

Mollie Huston Lee:

Founder of Raleigh's Public Black Library

by Patrick Valentine

Mollie Lee "talked of her library as though it was a living entity of vast importance."

— W. E. B. DuBois¹

As children "we went religiously to the Richard B. Harrison Library."

— Audrey V. Wall²

Mollie H. Huston Lee was an energetic apostle for libraries and for her race at a time and place that gave little respect to either. Whatever her personal feelings may have been, she knew how to work within the existing power structure to bring libraries and their treasures to her people. Her great achievement lay in developing, maintaining, and increasing public library service to the African American people of Raleigh and Wake County while never losing the dream of ensuring equal library service for everyone. When people would not come to the library, she took a "market basket in hand" and brought books to them — and more.³ The esteem in which she was held later in life is indicated by her selection as an UNESCO library delegate and her appointment as a trustee of the State Library of North Carolina.⁴

Although public library service was extended to Blacks in Charlotte in 1905, Raleigh had to wait another thirty years.⁵ No documentation appears to exist today that can explain the long delay — there were twelve Black public libraries in operation across the state by 1935⁶ — but White resistance, including that of librarians, was largely to blame. While some White librarians were in favor of extending services to Blacks, little was done in most areas of the state.⁷ Whatever the truth may be, Mollie Huston Lee was in the forefront of those advocating and working for such a library in Raleigh. She helped

persuade the White mayor of Raleigh, George A. Isley, to form a biracial committee in 1935 to establish a "Negro Library."⁸ She was not alone in her desire, and the push for the library must have aroused strong and wide support to win the mayor's quick action, not just in the African American community but among powerful Whites as well.⁹ It is notable that Raleigh had the first biracial governing library board in the South.¹⁰

African Americans in North Carolina had largely lost the right to vote early in the 1900s. Economically and socially, as well as politically, they were segregated and held down. But by the 1920s, some White support was evident for increasing their access to educational and other cultural institutions. Within the Black community, segregation had the effect of strengthening Black-owned businesses and institutions, so that by the time of the Depression, North Carolina had a small but firmly entrenched African American elite of small business owners, ministers, and educators. Black women like Mrs. Lee often were better educated and maybe freer than their male counterparts to stand up to and manipulate the establishment.¹¹ Still, the attempt to foster Black library access in Davidson and Mecklenburg counties in the late 1920s, funded by the Rosenwald Foundation, had mixed results at best.¹²

One of the most remarkable things about Mollie Huston Lee was that was she was not raised in the South and was

not returning from college to help her people: she had a bright and relatively easy future stretching before her in the North. Lee had been raised in Columbus, Ohio, attended Howard University, and then took her library degree at Columbia University in New York in 1930 — where she was the first African American to graduate. She then chose to work at Shaw University in Raleigh, where she served as librarian until the Richard B. Harrison Library opened on November 12, 1935. It may be unusual today for a college librarian to enter public library ranks, but the situation was much more fluid then. As a college librarian, she had been instrumental in the founding of what became the Negro Library Association of North Carolina.¹³

While the Harrison collection, named after a recently deceased professor of drama at North Carolina A&T College famous for his role as "De Lawd" in the popular play, *Green Pastures*, contained only 890 books, they were public books, accessible to all, managed by a professional librarian paid by the public. The city of Raleigh agreed to pay \$2,500 and the county \$750 for support of the Harrison Library.¹⁴ At this time, one-third of Wake County was Black, with an average income considerably less than that of Whites who themselves earned only slightly more than half the national average. Two-thirds of the African Americans in the county lived in rural areas.¹⁵

Within two years, the Harrison Li-

brary held 3,310 volumes, was open 42 hours a week, and had an annual circulation of almost 15,000. This compared favorably with many of the 17 other Black public libraries in existence in North Carolina. (Greensboro, whose White business community had given early support to the concept of a Black public library, funded its Negro library at 26¢ per Black person and Durham, which had a vigorous Black business community, provided 17¢ while Raleigh and Asheville managed only 10¢.)¹⁶

Lee was not content to rest, but looked upon it as her duty to provide library services for all the Blacks, whether they lived in the city or not, whether they particularly concerned themselves with libraries and books or not. As she told a radio audience in 1951, "a public library is the recorded memory of mankind, serving the community. Its function is to make available to all, information and thought in all fields of human knowledge and experience and to help each person, whatever his interest may be, to find and use the books and other library facilities and material which best serve his needs."¹⁷ One of her major achievements was building what was later called the "Lee Collection" of books by and about African Americans.¹⁸ Lee also directed many innovative programs

aimed at reaching and uplifting blacks. Under her direction, the Harrison Library in 1941 established a branch in Apex and shared the use of a bookmobile for the rural areas of the county.¹⁹ In addition to her regular duties, she served as part-time supervisor of the Raleigh school libraries. In 1943, she helped to organize a five-day workshop at Shaw University on operating Negro public libraries.²⁰ The next year, under her prodding, Wake County purchased for Harrison its own bookmobile.²¹ By this time 45 counties provided some library service to Negroes, a situation State Librarian Marjorie Beal was determined to improve.²²

