

CASE STUDY

Citizens of Cossitt: Southern Publics, Then and Now

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Abstract

This essay uses the history of Cossitt Library—from its founding in 1893 to its renovation and reopening in 2023—to explore how the Southern public library has faced, and continues to face, unique opportunities and challenges for public humanities projects. As a scholar-in-residence at Cossitt from 2020 to 2022, I worked alongside the branch manager, staff librarians, community outreach specialists, local arts organizations, and special collections managers to document the history of Cossitt's role in the city's civic life and to create policies and programming that encouraged many different constituencies to see the space as their own. It offers an example of where the qualitative research skills of a humanities scholar can impact both large-scale and targeted public humanities projects.

Keywords: library history; public history; public humanities; Southern history

When Cossitt Library—Memphis's first public library—opened in the spring of 1893, it faced a serious problem: it had zero books. The \$75,000 bequest from the family of Frederick Cossitt—a Connecticut merchant who made his first mint as a dry goods wholesaler in the South—funded an architectural marvel on the bluffs of the Mississippi River. L. B. Wheeler's design for a red sandstone castle with soaring archways and turrets occupied pride of place in the city. For travelers arriving on the cobblestone landing below, Cossitt would most likely be the first building they saw ([Figure 1](#)).

The Cossitt family gift was part of a public library boom, spurred on by Andrew Carnegie's belief that well-designed and easily accessible libraries would speed the assimilation of European immigrants and rural migrants into the moral uplift of self-education.¹ In Memphis, local leaders heralded Cossitt Library as “the people's university,” a place where “our youth [...] may find the opportunity and the resources to rouse their mental energies, stimulate and direct their ambition, and [...] climb the ladder of usefulness or renown.”²

All very inspiring stuff. Unfortunately, neither the family nor city leaders left any money to stock the shelves, so Cossitt sat empty for its first summer. It required an additional 18 months of public outreach to secure the 7,000 books, 22 daily newspapers, 52 weeklies,

¹ Van Slyck 1995; Wiegand 2015.

² Clapp 1893, 9.



Figure 1. Cossitt Library, Memphis, Tennessee, 1912. Photo Courtesy of Dig Memphis, Memphis Public Library. <https://memphislibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15342coll4/id/0/rec/1>

and 48 magazines that would make up Cossitt's initial collection. The library added circulating services at the beginning of 1895, and by the end of the year, individuals checked out over 30,000 titles. In a city that—less than twenty years before—had lost its charter and over half of its population because of a devastating Yellow Fever outbreak, Cossitt's success signaled renewed civic life. Perhaps, in light of this trial and triumph, it's not surprising that the first book checked out was *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

I learned this bit of library lore in 2021 while serving as a scholar-in-residence at Cossitt. I was on temporary loan to the library from the University of Memphis, where my permanent job is an English professor specializing in American literature and the institutions that help shape it. The Cossitt that I called home for two years is quite different than the original. Though a 1925 addition still stands, the city razed the sandstone castle in the 1950s and replaced it with a modern glass-and-steel structure that older locals refer to, not entirely affectionately, as “the blue louvers.” By the time I arrived, Cossitt's position in the Memphis Public Library (MPL) system had changed, too. It was demoted to a branch facility in 1955 when a new Main Library followed suburban sprawl eastward. For a short time, it served as a research library catering to the cotton markets and other downtown businesses. Since at least 1956, city and library officials have debated whether Cossitt should exist at all. As recently as 2012, MPL declared its future “untenable” and recommended tearing it down.³

I first met Shamichael Hallman, the branch manager of Cossitt, in the summer of 2020. I had recently become the director of our university's humanities center, and my first agenda item was to get faculty research in front of the broad swath of Memphis residents who, for better or worse, mostly think of the university in terms of the Tigers basketball team. I spent the summer of 2020 introducing myself to anyone who would meet with me: the arts program specialist at a local philanthropic organization, curators at two museums, and the director of

³ *Memphis Public Library and Information Center* 2012, 4.

a literacy nonprofit. Hallman let me take him to lunch, where we talked about how the library and the university can help one another. He made a splash the previous winter with a TEDx Talk about his goal to associate libraries with “bridges” as much as books. Bridges “are designed to help you go to new places, see new things, and cross obstacles that would otherwise be challenging to navigate.” Libraries, he argued, do the same thing. They connect individuals into a civic whole, “provide a common ground,” and allow people to “participate in public life.”⁴ So should public universities, I think.

