

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Dulcina B. Torrence DeBerry (June 12, 1878 – December 29, 1969)

“First Black Woman Librarian in Madison County, Alabama”

Dulcina B. Torrence DeBerry was born Dulcina Blanche Torrence on June 12, 1878, in York, South Carolina. She was the 2nd of eleven children born to Henry and Violet Torrence. Her parents, who were sharecroppers, struggled to save for Dulcina's education, but insisted that education was the way for a better future. Dulcina graduated from a two-year Normal School - an institution that trained teachers in pedagogy and education. She later met Perfect Robert DeBerry at Talladega College and married him in June 1903. Perfect DeBerry was a native of Montgomery County, North Carolina and was Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Raleigh, NC for 16 years. The couple had two children, Pallie and Perfect DeBerry, Jr.



For forty years, Dulcina worked as an educator and counselor at Lincoln Academy in North Carolina. During that time, at the age of 40, Dulcina returned to college, attending Shaw University. She graduated alongside her daughter, Pallie.

When her mother became ill, Dulcina moved to Huntsville, Alabama to care for her in the late 1930s. To pass the time, Dulcina stopped by Huntsville's Carnegie library on Greene Street to check out some books. Given her history of teaching, and abundant access to educational materials, Dulcina was disappointed to learn that the library was segregated and there wasn't a library for the black residents in Huntsville. The librarian, Mrs. Beamguard, allowed Dulcina to check out three books that day, but Dulcina was troubled by the fact that she was given "special permission." She knew that the other black residents were not afforded the same privilege. Dulcina later returned to the library and shared her concerns with the librarian who arranged for her to speak to the director of the Huntsville library. The director was a progressive man who was willing to apply for federal funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) with Dulcina and Mrs. Beamguard's assistance. The WPA was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" program to combat the aftermath of the Great Depression. One program, Federal Project Number One, provided funding for the arts, including musicians, artists, writers, as well as actors and directors, and most importantly, literacy projects. Through the collective efforts of Dulcina and the library staff, a request was made for funding a Library for the black residents of Huntsville.

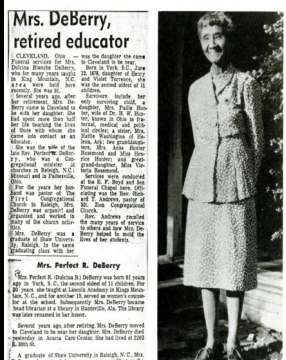
Librarian, Elizabeth Beamguard, left, and Dulcina DeBerry at her new library.



DULCINA DeBERRY
LIBRARIAN
Huntsville Public Library

The WPA agreed to provide funding for some books and a small salary for a new librarian, but required that the community provide the physical space and library furnishings. The black community worked together and the Lakeside Methodist Church provided a dark, damp room in the basement, furnished with only two unpainted tables, two rough benches, and a schoolroom desk with no chair. Dulcina DeBerry, the presumed librarian, had just ten days to get the space ready for the new library opening on June 10, 1940. With some additional donations from local residents, she had two high school boys paint six pieces of furniture and together they thoroughly cleaned the basement. The minister's wife, Mrs. Jackson, donated a chair for Dulcina to use. A group of young girls gave pots of flowers to decorate the window seats.

The initial WPA donation consisted of a small collection of reading materials; 27 juvenile books, 39 books for adults, and 10 used magazines. Since there were no bookshelves, the items were stored in a large unpainted dry goods box. The small library eventually extended its services into Madison County schools. In 1947, the library was moved to Pelham Avenue, a bustling black business district, and named the Dulcina DeBerry library.



Mrs. DeBerry, retired educator
Mrs. Perfect R. DeBerry is shown in a photograph from the late 1930s or early 1940s. She is wearing a light-colored, patterned dress and a dark jacket. The photograph is part of a historical document or book, as evidenced by the text and other images on the page.

In 1951, the library on Pelham closed and was moved to a two-story building on Church Street. That spot was eventually torn down amid urban renewal efforts. In 1962, the library board began integrating services and four years later, the Fountain Row Library opened to the public. At that point, the library had grown its collection to over 5,000 books.

Dulcina moved to Cleveland, Ohio to be with her daughter, where she died at the age of 91, on December 29, 1969.