In 1949, Beal recommended the employment of a full-time Negro supervisor of rural libraries as part of a nine-point program for improving Black public libraries.²³ While she did not get all she wanted, she did get permission to hire

a part-time assistant — and naturally chose Mollie Huston Lee. Lee held this position while also maintaining her job



Mollie Huston Lee arranges books before the opening of the new library building in 1948. Richard B. Harrison collection. Photo courtesy of Wake County Public Library.



Bookmobile staff bring books to tobacco worker, 1940s. Richard B. Harrison collection. Photo courtesy of Wake County Public Library.

as the Harrison librarian — perhaps a wise precaution as the state job died away after Beal left in 1950. The cause, effect, and sequence of Lee's departure remain unclear. Beal herself considered Lee "a stimulating influence for Negro library development."²⁴

But on the local front, pressure was mounting to combine the Richard B. Harrison with the White Olivia Raney Library and then add other town libraries to create a comprehensive county-wide system. Negotiations were long and somewhat tortuous — at one point some at Olivia Raney wanted to merge with the State Library! Part of the problem in Wake, as elsewhere, was a general indifference to libraries on the part of the public.²⁵ In 1965, after six long years of dispute, the city merged the Raney and Harrison libraries, but kept the individual facilities open. The new system, called the Olivia Raney Library, Inc., had a biracial, 22 member board. Only after 1970 did a true county-wide system emerge.²⁶

Combining libraries and merging staffs and policies is never easy, and can be made better or worse depending on the personalities and circumstances involved. Differences in cataloging, acquisition, personnel policies, staffing levels, and outreach services affect the process. Even leaving aside the delicate business of Black-White integration, the list of potential trouble goes on. Records about such matters, as for library integration itself, tend to be sketchy.²⁷ We do know that Lee was in favor of the merger, for financial if no other reason, as was William O'Shea, director of the combined system, for administrative if no other reason.²⁸ Both worked together to harness what could be, and in some other systems has been, a difficult merger.

Lee remained in charge of the Harrison Branch Library until her retirement in 1972, at which time there was an outpouring of community and staff love and respect.²⁹ She had committed her life to a southern Black community that had little voice and fewer resources. She had insisted on helping others and making them help themselves. She knew the power of reading and good books and worked tirelessly to promote them. Yet she also knew how to work within the system to promote the best goals of both races.

Mollie H. Huston Lee died unexpectedly on January 26, 1982. Her husband, Dr. James S. Lee, retired head of the Biology Department at North Carolina Central University, had predeceased her, and a son and two grand-

children survived her.³⁰ Her legacy in Raleigh and North Carolina and the South remains and has grown.

References

¹ Quoted in Ray Nichols Moore, "Mollie Huston Lee: A Profile," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 49 (1975): 434. This excellent article (pp. 432-439) remains a prime source for information about Lee and her times.

² Oral interview in Linda Simmons-Henry and Linda Harris Edmisten, *Culture Town: Life in Raleigh's African American Communities* (Raleigh: Raleigh Historic Districts Commission, 1993), 83.

³ Moore, "Mollie Huston Lee." See also Benjamin F. Speller, Jr., "Mollie Huston Lee," *Notable Black American Women*, Jessie Carney Smith, editor (Detroit: Gale Research, c1992), II, 406-408; Benjamin F. Speller, Jr., and James R. Jarrell, "Profiles of Pioneers: Selected North Carolina Black Librarians," *The Black Librarian in the Southeast: Reminiscences, Activities, Challenges*, ed. by Annette L. Phinazee (School of Library Science, North Carolina Central University, 1980), 78-81; Virginia Lacy Jones, "A Dean's Career," *The Black Librarian in America*, ed. E. J. Josey (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1970), 35; and A. P. Marshall, "The Search for Identity," *ibid.*, 179.

⁴ North Carolina State Library, *News Letter* (October 1961) 27; "Scott Announces Posts," *News and Observer* (April 13, 1972), 68.

