

Full History of Nora Navra Library

The Nora Navra Library, originally called Branch 9, opened in two temporary locations in 1946, and was then dedicated in its current location at 1902 St. Bernard Avenue as the Nora Navra Library on May 2, 1954.

In 1946, New Orleans had existed for half-a-century as a completely segregated city under the separate but equal doctrine decreed by the Supreme Court's 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision. But change began appearing on the Crescent City's horizon as some local facilities--public housing, for example--showed signs of becoming more equal, while remaining separate.



During World War II, the New Orleans Public Library had begun to extend service to the local African-American community beyond the walls of the African-American only Dryades Branch located at the intersection of Dryads and Philips streets. Small book collections were placed in three of the newly-built public housing developments set aside for African-American residents. One of these stations, located at the St. Bernard project, ran into managerial problems and had to be closed at the end of 1944. At that time, however, Library officials expressed hope that they soon would be able

to open a permanent branch to serve black readers in the downtown section of the city.

Shortly after the end of the war, Library officials renewed their efforts to bring library service to the Seventh Ward. On June 12, 1946, they opened the system's ninth branch in temporary quarters at the Valena C. Jones Elementary School, 1901 North Galvez St. Mrs. Mildred Rousseve, a teacher and the wife of African-American historian Charles B. Rousseve, served briefly as branch head. When she returned to teaching, Mrs. Rousseve was succeeded at the branch by her daughter, Theresa. In her September 1946 monthly narrative report, the branch's first, Miss Rousseve noted that "when school began the children from Valena C. Jones came in very large groups... Many sixth, seventh, eighth grade, and high school students came in for reference work--usually in Literature, Science, and History."

The Library's space in the Jones school was temporary--it had to be returned to school use at the beginning of the fall term. While the Library Board of Directors was trying to solve that dilemma, a notice from the War Assets Administration came across the City Librarian's desk announcing the availability of surplus army huts at a reasonable cost. For \$302.40 the Library purchased two of the huts which city property workers were able to combine to form a structure with a single rectangular room measuring 32 feet by 54 feet. The city administration allowed the Library to place this new facility on a piece of vacant land at the intersection of St. Bernard Avenue and North Prieur St.

Though more substantial and "less temporary" than the space in the Jones school, the new library facility still lacked a permanent home.

The new Branch Nine opened on October 8, 1946. With the move from Valena C. Jones came an influx of new users, many of them from the nearby parochial school, Corpus Christi. At the end of Branch Nine's first year on St. Bernard Avenue, Theresa Rousseve was able to note that it "has provided amusement and education

to both young and old." The branch soon gained the enthusiastic support of community leaders within the Seventh Ward. In January, 1949, the new branch head, Dora Guichard, reported, "Attorney A.P. Tureaud visited the branch this month and promised to assist in getting adults to use it in larger numbers. He also came to our aid in handling the misconduct of some of the boys. He agrees that it is a community problem and should be handled by the Civic leaders. We have great hopes that much good will result."

In the meantime, during the period when the temporary branch was under construction, an event had taken place all the way across town that would have a tremendous impact on the future of the Seventh Ward library. On Friday, August 16, 1946, at Touro Infirmary, Miss Nora Navra passed away at the age of seventy-four. Miss Navra, an unmarried homemaker of Jewish ancestry, had been during her life a frequent user of the Napoleon branch library. When her will was finally probated in 1948, the Library Board received word that Miss Navra had left the major portion of her estate to be divided equally among the American Red Cross, Touro Infirmary, and the New Orleans

Public Library. On November 15, 1948, the Board accepted \$15,181.63 as NOPL's share in the Navra legacy. On that date, the Board authorized the use of the funds to purchase the remainder of the lot adjacent to the temporary structure for the eventual construction of a permanent Nora Navra Memorial Branch Library.

In October 1950 the Board selected Jules K. de la Vergne as architect for the new Navra facility. He soon produced preliminary plans, but lack of funding prevented further action for at least the next fourteen months. Early in 1953 the city administration finally committed \$15,000 for construction of the new branch and the Board selected the Union Construction Company to perform the work of transforming de la Vergne's now final plan into reality.

In August 1953 the Board authorized rental of a former drug store at 1700 North Galvez St. to serve as a temporary branch during construction of the new building. Work began shortly thereafter and continued through the next seven months. On April 4, 1954, the staff moved into the new building, but it was another month before its formal dedication. Miss Guichard did note in her report for the month, however, that hundreds of area residents came in to view the new facility.

The dedication of the Nora Navra Memorial Branch took place on May 2, 1954. The occasion was marked by musical entertainment from the St. Augustine High School band and by the choir of J.S. Clark Senior High School. Library Board Chair Charles G. Smither presented citations to several community figures and organizations. He was assisted in this task by Fannie C. Williams, principal of Valena C. Jones School. A highlight of the event was an address, "Moving Forward," by A.P. Tureaud. In his remarks, Mr. Tureaud recounted the twenty-five-year effort to bring public library service to the downtown black community. The noted attorney and civil rights advocate noted, Public facilities which are provided on a racially segregated basis are not only a drain on our economic resources but are an outmoded relic of a slave psychology. Libraries tend to free the mind of bigotry and prejudice; they are supposed to be a civilizing influence on the community. We need more of them.



In her monthly report for May 1954, Miss Guichard observed that "The dedication of the new modern library, Navra branch, marked a great civic event in the downtown section." City Librarian John Hall Jacobs, in his report to the Library Board for the month, remarked, The Navra branch is wonderful. The architect is to be commended for orienting the building perfectly on the lot. It is bright, airy and attractive... And what crowds are attracted to it.

Miss Guichard was able to report on the occasion of the new building's first anniversary that monthly circulation was up to 2,970 items and the branch's active borrowers had increased to 5,028. She also noted that "The community still shows keen pride and appreciation more and more each day."



Shortly after the Navra dedication, the Supreme Court issued its momentous opinion in the Brown case, thereby setting the stage for the reversal of legal segregation as allowed by the Plessy decision. The New Orleans Public Library Board was one of the first to act, with the result that by mid-1955, local public libraries were open to all citizens of the Crescent City. Branch Nine, conceived as a library for the African-American community, was truly transformed, as the Nora Navra branch, into a full member of the New Orleans Public Library system.

Branch Nine and the Nora Navra Library served the people of the Seventh Ward continuously for 69 years until it was destroyed by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The destroyed building was demolished in 2017, and construction began on a new one. The celebration of the new 7,800 square foot building, held on Friday, August 24 and Saturday, August 25, 2018, marked the official reopening of all six of the Libraries that were damaged beyond repair by Hurricane Katrina.

