

VLR 6/1/15  
NRHP 8/17/15

U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Newport News Public Library  
City of Newport News, VA

### NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name Newport News Public Library

other names/site number West Avenue Library DHR File # 121-0080

#### 2. Location

street & number 2907 West Avenue not for publication

city or town Newport News vicinity

state Virginia code VA county Independent City code 700 Zip 23607

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Catherine Johnson* June 28, 2005  
Signature of certifying official Date

**Virginia Department of Historic Resources**  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the

National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Keeper \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property** (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private  
 public-local  
 public-State  
 public-Federal

**Category of Property** (Check only one box)

- building(s)  
 district  
 site  
 structure  
 object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>  1  </u>	<u>  0  </u> buildings
<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> sites
<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> structures
<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> objects
<u>  1  </u>	<u>  0  </u> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Education Sub: Library

**Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Education Sub: Library

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

Colonial Revival  
Georgian Revival

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
roof Slate  
walls Brick  
other Weatherboard

**Narrative Description** (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**8. Statement of Significance**

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**Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

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**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

**Period of Significance** 1929-1954

**Significant Dates** 1929-1954

**Significant Person** (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

**Cultural Affiliation** \_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder** Robinson, Charles Morrison, Architect

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS)**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other                      Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of Property .23 Acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing    Zone Easting Northing

1 18 372339 4093631 2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet.

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**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title: Gregg Grunow, Librarian

Organization: Newport News Public Library System      date April 2005

street & number: Main Street Library, 110 Main Street    telephone 757-591-4858

city or town Newport News                      state VA    zip code 23601

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Property Owner**

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Newport News

street&number 2400 Washington Avenue telephone 757-926-8411

city or town Newport News state VA zip code 23607

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**7. Summary Description:**

**Summary:**

The Newport News Public Library building is located at the corner of West Avenue and 30<sup>th</sup> Street in the old downtown area of the City of Newport News. The Library building was constructed in the year 1929. The official groundbreaking for the building occurred on February 12, 1929 and the cornerstone was laid on April 11, 1929. The Library building was opened to the public on October 14, 1929.<sup>1</sup> The building was the first to be constructed for use as a public library in the City of Newport News, Virginia. The Daily Press reported, "That the long dream of Newport News for an adequate and attractive public library has been completely fulfilled is the impression gained by the visitor to the handsome new building..."<sup>2</sup> This building was designed in the Georgian Revival style. The exterior of the building is red brick in the Flemish Bond pattern. The building is trimmed in wood painted white. In plan, the building was designed in the form of a modified crucifix.<sup>3</sup>

The Newport News Public Library building was in a quiet residential neighborhood one block from the main business section of the city when first built.<sup>4</sup> A few blocks to the north is what was once called the Newport News Ship Building and Drydock Company. The company is now called Northrop Grumman Newport News. To the south directly adjacent to the Library is a recent addition to the National Register, the Medical Arts Building, which was also designed by the Library's architect, Charles M. Robinson. The neighborhood has changed over the years. Directly across West Avenue where there was once a row of homes now stand two houses with a parking lot in between. Directly across 30<sup>th</sup> Street is an empty apartment building, which is currently being renovated. To the rear of the library are apartment buildings and houses along the James River.

**Detailed Description:**

The Newport News Public Library building is designed in the Georgian Revival style in the tradition of classic Virginia architecture. The exterior walls consist of red brick laid in the Flemish bond pattern. In plan, the building is in the shape of a modified crucifix.<sup>5</sup> The main portion of the library is rectangular in shape and forms the cross section. The rear three-level stack portion of the building is more square in shape and is not as wide as the main library section. This forms the base of the crucifix.

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The Library building is two and one-half stories in height upon a ground floor, with a symmetrical façade, a gable roof on the main library section, and a hipped roof with a deck on the rear section. The roof is clad with slate (except for the deck on the rear section, which is covered with metal), and is interrupted by four gable-roofed dormers on the façade. The main entrance is at the front of the building, on the east side, and accesses the first floor. Elliptically curved, paired stairways lead up to the porch at the front entrance from each side. The base of the porch, and cheek walls beneath the stairs, are of brick laid in the Flemish bond pattern. Risers and treads on the stairways are granite, and curving, black wrought iron railings edge each stairway. The central three bays of the Library's nine-bay façade project slightly forward, at a depth that allows room for a window in each side wall of the projection. Four Doric pilasters frame the entrance and windows in the three central bays, and support a pediment. The pilasters stand upon a projecting course of stone blocks at the base of the first-floor level. In the pediment's tympanum is the seal of the Corporation of Newport News. The pediment's entablature has dentil bands and a frieze containing the words "Public Library" in applied lettering.