⁵ See Patrick M. Valentine, "Steel, Cotton and Tobacco: Philanthropy and Public Libraries in North Carolina, 1900-1940," *Libraries & Culture* 31 (Spring 1996): 272-298; and "The Spread of Public Libraries: The Community of the Book in North Carolina, 1900-1960," *North Carolina Libraries* (Fall 1996): 113-121.

⁶ Asheville, Charlotte, Durham, Greensboro, Henderson, Laurinburg, Lexington, Raleigh, Thomasville, Weldon, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem. It appears that the libraries in Oteen and Hendersonville also served African Americans. ("North Carolina Libraries 1935-1936," statistics compiled by the North Carolina Library Commission.) High Point, New Bern, Hendersonville, Rocky Mount, Sanford, and Warrenton added Black branches the next year.

⁷ See Minutes, North Carolina Library Association, 3rd Biennial Conference, November 2, 1927; and North Carolina Library Commission, 62.9, Administrative Section, Minutes,

meetings of September 30, 1924 and September 22, 1927 (both in North Carolina Department of Archives and History). Typically, a tenth of the state's appropriation for library work, mainly for traveling libraries, would "be used for Negro library work." *North Carolina Library Bulletin* 6 (December 1926): 202. The first two librarians at Raleigh's White Olivia Raney Library had no library training. (Jonathan Daniels remembered them as "old maiden ladies ... whose qualifications as librarians were that there was then no old age assistance roll upon which their influential relatives could put them." "Address before the American Library Association, in Philadelphia, July 8, 1955," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection [cited hereafter as SHC], Jonathan Daniels papers, 3466, folder 2268, p. 11.) The first trained librarian was Miss Clyde Smith, who was hired in 1936. While library officials later claimed that Olivia Raney's state charter limited its service to Whites only, this charter was amended in 1927 to allow services to Negroes.

⁸ Race nomenclature remains a sensitive and shifting field. This paper will use "Black" and "African American" interchangeably. Earlier terms will be used where historically appropriate. For instance, the first Black library, in Charlotte, later called the Brevard Street Library (or Branch), was titled the "Charlotte Public Library for Colored People" for years. In the late 1940s Weldon and High Point had "Negro Branches" while Asheville had a "Colored Public Library."

⁹ See for instance, A. T. White, Chairman, (Library) Location Committee, to Drs. [Lemuel T.] Delany and [George] Evans, September 18, 1935, and WRAL radio typescript, 16th Anniversary of Richard B. Harrison Library, in the "Harrison Library — History" files, Richard B. Harrison Branch Library [cited hereafter as RBH]. Delany and Evans agreed to give the entire first floor of their building to the library. That Mayor Isley became chairman of the library board, which consisted of three Whites and three Blacks, surely was a compliment to Lee's abilities.

¹⁰ Eliza Atkins Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), n. 13, p. 82. On the composition of the board, which included Julia B. Delany, an instructor at St. Augustine College, and Pearl L. Byrd, supervisor of North Carolina colored elementary schools, see *News and Observer* (November 12, 1935): 10. Julia Brown Delany was Dr. Lemuel Delany's wife. ("Raleigh Physician Dies," *News & Observer* (January 10, 1956), 3.)

¹¹ Note in particular the pioneering but largely forgotten work of John R. Larkins, *The Negro Population of North Carolina: Social and Economic*, Special Bulletin #23 (Raleigh: N. C. State Board of Charities and Public Welfare, 1943); "The Negro Population of North Carolina, 1945-1955," typescript, North Carolina State Board of Public Welfare (August 1957); and *Patterns of Leadership Among Negroes in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Irving-Swain Press, 1959). Good background studies are Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance company, based in Durham, was of course not a "small business" but had tentacles reaching into every Black community in the state. Its agents were often aspiring and prospering members of the local elite, but they were hard pressed by the Depression.

¹² James V. Carmichael Jr., "Tommie Dora Barker and Southern Librarianship" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987); and Valentine, "Steel, Cotton and Tobacco," offer the most recent assessment and further references.

¹³ "Colored Library Conference Meets at Shaw University," typescript, "Negroes — N.C. — Libraries," RBH files. (The author thanks Wanda Cox-Bailey for her help in using the wonderful materials at Harrison.) See also Mollie Huston Lee, "Development of Negro Libraries in North Carolina," *North Carolina Libraries* III (May 1944): 1-2. Most of the professionally trained Black librarians working in North Carolina were from the Hampton Library School, with one each from Simmons, Michigan and Columbia (Lee). Albert P. Marshall, "The North Carolina Negro Library Association," *Handbook of Black Librarianship*, comp. & ed. E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1977), 54-57.