Over egg tortas, Hallman shared that Cossitt, again, was at a crossroads. It closed in 2017 as part of a massive renovation to fix physical infrastructure that had suffered decades of neglect. He also wanted to use the closure as a chance to rethink Cossitt’s role in the downtown neighborhood that it has anchored for one hundred and thirty years. The national philanthropic organization Reimagining the Civic Commons had recently selected Cossitt’s neighborhood as one of five test sites for strategic investment in struggling urban cores. They chose the area because of the potential of its “community anchors”—Cossitt, along with an adjacent blufftop park—and city leadership expected the library to spark renewed economic and social activity in the area.

The plans for the renovated Cossitt, developed in 2017 by Groundswell Design Group, bear the hallmarks of what urban planners refer to as a social “third space” between home and work. They highlight an updated broadband infrastructure, an open floorplan, co-working space and entrepreneurship classes, a podcasting studio, and a community café. These decisions reflect prevailing ideas about community-centered design in contemporary libraries, specifically how physical infrastructure nestles into the social, informational, and technical fabric of contemporary life.⁵ The new keyword for Cossitt is “modularity.” Moveable bookcases on caster wheels can easily be pushed aside for large community gatherings, and retractable walls can cordon off or expand a performance space. This is “the library beyond the book,” the library as an engine for patron participation, and a piece of “social infrastructure” for civic engagement.⁶

However, as a literary historian, I can’t help but think about libraries as sites that preserve and circulate historical knowledge, especially in the form of books. When Hallman took me on a tour of a still-unrenovated section of the Cossitt facility, its formerly codex-centered life was fully on display. Giant iron bookcases dominate the space. Even more, they are structural, load-bearing elements of each floor: the library literally built out of its collections. When you look at Cossitt from the outside, standing on the south side of the building and facing east toward Front Street, the seam between the old and new sections is still visible. When I noticed this ungainly joint, I began to see it as a Bunyan-esque allegory for the uneasy fit between Cossitt’s past and its future (Figures 2 and 3).

Therefore, I pitched a project to accompany the reopening: *Citizens of Cossitt*, a multimedia public history of the library’s role in Memphis civic life. With funding from an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship, I offered to work alongside Hallman and other librarians to research the library’s past successes in outreach, access, circulation, and civic engagement so that the new Cossitt might learn from the old Cossitt. We established two goals. First, to tell the story of the library’s complicated role as both a catalyst and a barrier to civic participation in pre- and post-segregated Memphis. We wanted to highlight how the library’s earlier successes and failures can internally inform its vision of “the public” going

⁴ Hallman 2020; Hallman 2024.

⁵ Mattern 2007.

⁶ Schnapp and Battles 2014; Mattern 2014; Andrews et al. 2017; Klinenberg 2016.