The front entrance has paired doors with multi-light windows, and is flanked by round-arched windows. Above the door opening is a rectangular transom window detailed with tracery. The transom window is comprised of thirteen panes of glass in honor of the original thirteen states. Above the transom window is a broken scroll pediment with a finial.

The first floor of the building's main library section has round-arched, multi-light windows, edged by brick voussoirs and accented by key stones. The windows have lower sashed with twelve lights. The end walls of the main section are three bays wide, while the rear wall has one bay at each end, adjoining the juncture with the building's rear section. The rear section reads as one story above the ground floor, topped by an attic floor. It is six bays wide across the rear façade. The first-floor windows are wood, double-hung sash with six-over-six configuration. The attic window openings are fitted with three-over-three wood sash windows. In both the front and rear sections of the building, the windows in the ground floor are double-hung wood sash, with either six-over-six or eight-over-eight configuration.

Each of the end walls of the main library section of the building have paired brick chimney stacks rising from the roof, topped by corbelled caps. On each end wall, the chimneys rise from a slightly projecting central full-height bay, each of which features a blind round-arched window on the second floor. There are bull's-eye openings that pierce

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the chimney structures on each end wall, centered within the pedimented gables that top the end walls. On the north end wall, the bull's-eye opening contains a multi-light window; on the south side, there is a louvered vent in the opening. On the first floor of the north end wall, there is a secondary entrance with paired paneled doors flanked by pilasters, which support a broken pediment with a finial. The entablature that forms the base of the pediment on the primary façade extends around the main section of the building, breaking at the chimney structures on the end walls and at the juncture with the rear section of the building. A fifth chimney, a tall stack with a corbelled cap, is located near the north end of the rear wall in the building's rear section.

A domed cupola resting on a square base rises from the center of the roof of the building's main section. The cupola is four-sided with a multi-light window in each side. The windows are topped with round-arched lintels with keystones, echoing the treatment of windows in the building's main section. There are panels framing the windows, and a balustrade edging the base of the cupola. The four dormers breaking the roof on the front of the library building have pedimented gables, slate roofing, and wood cladding on their side walls. The windows in each are six-over-six, double-hung wood sash. The exterior of the building is little-altered, as it has never been structurally changed; only relatively minor repair work has been done.

In its layout and functions, the interior of the library building reflects the two sections visible from the exterior. The first floor of the main section is a double-height space that contains reading rooms and the circulation desk; the rear section of the building houses the library's book stacks. The primary entrance into the library accesses a vestibule, which opens to the interior through paired doors topped by a transom that echoes the treatment of the entrance on the building's exterior. The vestibule walls have tiled wainscoting, and the flooring is also tile. On the south wall is a plaque, commemorating the erection of the library and giving the names of the Board of Trustees, members of City Council, and the name of the architect, Charles M. Robinson.

Within the main section of the library, the space is divided into three areas: the central section contains the circulation desk, and this area is flanked by north and south reading rooms. The half-octagon shaped circulation desk stands in front of the west wall, across from the entrance into the library, and is on axis with the entrance. Behind the desk is a 7-foot by 27-foot mural of Captain Christopher Newport, painted by Allan D. Jones, Jr., and installed on May 2, 1957 in honor of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jamestown Settlement.



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The north and south reading rooms are separated from the central area by paired columnar piers, with molded trim suggesting paneling on each face. Between the piers and the east and west walls, half-height partitions consisting of book shelves divide the spaces. The bookshelves extend around the walls of the reading rooms. The north reading room has a fireplace centrally located in the north end wall, with a Colonial Revival mantel featuring a deep mantel shelf. In the south reading room, the fireplace has been covered to allow for installation of bookshelves across the south end wall. In both reading rooms, the round-arched windows are set in squared frames with architrave trim, keystones, and spandrels edged with molding, suggesting spandrel panels. Cast-iron radiators are located beneath the windows.

