

Alexandria Circuit Court Dismisses Charges Against Civil Rights Advocates at 1939 Library Sit-In

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On October 18, the Alexandria Circuit Court dismissed all charges against the participants in a 1939 sit-in to protest Alexandria's whites-only public library. After recent research by Alexandria Library staff determined that the original judge in the case never issued a ruling and the charges were technically still outstanding, Commonwealth's Attorney Bryan Porter asked the Court to dismiss the charges.

Although the five African American residents were charged with disorderly conduct, the Court has now found that they were "lawfully exercising their constitutional rights to free assembly, speech and to petition the government to alter the established policy of sanctioned segregation at the time of their arrest," and that "sitting peacefully in a library reading books ... was not in any fashion disorderly or likely to cause acts of violence." The Court determined that no laws had been broken and no criminal charges should have been filed.



"I applaud the recent action by the Commonwealth's Attorney and the Circuit Court to right an important part of the wrong that occurred 80 years ago," said Mayor Justin Wilson. "While the arc of the moral universe has just bent a little closer to justice, we know there remains much to be done to improve equality for all residents of Alexandria and our nation. Today's Alexandria Library is a thriving hub of learning and engagement for our diverse community, and I commend Library staff for commemorating our difficult history while working to create a bright future for all."

Mayor Wilson will present the [Court's order](#) to descendants of the sit-in participants at a panel discussion on Monday, October 21, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., at the Charles E. Beatley Jr. Central Library (5005 Duke St.). The event, which is open to the public, will also include questions from the audience, the presentation of a proclamation, the unveiling of new commemorative posters, and light refreshments. An activity will be available for children six years and older in the Story Time Room. The panel discussion is the culminating event in the Library's year of programming in honor of the 80th anniversary of the sit-in.

One of America's first civil rights sit-ins took place at the present-day Barrett Branch Library on Queen Street. At the time, it was the City's sole library and permitted only white patrons. After trying for several years to convince officials to establish equal access to community resources, 26 year-old resident and attorney Samuel Tucker organized five other African American residents to engage in a deliberate act of civil disobedience.

On August 21, 1939, William Evans, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray, Clarence Strange and Otto Tucker each asked to register for a library card. After being turned down, each sat silently at a different table and began to read a library book. Police officers arrested the group and charged them with disorderly conduct. The charges were never prosecuted, and instead the City quickly established a separate library for African Americans.

Samuel Tucker remained a leader in the war against segregation and intolerance, arguing groundbreaking civil rights cases statewide. He served as the lead lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Virginia, appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court four times, and was a founding partner in the prominent Richmond law firm, Hill, Tucker, and Marsh. In 2000, a decade after Tucker's passing, the Alexandria School Board named Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in his honor. The Alexandria Library held events in 2009 and 2014 to commemorate the 70th and 75th anniversaries of the 1939 protest.