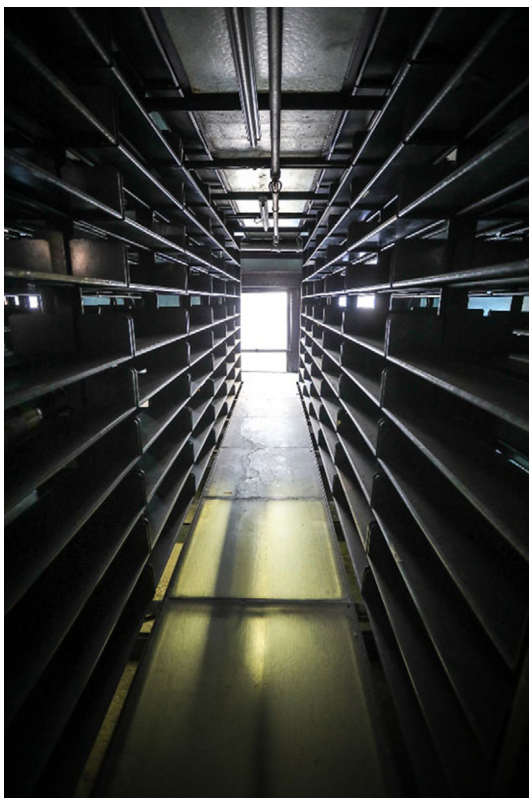


Figure 2. In the 1925 section of Cossitt, the bookstacks are a structural part of each floor. Photo by Jamie Harmon, courtesy of the artist.

forward. Second, to develop freely accessible digital collections and public programming that reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. In both facets of the project, librarians and their stakeholders would be more than the subjects of academic history. They would be equal participants in guiding the mission and eventual output.

Citizens, by design, modeled the variety of library usership and community engagement that we hoped to document. This required a large team: along with Hallman, I worked with a staff librarian, Emily Marks, who also runs a performing arts education nonprofit; the MPL History Department Manager, Wayne Dowdy, who supervises the library's special collections and has forgotten more about Memphis history than I'll ever know; a digital branch librarian, Jamie Corson, who helps run Dig Memphis, the library's online archive and digital collections; and dozens of other librarians, artists, graduate students, high school teachers and students, and community volunteers. Hallman envisioned the renovated Cossitt as a community hub of "patron-participants," so he invited an array of artists, academics, activists, and entrepreneurs to shape the library's collections, programming, and technology. Our project was one of many, each attuned to the interests and skills, the media format, and audience of specific teams. However, they shared a vision of the library as a conduit—or, in the parlance of information sciences, a "platform"—for sharing situated, historical knowledge that can anchor a community's sense of place.⁷

⁷ Weinberger 2012.



Figure 3. View of the 1955 addition to the Cossitt Library, standing on south side of building and looking east toward Front St. Courtesy of Library History Collection, Dig Memphis.

In our research, we found that Cossitt has lived many lives, a microcosm of what Wanda Rushing refers to as the “paradox of place” in Memphis.⁸ During the Progressive Era, it was a publicly funded institution presided over by a self-appointed board of wealthy patrons. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was an engine of literacy and public engagement—the 1925 addition created a “young folks room” and community meeting spaces—but it was officially off-limits to African Americans, who were relegated to a series of temporary “Negro” branches. When, in 1955, Memphis and Shelby County opened a new Main Library in the heart of a wealthy residential neighborhood, Cossitt rebranded as a technical and research branch for the downtown business class.

This specialized focus deterred the young folks. However, in the early 1960s, it attracted the attention of Black undergraduates at LeMoyne College and Owen Junior College, who were inspired by the direct action taking place at lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina. A sophomore at LeMoyne, Olly Neal, Jr., later recalled that their conversations centered on “public facilities” rather than private businesses in Memphis. The students were “particularly upset about not being able to use the Memphis technical library”—that is, Cossitt.⁹ Cossitt held the materials that Neal needed to complete research papers for his biology and chemistry courses, so that’s where he focused his attention. And on March 19, 1960, roughly 50 students carpooled to Cossitt and the Main Branch, where they sat down in the reading room or asked librarians for circulating materials. By the end of the day, 41 college students and 5 Black journalists were arrested, inaugurating the Memphis sit-in movement and sparking a series of protests and boycotts that forced the city, in October, to integrate public facilities.¹⁰

⁸ Rushing 2009

⁹ Neal 2020, 48.

¹⁰ For more on the desegregation of Memphis libraries, see Knowlton 2018; Wiegand and Wiegand 2018, 65–82; Dowdy 2010, 77–83.