There are four chandeliers in each of the reading rooms which were installed during renovations in the 1970s. The interior walls of the main floor are plaster. Around the ceiling on the main floor is a dentil course, which tops a deep entablature with a wide frieze. The rear section of the main floor contains the first-floor stacks. There is a staff room with restroom, and a public restroom on the north side. There are two stairways that lead to the lower and upper floors. On the south side is the librarian's office with small restroom and another public restroom. Within the manager's office is a rope-operated dumbwaiter, which goes down to a ground-floor storage room.

Behind the double-height main section of the library building, the second floor has usable space in the rear stack section of the building. There is a stairway entrance, two restrooms, and a closet. The floors of the top two stack levels consist of a steel grid framework supporting two-inch thick blocks of gray slate flooring. The interior walls of the rear stack area for the ground, main and second floors are made of red glazed brick.

A ladder and trapdoor in the ceiling of the second floor lead to the attic and cupola. The building's wooden structural system is visible in the attic, which houses the air conditioning ductwork and piping. It can be seen from inside the attic that the cupola has a square cut in its base for a clock as the original building sketch shows. The cut has been covered and is not visible from the outside. There are no records showing that a clock was actually installed.

The ground floor of the main section of the library building consists of one large room divided by a wooden sectional temporary wall. There is an entrance on the north side with a set of double doors. The entrance is fronted by a landing, which has three steps leading down on each side, and a railing across the front of the landing containing square

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Classical Revival posts. On this level of the building, part of the front section beneath the portico was walled off to form an office. There is a door on the wall next to the office which leads to two former restrooms that are located under the main entry stairs to the building. The space is now unused. There are four steps up to reach the rear stack section of the building. The interior walls of the front section of the ground floor are made of brick, which has been painted.

The ground floor of the rear section of the building contains additional stacks. On the north side is the mechanical room which houses the furnace. On the south side is a storage room, which contains the lower part of the dumbwaiter. The storage room has a double door leading to the exterior. There is also a fire-proof room with a steel vault door. There are two stairways leading to the main floor. The stack area doorways leading to the front sections of the main and ground level and to the office, staff room, public restrooms and mechanical room, have large sliding fire doors which operate on a pulley and counter-weight system.

Interior modifications to the library building began in 1946 with the finishing off of the basement for use as the children's library. In 1954 the ceiling over the north reading room was removed and replaced. In 1957, in addition to the installation of the mural behind the circulation desk, new heating and air conditioning systems, as well as, new lighting were added to the building. The rear stack area was remodeled in the same year. In the mid-1970s the original chandeliers were replaced. In 1976 the north reading room was remodeled to house the Martha Woodroof Hiden Virginiana Collection, which moved to the Main Street Library in 1996.<sup>13</sup> In 1986 the front stairway was repaired and waterproofed. The two restrooms beneath the front stairs had their fixtures removed and were waterproofed and placed out of service. From 1986 to 1987 there were a number of repairs to the building. The boiler was replaced, the flat metal portion of the roof was replaced with standing seam metal, interior walls were painted, carpeting was replaced, the plaster walls were patched and the windows reglazed.

The Newport News Library is a fine example of a public building rendered in the Georgian Revival style with a Virginia interpretation of the style, by a regionally important architect noted for his civic building designs. Modifications to the building to modernize facilities have been minor. The building retains a high degree of physical integrity, continuing to serve in its original capacity, and standing as a visual landmark in the City of Newport News.<sup>7a</sup>

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**Summary Statement of Significance**

The Newport News Public Library building is a visual landmark in downtown Newport News. The building was built in 1929 in the popular Georgian Revival style. The Library building has the rectangular shape, symmetrical façade, dormers, cupola, portico, cornices, broken pediments and symmetrical placement of chimneys, which are hallmarks of the Georgian Revival subcategory of the Colonial Revival style.<sup>8</sup> The building resembles many of the colonial-era structures in Colonial Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary.

The building has great integrity and its structure has not been changed. Most of the repair work and interior renovation has had a minimal impact on the look and feel of the building. In addition, the Newport News Public Library (now known as the West Avenue Library) is still operating as a public library as originally intended. The building was one of the first establishments in the city to be integrated and is significant for its association with the civil rights movement in Newport News in the 1950s.

**Criteria Statement**

The library is historically significant under Criteria A and C of the National Register. The building's significance under Criterion A is due to its role in the history of desegregation in the City of Newport News. In 1952 the Newport News Public Library was opened to all adult citizens of the City of Newport News. This made the Library one of the first establishments in Newport News to racially desegregate.

