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Though the July 16 sit-in wasn't the first integration action, it is distinguished by location, says Sean O'Rourke, a professor of rhetoric and oratory at Furman University who has done extensive research on the local civil rights movement. The NAACP-led march to protest baseball great Jackie Robinson's exclusion from the white waiting room at the airport drew almost 1,000 people and sparked a shift in the black community, particularly among the young people who had seen the effects of racism on their parents' generation.

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Looking back, July 16, 1960, was a day so planned that even before it arrived it had already come and gone.

That day, when eight African-American students entered the all-white library to check out books, it was a calculated effort, one that became the pinnacle for civil rights in Greenville. The largeness of that day is now etched, a historical marker of change in a Southern city. But the proof is in the details.

Dorris Wright remembers that George Washington's first set of false teeth was made of wood. The fact is from the book she read that day, one of the few she was able to bank in the 30 minutes it took Greenville police to arrive at the library and arrest the students.

"I think it was a moment in time. It said to me that we had a thirst to learn and that we had a right to use the resources that were available to everyone else," Wright says with a slight New York accent she picked up when her family was forced to leave Greenville because of the harassment they received after the sit-in. "That was my thought then, and that is my thought today."

Fifty years ago, Wright recalls, her family ate Thanksgiving dinner after her mother finished serving dinner for the white family she worked for. Elaine Means recalls being directed to the back of the bus. Benjamin Downs remembers being awed by the

contrast between the black library and the Greenville High library.

That landscape had to change.

Fifty years after the Greenville Eight -- Elaine Means, Dorris Wright, Benjamin Downs, Joan Mattison Daniel, Margaree Seawright Crosby, Hattie Smith Wright, Jesse Jackson and Willie Joe Wright -- staged the sit-in that led to the integration of Greenville's library, the city is a different place, a different landscape. The effects of that day are still felt.

Though the July 16 sit-in wasn't the first integration action, it is distinguished by location, says Sean O'Rourke, a professor of rhetoric and oratory at Furman University who has done extensive research on the local civil rights movement. It became what O'Rourke calls "a hinge moment" that helped pave a path toward integration in both the black and white communities.

After the library arrests in July, there were more sit-ins and demonstrations. Protesters sat at lunch counters at Woolworth's and Kress drug stores, and they staged "wade-ins" at Cleveland Park's segregated swimming pool.

But the library was strategic, says the Rev. James Hall, pastor of Springfield Baptist Church at the time, who helped organize many of the civil rights actions.

"We thought going to the library would say something about what our real goal was," says Hall, now pastor at Triumph Baptist Church in Philadelphia. "We were not, at that point, sitting at lunch counters or freedom riders, but we thought, how can they refuse students to go to a library to get a book so they could improve their knowledge?"

Change begins

Preparing Greenville for change took time and planning.

The first civil rights action that occurred here was a January 1960 march on the Downtown Airport, O'Rourke says. The NAACP-led march to protest baseball great Jackie Robinson's exclusion from the white waiting room at the airport drew almost 1,000 people and sparked a shift in the black community, particularly among the young people who had seen the effects of racism on their parents' generation. Adults could lose their jobs for participating in protests, so young people grabbed the reins.

Teachers and administrators at Greenville's all-black Sterling High School provided further direction, mentoring students and illuminating the civil rights movement taking shape in other parts of the country.

"When your students run into Martin Luther King, they run into Thoreau, they run into Shakespeare. You're talking about some universalities here of pain and struggle," says Hattie Smith Wright, who now runs a program for disadvantaged youths and teen dropouts in Elmira, N.Y.

Wright got involved with the youth chapter of the local NAACP and soon became a subscriber to the liberation theology that the Rev. Hall preached. She asked permission from her grandmother to attend Springfield instead of John Wesley Baptist.

Sitting in the pews of that church, Wright had what she calls her "first spiritual conversion" and determined that education would be her path forward.

"I didn't know what the word revolution was, but I realized the philosophy of Christ was the most radical thing that you could ever do in this lifetime. I knew to get to go to college with no money, I would have to become a scholar."

The Greenville Eight were not a random mix, but a strategically picked bunch. The local NAACP chapter sought top students who were leaders among their peers and self-disciplined enough to adhere to the principles of nonviolence.

All were in the National Honor Society, at the top of their classes and with an eye

toward college. Librarian Jeanette Smith stocked the "colored" library on McBee Avenue as well as she could, but the limited selection was dated.

In December 1959, Jesse Jackson, a college freshman home for the holidays, needed 25 books for a speech he was to write. Ordering them from the "white library" would take too long, so Jackson walked there to see about getting them sooner. He was turned away.

"It was very personal, and each of us had our own personal humiliation in that way," says Jackson, who recently honored the surviving members of the Greenville Eight at the national Rainbow Push Coalition conference in Chicago. "That was such a factor."

There were two attempts to integrate the library in March, both led by Sterling students, and the second ending in arrests. But the court case was thrown out before trial, precluding any legal action to integrate. So organizers set their sights on the summer.

The students and NAACP members met almost weekly from March to July leading up to the sit-in, calculating, studying the philosophy of nonviolence and learning the legal course necessary to see their goal through.

On July 16, Margaree Seawright Crosby ate breakfast with her mother. Saturdays were always pancake days. Then she walked toward Springfield, where she met Hall and the other students. In silence, the eight young people walked to the library on North Main Street. When they were turned away, they returned to the church.

"Rev. Hall said, 'No, go back and let them arrest you, if that's what they have to do,'" Wright recalls.

Thirty minutes later, the Greenville Eight were arrested. Wright still has her mug shot.

Impact continues

The July 16 event was significant because it resulted in arrests as well as a court case, which forced a ruling on the issue. Two months later, in September, the library was reopened as an integrated public space.

The sit-ins moved on to the drug stores and the lunch counters. Protesters took their case to churches in the hopes of appealing to the "moral consciousness of the community," says Leola Robinson-Simpson, once a member of the youth NAACP chapter and now a Greenville County school board member and author of "Black America - Greenville."

Had the eight not taken action that day, change no doubt would have come, but probably not as quickly and perhaps not as peacefully.

"All of those protests played a very important role in the movement itself, in terms of preparing Greenville for the change that was imminent," Robinson says. "As a result of those demonstrations that took place in early 1960, by the time the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, Greenville was more or less ready for it, more so than other communities."

When she returned to Greenville almost 20 years after the sit-in, Means visited the library. It was a new building and a new location and entering it was somewhat uneventful. Black children sat reading next to white children, Means recalls. They didn't know who she was.

But in some ways, the 68-year-old says, that was the best thing she could have hoped for.

"Our movement at the time was significant," Means says. "But in the scope of things today, with our black president, this was just one little component in what makes history."

Lillia Callum-Penso can be reached at 864-298-3768.

YOU CAN GO

- * What: Program commemorating the 50th anniversary of the library sit-in
- * When: 3-5 p.m. today
- * Where: Hughes Main Library, Greenville
- * Cost: Free
- * For more: 864-242-5000

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



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