When our team began its work in the Fall of 2020, we took this civil rights history as our starting place. The sixtieth anniversary of the sit-ins occurred in March 2020, so we decided to commemorate the occasion by documenting its continuing impact on the city. We organized two-way interviews between surviving participants in the library sit-ins and a group of students from Crosstown High School, who in 2019 led walkouts in protest of what they perceived as racist policies at their school.¹¹ During the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters, Cossitt librarian and Executive Director of Lionheart Arts, Emily Marks, and I worked with a Sound Engineering class at Crosstown High to train students in oral history practices and interviewing strategies. Their teacher, Ty Boyland, recorded conversations between current seniors about their reasons for participating and whether they think they succeeded.

In April 2022, the students then met with Ms. Grace Meachum, who participated in the 1960 sit-ins and has become an unofficial archivist among her peers. During after-school sessions, Ms. Meachum explained the sit-in goals and strategies, going back and forth with the high schoolers about what had changed in student activism in the last sixty years. The Crosstown students rolled their eyes when Ms. Meachum talks about “young folks’ music.” They laughed when she shared that she missed out on being arrested at the library because she overslept, and caught a ride to jail with the photographer Ernest Withers. Footage of the interviews served as part of the student’s senior capstone projects, and the recordings will become part of MPL’s 901Voices oral history collection. As one student wrote about the process in her reflection, “We were intimidated by everything about it: ‘civil rights’ was something done by heroes, not regular Memphis students like us.”

The project’s popularity with Crosstown students blossomed in unexpected ways. A media class, led by Andres Artauz, wanted to use the audio material and historical documents to create a multimedia art installation, “Student Movements: Cossitt and Crosstown.” During the summer and fall of 2022, Mr. Artauz and I worked with them to develop a budget, draft a project proposal, and create installation mockups. We helped them contact and pitch their exhibition to two local galleries in Memphis (a process that ultimately was unsuccessful. The installation mockup displays digitally projected loops of student collages that overlay archival and contemporary images of student protests. The collages slowly dissolve into one another and are synced with audio recordings from their classmates’ interviews.

The artists wrote that they hoped to “contextualize the rich history of the Cossitt Library by drawing visual and audio parallels between student activism in the past and present.” They emphasized the historical proximity: “the sit-ins that led to the library’s integration appear farther away and more detached than they truly are.” In the oral history project and the gallery exhibitions, we find patrons, librarians, and academics using Cossitt’s complicated legacy to tell multiple overlapping stories about their own place in the city.

The second part of *Citizens* entailed building publicly accessible digital collections and learning tools that highlight library history. This portion of this project presented a different kind of challenge: unlike Ms. Meachum, no one at MPL had organized their historical records. Most material related to Cossitt’s history sits in Special Collections, in the basement of the Benjamin Hooks Central Library. The “Library Collection,” as it is labeled, consists of hundreds of linear feet of boxes that are unprocessed, uncatalogued, and publicly inaccessible. One librarian affectionately refers to it as MPL’s junk drawer: it contains everything from the guestbook from Cossitt’s grand opening in 1893 to photos of

¹¹ See Bauman 2019 for details on the student walkouts.



Figure 4. The unprocessed Library Collection at Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee. Photo by the author.

a storytime at the Levi Branch, hosted by a defunct professional indoor soccer team in the mid-1980s (Figure 4).

Along with the head of the History Department and a digital projects manager, two graduate students and I developed a plan to sort, digitize, and publish material from the Library Collection related to two branches: Cossitt, to align with the re-opening; and the Cornelia Crenshaw Branch (originally Vance Branch), the longstanding “Negro Branch” that, in 1939, became the first permanent library facility for African Americans in the city.¹²

We rediscovered a range of fascinating material that highlight the difficulty of settling on who exactly “the public” consists of when we discuss the public library. For example, we found a library promotional photo from the late 1970s depicting two hands, one Black and one white, exchanging the system’s first automated library card. While looking through a box labeled “#113: Director 1930–1980s,” I discovered a thick folder called “Library Service to Negroes” shoved in the back of a banker’s box. It contains internal reports and surveys dating back to the 1930s, along with dozens of letters to and from former library directors Jesse Cunningham and Lamar Wallis about “the Negro question” in library service from individuals across the United States. These two discoveries present competing visions of the library’s place in Memphis: on one hand, the library card as an uncomplicated bridge across a

¹² The Library History Collection can be found at <https://www.memphislibrary.org/digmemphis/libraryhistory/>.