Under Criterion C, the building is an excellent representation of the Georgian Revival style of architecture, which was prevalent in the United States from approximately 1870 to 1940.<sup>9</sup> The Newport News Public Library is also significant as the design of a master architect. Charles M. Robinson designed the library building as well as its neighbor the Medical Arts Building. Mr. Robinson was the highly respected Richmond architect who designed many public buildings for the Richmond School System, College of William and Mary and other universities and school districts in Virginia. Charles M. Robinson passed away on August 20, 1932, thus the Newport News Public Library Building was one of the designs from his last years.<sup>10</sup>

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### Historical Background of Newport News Public Library

#### Establishment of library and building--A Public/Private Venture:

In January 1891 the Subscription Library Association, started by a group of young business professionals, created the first Newport News Library System. The books were housed at the office of W. I. Fitzsimmons, at the corner of Washington Avenue and 27<sup>th</sup> Street. The subscription-fee-based library gained more solid financial ground in 1914 when the Library Association Board decided to charge a fee of 50 cents per year for all library users. Also in 1914 the Newport News Shipyard agreed to donate \$20 per month to support the cause of literacy.<sup>11</sup> In 1917 the City began to support the library with \$10 per month. This was the beginning of a private-public partnership that remained until 1968.

On July 6, 1927 the Commonwealth of Virginia issued a charter of incorporation to a new library group of 21 board members who called themselves the Newport News Public Library, Inc. Within six months, the board had taken over all the assets of the old Newport News Library Association. A primary goal was a new library building to replace the inadequate structure on 26<sup>th</sup> Street where the library was temporarily housed. A building committee was formed and within two years the cornerstone for the new library was laid on April 11, 1929. The people of Newport News showed their approval by a 2,285 to 827 vote of approval for the issuance of \$45,000 in bonds for the City Council to pay for a new library building. The Library Board contributed \$6,200 and a book collection valued at \$30,000. The Old Dominion Land Company, the business that planned and built the infrastructure for the City of Newport News, donated land valued at \$12,000. Newport News Public Library was officially opened on October 14, 1929—exactly two weeks before the great Stock Market crash. It was the first building in Newport News built for the purpose of being a library.<sup>12</sup>

#### Charles M. Robinson, Architect:

The designer of the Newport News Public Library building, Charles M. Robinson was a very prominent Richmond, Virginia architect. The May 11, 1999 "Style Weekly" named Charles M. Robinson as one of the 100 most influential Richmonders of the Century.<sup>13</sup> Charles M. Robinson was born in Hamilton, Virginia March 3, 1867. His father, James T. Robinson was also an architect. As a young adult Charles M. Robinson studied

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architecture under D.S. Hopkins of Michigan. He later practiced architecture under John K. Peebles of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1889, Robinson established an architectural partnership with G. T. Smith called Smith and Robinson. A few years later he moved back to Pittsburgh and went into private practice. In 1906 Robinson moved to Richmond, Virginia.<sup>14</sup>

In Richmond, in 1906, Charles M. Robinson created his own architectural firm and called it, Charles M. Robinson Architects, Inc. Mr. Robinson was especially renowned as a designer of educational buildings. He was the supervising architect of the Richmond Board of Public Instruction from 1910-1929. He designed the campuses of James Madison and Radford Universities in 1908 and 1913, respectively. Robinson created the master plan in 1925 for and designed many of the college buildings, which were regarded as some of his best work. Many of the William and Mary buildings were designed in the Georgian Revival style like the Newport News Public Library Building. The Newport News Public Library building was designed after Charles M. Robinson had spent time perfecting the style at the College of William and Mary. In fact Mr. Robinson was still working on William and Mary designs after completion of the Library.<sup>15</sup>

Charles M. Robinson was the architect for many buildings, which are currently listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The buildings on the Virginia Landmarks Register as of 1999 are the 1910 Alleghany County Courthouse, the John B. Cary School, the Highland Park Public School, and Thomas Jefferson High School all in Richmond. Other buildings attributed to the architect include: Clarendon School in Arlington, Orange High School in Orange County, Anna P. Bolling Junior High School in Petersburg, Shea Terrace Elementary School in Portsmouth.<sup>17</sup>

