of the peace or loitering or some other specious charge. Unless they had alerted the press in advance, their efforts went largely unnoticed.

Many localities quietly desegregated their libraries in response to the persistence of activists, but sometimes they did so to avoid protests. In either case, this could lead to what whites sardonically called “vertical integration,” or the removal of tables and chairs so that white patrons would not have to sit next to black patrons. Activists sometimes had to file lawsuits to force the issue, and the Weigands pay due and welcome attention to litigation. The most interesting case they examine is *Brown v. Louisiana* (383 U.S. 131, [1966]), a criminal case that local attorneys affiliated with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the general counsel of CORE appealed all the way to the US Supreme Court.

Harry Brown and four others had been charged with disturbing the peace when they engaged in a read-in in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to overturn the convictions. Justice Abe Fortas called it “sad” that a racial confrontation had occurred in such a “hallowed” place (183-84). But he insisted that public libraries could not discriminate in regulating access, and he observed that the protestors were peaceful and orderly and were, therefore, not disturbing the peace. Justice Hugo Black entered a dissent in which he claimed that there was



“simply no racial discrimination practiced in this case” and that “groups that think they have been mistreated or that have actually been mistreated” did not “have a constitutional right to ... protest whatever, wherever, whenever they want without regard to whom such conduct may disturb” (183). The decision led most libraries to accept desegregation as a *fait accompli*.

The book’s final chapter is an indictment of the American Library Association (ALA) for its failure to proactively oppose segregation. The Weigands seek to debunk the “professional myth” that “opposing censorship, defending intellectual freedom, and offering neutral service to all people characterized the entire history of Twentieth Century librarianship” (209). They argue that the ALA—fearful of losing southern dues-payers—stood aside while local black activists and a few sympathetic white librarians fought their battles unassisted.

The authors devote a chapter to Georgia, though it focuses on the Albany Movement’s familiar actions in 1962. Albany’s Carnegie Library was among the public accommodations targeted by activists and became “the first public facility to be truly integrated” in the city (140). The Weigands maintain that police chief Laurie Pritchett deserves credit for ensuring that local police did not violently engage protestors, a claim that should give civil rights historians pause: Pritchett took this approach only because he knew it would prevent the practitioners of civil disobedience from exposing the violence endemic in the Jim Crow South and thus thwart the Albany campaign. The chapter includes a few paragraphs on voluntary library desegregation in Savannah in 1961, prior to any demonstrations, and in Columbus, following read-ins, in 1963.

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