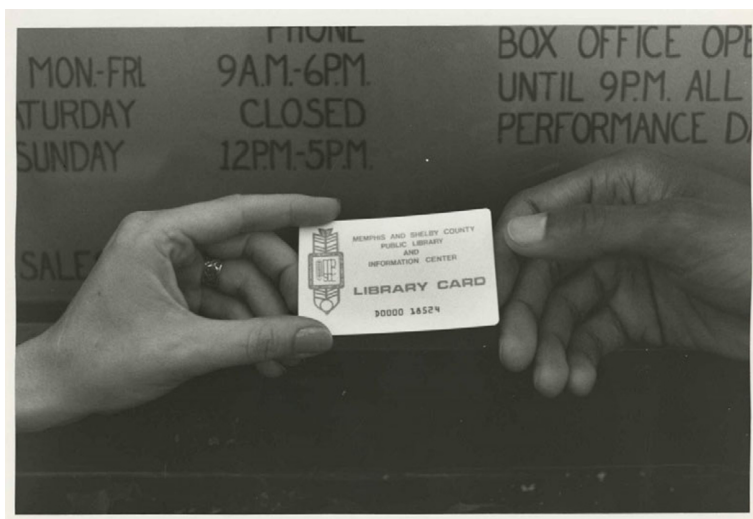


Figure 5. Promotional photo of two hands exchanging a library card. Courtesy of Dig Memphis.

racial divide; on the other, the library as a conflict zone for a wide range of arguments for and against who counts as worthy of public services (Figure 5).

This part of the project gave graduate and undergraduate students hands-on experience in digital humanities projects. Two doctoral and undergraduate students worked with me to compile primary research, digitize MPL archival materials for public circulation, and compose content for MPL's website and social media. They learned skills in archival processing and digitization standards while they gained subject-area knowledge in Southern history, twentieth-century civil rights movements, and regional literatures.

We publicized our findings through twice-weekly Instagram posts on @digmemphishistory, Dig Memphis's social media account. Inspired by Marissa Lopez's *Picturing Mexican America* project, we highlighted how Dig Memphis collections offer insights into the often-overlooked individuals and organizations that shaped the region's politics, culture, and national reputation.¹³ For example, we wrote about a newly digitized promotional photo from King Vidor's 1929 film *Hallelujah*—the first studio-backed production to feature an all-African-American cast, which was shot in Memphis—during the IndieMemphis Film Festival, which features a Black Creators Forum. And in a post commemorating Cossitt's grand opening in 1893, we shared that the event's guestbook carries the signature of the prominent educator and civil rights reformer Ms. Julia Hooks, the “Angel of Beale Street” and grandmother of Benjamin Hooks, namesake of MPL's current Main Library. Cossitt officially was not open to African Americans, but Ms. Hooks attended anyway and left a record of her claim to its services.

We also used the account to crowdsource contextual information on library materials. A graduate student, Kayla Lutes, developed a semester-long “Memphis Mysteries” series that featured a dozen recently digitized materials, and patrons helped identify people, buildings,

¹³ *Picturing Mexican America* started as an Instagram account that used archival material from the Los Angeles Public Library to draw attention to Mexican Los Angeles and Southern California. It has since grown into a full website and public history app (<https://www.picturingmexicanamerica.com/>).

crossroads, and events that otherwise would have remained unknown. These digital collections and public writing, along with drawing attention to ongoing programs at Cossitt and MPL, will also provide a resource for future projects, both academic and not, that approach social history in the South from the point of view of everyday readers and library users.