### **Key Figures in the Development of the Library**

Two dynamic women, Ellen Livesey and Martha Woodroof Hiden, guided the growth of Newport News's libraries from 1910 to 1968. Livesey was elected Chairman of the Newport News Public Library Association in 1910 and continued in that capacity until 1926. From 1926 until her death in 1952, Livesey served as honorary President of the Newport News Public Library Board. Mrs. Martha W. Hiden served as Chair of the Newport News Public Library, Inc. from 1926 to 1952.<sup>18</sup> Hiden used her long tenure to nurture the Virginia Collection to the status of a major research depository on Virginia history.<sup>19</sup>

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Hiden graduated from Randolph-Macon Women's College with a degree in the classics. She attended graduate school at the University of Chicago and the College of William and Mary. Hiden was elected to the Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa from the College of William and Mary in 1935. In 1952 she was elected to the Board of Regents of the College of William and Mary.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to being Chair of the Newport News Public Library, Martha W. Hiden was on the Board of the Virginia State Library (now the Library of Virginia) from 1932 to 1952.<sup>21</sup> She was active in several patriotic, historical and genealogical organizations, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Colonial Dames, Order of First Families of Virginia, Jamestown Corporation, Virginia Historical Society and others. As Chair of the State Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of Virginia Court Records for the Daughters of the American Revolution, Hiden was instrumental in leading the drive to preserve Virginia courthouse records, often personally going to county courthouses and bringing the records to the State Library for preservation. For her preservation efforts, the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution presented Hiden with the Award of Merit.

Martha Hiden was also a successful businesswoman. After her husband Phillip Wallace Hiden passed away in 1936 she took over and, until her death in 1959, headed the Hiden Storage and Forwarding Company, a business started by her late husband. In addition, Hiden wrote many articles for the William and Mary Quarterly, Tyler's Quarterly and the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography.<sup>22</sup> Hiden also authored and co-authored several books.

Like Martha Hiden, Ellen Livezey was civic-minded. In addition to being Chair of the Newport News Public Library Association from 1910 to 1926 she was honorary president for life of the Newport News Public Library, Inc. She guided the Newport News Public Library Association through its early development. Livezey was active in many local civic, patriotic and genealogical groups including the Newport News Woman's Club (charter member), the Colonial Dames of America as organizer of the Sarah Constance Committee, and the Newport News Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution as organizing regent.<sup>23</sup>

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### The Library's Role in Desegregation in Newport News

On May 9, 1949, W. Hale Thompson, a local African-American attorney, went before the Newport News City Council and proposed that the Newport News Public Library be opened to persons of all races. Within two months, a segregated library, Branch No.1 was set up in a room on the second floor of the Dorie Miller Center, which was known as the Negro Recreation Building, and which was located in the predominantly African-American section of the City of Newport News. Mr. Thompson, not satisfied with this arrangement, returned to the City Council on March 27, 1950 and again petitioned the City Council members to

allow "unrestricted use of the Newport News Public Library for whites and Negroes."<sup>24</sup> He argued: "The recent establishment of a branch library in the Dorie Miller Recreation Building, in my opinion, does not satisfy the State and Federal constitutional requirements of equal protection under of the law." Within two months, Mr. Thompson's attorney, William Davis Butts, had written to Council requesting the opening of both library facilities to all races. On May 15, 1949, City Attorney Harry L. Nachman recommended to the City Council that any decision on Thompson's petition be put off until the Supreme Court had ruled on the constitutionality of race-restricted use of public facilities.<sup>25</sup>

W. Hale Thompson, a local official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was not deterred. He threatened to go to court if the Newport News Public Library was not opened to African Americans. The Council reacted to the threat of a lawsuit with anger and charged Mr. Thompson with ingratitude. The Council refused to make any changes, arguing that policies with regard to use of the Newport News Public Library were made by Newport News Public Library, Inc. with the Council only approving them.<sup>26</sup> At that point Mr. Thompson filed suit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia against both the City and the Library Board. The case dragged on through the remainder of 1950 and 1951 with numerous postponements, until Judge Sterling Hutcheson scheduled the case to be argued before a jury on July 10, 1952. On July 8, 1952, two days before the trial was to begin, the board of directors of Newport News Public Library, Inc. issued a statement: "The Board of Directors of the Newport News Public Library, Inc. has announced that the facilities of its main reading rooms in the library at 30<sup>th</sup> Street and West Avenue are now available to all adult inhabitants of the City of Newport News."<sup>27</sup> The Newport News Public Library was now open to African Americans and Judge Hutcheson dismissed the court case on July 18, 1952.<sup>28</sup>