¹⁴ Cited in George Stradley Browning, "The Services of the Richard B. Harrison Public Library, Raleigh, North Carolina," (Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1962), 4. The Olivia Raney Library received \$7,000 from Ra-

leigh and \$3,250 from Wake County. "North Carolina Libraries 1935-1936, statistics compiled by the North Carolina Library Commission."

¹⁵ Additional statistics for Wake can be found in Charles S. Johnson, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties...* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 192.

¹⁶ The statewide average for communities that provided Negro library service — and reported on it — was 6¢ per capita per year. Based on "News Notes prepared by the North Carolina Library Commission," October 28, 1937. Over half the state did not provide any library service to Blacks.

¹⁷ WRAL radio transcript.

¹⁸ This collection was especially important at a time when Black researchers were not welcome at mainstream institutions. See John Hope Franklin, *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 288-289; and Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33-36.

¹⁹ Mollie Huston Lee, "Development of Negro Libraries in North Carolina," *North Carolina Libraries* III, (May 1944): 3. Hertford County had the first Black bookmobile in the state, in 1939, and Durham the second. Blacks in Hertford raised over \$1,000 for their bookmobile, and later another \$500 for a permanent branch library. *North Carolina Libraries Newsletter* (3 May 1938). RBH, on the other hand, shared its bookmobile with the Olivia Raney Library. On foreign reaction to the use of bookmobiles in Raleigh and Wilson, see "Library System in South Lauded," *News and Observer* (6 March 1949), 12.

²⁰ "Library Studies Will Open Today," *News and Observer* (19 June 1944), 10. Mrs. Ann Robinson also served at RBH. North Carolina Library Commission *News Letter*, November 18, 1946), 2. Beatrice R. Hamlin, who later received her graduate degree from North Carolina Central University, became the children's librarian at Harrison in 1952. Oral interview, *Culture Town*, 139-143.

²¹ By 1949 ten counties had bookmobiles for African Americans and another 13 shared a bookmobile between Whites and Blacks. See "North Carolina Negro Public Library Service — 1949" map (RBH files).

²² Marjorie Beal, ed., "Libraries in North Carolina: A survey, 1946-1947" (mimeograph, Raleigh: North Carolina Library Association, 1948), 19.

²³ Public Libraries Section report, NCLA Records, Vol. 1, 1937-1951, (un-

cataloged files, State Library of North Carolina), 3. The North Carolina Negro Library Association had first broached the idea in 1944 to the legislature. Lee, "Development of Negro Libraries," 2. Beal's efforts in many directions, during a difficult time, have gone largely unappreciated.

²⁴ Beal, "Libraries in North Carolina," 19. See also North Carolina Library Commission, *News Letter* (November 18, 1946), 2. For an example of Lee's work at the State Library, see "Bibliographies of Holdings of North Carolina Libraries" and the reactions it spawned. SHC, 3823, North Carolina Council on Interracial Cooperation, folder 52. Another example is Lee's candid report on the Brevard Street and Fairview Homes branches in Mecklenburg County, May 13, 1948, uncataloged files, State Library of North Carolina.

²⁵ For instance, in 1960 a bond issue passed in Wake County but a library tax vote did not. Valerie W. Lovett, ed., "A Closer Look: A Community Analysis and Library Evaluation of Wake County" (Raleigh: Department of the Wake County Library, 1979). As Doris Rosemond commented, "Selling libraries in North Carolina seems to be one of our problems, however." (Mrs. D. G. Rosemond to McNeill Smith, United States Commission on Civil Rights, North Carolina Advisory Committee, Duke University, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library Box 3, September 2, 1960. Rosemond was head of the Wilson County Negro Library.)

²⁶ See the extensive material under "Wake County Public Library," uncataloged files, State Library of North Carolina. In 1951 Lee had established a second branch library, in Washington Terrace. North Carolina Library Commission *News Letter* (March 1951), 4.

²⁷ See, for example, the paucity of materials in the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 52-A, even though use of public libraries was a major focus of the Commission.

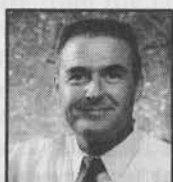
²⁸ For the latter, personal conversation with Bill O'Shea in 1980.

²⁹ See Charlotte Hilton Green, "Out-of-Doors in Carolina," *News & Observer*, June 18, 1972 V-11; Leon White, "Tar Heel of the Week," *ibid.*, April 1, 1971; Mary Day Mordecai, "Mrs. Mollie Lee and a Little Faith Built Richard B. Harrison Library." *ibid.*, June 2, 1972, 17

³⁰ In addition to sources noted above, see "Chairman Of NCC Dept. Of Biology Dies At Age Of 59," *Durham Morning Herald* (June 13, 1963).

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