There's nothing especially innovative about creating a digital collection; dozens of similar projects are featured on the National Humanities Alliance's *Humanities for All* website. But I think our decision, early on, to build the collections and exhibits into the infrastructure of Dig Memphis, MPL's digital repository, is worth considering. It presents some difficulties: for example, the MPL website contains no by-lines, so did not have an obvious method for citing authorship or ownership of the work. This agency-based writing style inhibits how faculty and graduate students demonstrate research activity, which can discourage participation from individuals planning for job searches or promotion. However, hosting the work on MPL's website also ensured the sustainability of our digital collection after the two-year grant expired, because Dig Memphis has an ongoing base budget to maintain and continue to build on the collection.

As much as I want *Citizens* to offer a blueprint for research and outreach partnerships between "the people's university" and university-based humanities departments, I faced a number of challenges. First, the project required a different concept of "research activity" that relinquishes a central occupational benefit of professors—the ability to independently research and write about what one wants. Following this, it was a challenge acclimating to a nonacademic institutional voice, especially one restrained by municipal policies. Our written output represented Cossitt and MPL, and therefore the City of Memphis, so the direct institutional critique that is native to academic writing was mostly unwelcome.

Perhaps the most pressing issue, especially for our team members without job security, was making the work professionally visible in our own university and home disciplines. At least temporarily, it required our university-based participants (and their departments) to cede concerns over peer-review and demonstrations of expertise to the expectations of another professional field, driven by the interests and needs of individuals who are not our students, coworkers, or peer-reviewers. However, as Judith Butler recently argued, it is hard to imagine a future of the humanities—let alone the public humanities—if there is no public that cares about the humanities.¹⁴ And at Cossitt, I discovered large numbers of individuals who, given the reins, see historical research and interpretation as a pleasurable, life-affirming part of civic life. This does not bring traditional scholarship to a non-university-based audience. Instead, it offers training and financial support and then invests curatorial power in the hands of library patrons.

It also changed my idea of what humanities research accomplishes and who gets to claim ownership of it.¹⁵ When Cossitt reopened in April 2023, it was simultaneously Memphis's oldest and newest library. City officials and national library organizations touted it as "the most innovative library in the nation" and uniquely attuned to the possibilities for a twenty-first-century downtown public library.¹⁶ Its transformation helped earn MPL the 2021

¹⁴ Butler 2022.

¹⁵ Sanchez 2022. As Sanchez states, "Since colleges and universities continue to produce most of the practitioners in the public humanities—whether as college graduates, master's, and PhD students, or faculty who build between institutional settings—we must ask: have our institutions of higher learning diversified sufficiently to readily bring expertise based on community knowledge, growing new scholarship, and passion to understand new perspectives to the world of the public humanities?"

¹⁶ Grant and Cobbett 2021.



Figure 6. Anthony Lee's mural, depicting the library's place in civil rights history, at Cossitt Library. Photo courtesy of Mark Webber, *The Daily Memphian*.

National Medal for Museum and Library Service and a feature in the *Smithsonian* magazine (Figure 6).

However, an enormous installation of public art in the lobby asks patrons to consider the double vision of how Old Cossitt and New Cossitt come together. Created by local artist Anthony Lee, the left side of the mural depicts the turrets and arched entryways of the original 1893 red sandstone structure. The right side depicts the current building. Linking Cossitt Past and Cossitt Present, though, are those who were excluded from the library. Here, Lee recreated an Ernest Withers photograph depicting a scene from the arraignment of the sit-in participants.¹⁷ The mural, as public history, explicitly places the legal fight for integration—as well as the Black artists and journalists, like Withers, who documented it—at the center of the library's place in the city's civic life. Lee's mural—as well as the *Citizens of Cossitt* project—encourages patrons not to lose sight of Cossitt's history as the library positions itself as a community anchor and public asset for Memphis's future. From Hooks's presence at the grand opening to the students who fought—and continue to fight—for their recognition as full citizens, Cossitt has always been a place to contest who can claim Memphis as their own.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: D.H.

Conflicts of interests. The authors declare none.

¹⁷ For more on the desegregation of Memphis libraries, see Dowdy 2010, 77–83; Knowlton 2018; Wiegand and Wiegand 2018, 65–82.

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