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The Newport News Public Library was one of the first organizations in the City of Newport News to open its doors to people of all races. Desegregation of the library occurred approximately nine years before the City's Public School System began desegregating in the fall of 1961.<sup>29</sup> Only a few months before, on March 7, 1952, a panel of three federal judges in Richmond upheld Virginia's segregation laws. On May 17, 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the doctrine of "separate but equal" in public schools in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.<sup>30</sup> In response, school systems in several of Virginia's cities and counties were closed as the state practiced "Massive Resistance" to the desegregation ruling. On February 2, 1959, some all-white schools in Norfolk and Arlington were opened to African American students.<sup>31</sup> At the time of the desegregation of the Newport News Public Library the sentiment for segregation was still very strong in Virginia. Public schools in most of Virginia did not act to desegregate until after 1968 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, requiring localities to demonstrate actual progress in desegregation.



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<sup>1</sup> "Proposed New Public Library," Daily Press 24 August 1928, 9.

<sup>2</sup> "Proposed New Public Library," Daily Press 24 August 1928, 9.

<sup>3</sup> MMM Design Group, Additions and Alterations to the Old Newport News Library on West Avenue; Basis of Design (Norfolk, VA: 15 November 1984) 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Proposed New Public Library," Daily Press 24 August 1928, 9.

<sup>5</sup> MMM Design Group, 4.

<sup>6</sup> "New Library is Materialization of Long-Held Hopes; Gives Idea of Georgian Colonial Residence," Daily Press, 13 October 1929, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Nolan, "An Architectural History of The West Avenue Library," 1979, 11-13.

<sup>7a</sup> DHR staff

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780: Guide to the Styles (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969) 159-160.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Guy Wilson, ed. Buildings of Virginia; Tidewater and Piedmont. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 25-35.

<sup>10</sup> "C.M. Robinson dies in Norfolk," Daily Press 21 August 1932, 1.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Morris and Margaret S. Moseley, From the People For The People: The Newport News Libraries, The First Century (Newport News, VA: Newport News Public Library System, 1991) 10.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, 10.

<sup>13</sup> "Movers and Shapers: The 100 Most Influential Richmonders of the Century," Style Weekly 11 May 1999.

<sup>14</sup> David Robinson, Charles M. Robinson and the Richmond Public Schools (Richmond, VA: Robinson, 1978) 3.

<sup>15</sup> John E. Wells and Robert E. Dalton, The Virginia Architects 1835-1955; A Biographical Dictionary (Richmond, VA: New South Architectural Press, 1997) 377.

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<sup>16</sup> Calder Loth, ed. The Virginia Landmarks Register, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1999) 595.

<sup>17</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Index by Architect 17 September 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Bobbe Wilson, "Newport News Public Library Owes Success to Mrs. Phillip W. Hiden," Times-Herald 9 March 1955, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Mrs. P. W. Hiden Dies; Civic, Cultural Leader," Daily Press 2 March 1959, 1-A, 8-B.

<sup>21</sup> Mrs. P. W. Hiden Dies; Civic, Cultural Leader," Daily Press 2 March 1959, 1-A.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Livezey Succumbs at 79," Daily Press 25 August 1952, 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, 15.

<sup>27</sup> "Main Library Opens Doors to All Adults," Daily Press 9 July 1952, 2.

<sup>28</sup> "Judge Orders Dismissal of Library Case," Daily Press 19 July 1952, 1.

<sup>29</sup> John V. Quarstein and Parke S. Rouse, Jr. Newport News: A Centennial History (Newport News, VA: City of Newport News, 1996) 180.

<sup>30</sup> John Clements, Virginia Facts: A Comprehensive Look at Virginia Today, County by County. (Dallas: Clements Research II, Inc., 1991) 511.

<sup>31</sup> Clements, 512.

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**Verbal Boundary Description**

The nominated property consists of the Newport News Public Library building and the lot on which it sits.

**Verbal Boundary Justification**

The building is sited on lots 1, 2, 3 and 4; Ward 1, Block 145 of the Newport News tax parcel map located in the City of Newport News' Real Estate Assessor's Office.



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