

# Alexandria Gazette Packet

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## Shhh! History Being Made

Remembering segregation and defiance on 70th anniversary of Alexandria's civil-rights protest at library.

By MICHAEL LEE POPE  
GAZETTE PACKET

The year was 1939. Virginia was harshly segregated between black and white — at the water-fountain, in the classroom and even at the library. That bothered Samuel Tucker, a 26-year-old African-American lawyer who decided to organize against the longstanding practice of segregation. Tucker, an Alexandria native, recruited 11 young black men to participate in a sit-in protest. He instructed them to dress well and behave respectfully as they entered the whites-only library, selected a book from the shelf, sat down and began reading.

When the day of the planned sit-in arrived, Tucker alerted members of the press who were there to chronicle the event. He planted a photographer to wait outside to snap a picture of the cops dragging away the well-dressed men. He even made sure he had a runner to provide updates from the library to his law office at the intersection of Princess and Alfred streets. But only five of the 11 recruits showed up.

"My brother was supposed to be there that day," said Ferdinand Day, former School Board chairman. "But he overslept."

The five men were arrested by the Alexandria Police Department and taken to the police station, which was then located on the Fairfax Street side of City Hall. Instead of being arrested for violating Jim Crow segregation laws, the five were charged with disorderly conduct. Flash forward 70 years, when City Attorney James Banks was attending an anniversary commemoration of the protest at the Barrett Branch



PHOTO BY LOUISE KRAEHL/GAZETTE PACKET

**During last week's reenactment, the police escort the five civil-rights activists out of the library where they are arrested and taken to jail.**

Library. Banks speculated that the city chose to issue charges of disorderly conduct to avoid a direct confrontation on the issue. Although the judge chose to postpone the case indefinitely, Banks said he could see a scenario in which the incident could have become as groundbreaking as Brown versus Board.

"It's an interesting thought experiment," said Banks, the city's first African-American city attorney. "Alexandria could have been at the center of the civil rights movement."

**ALTHOUGH THE SIT-IN** protest is widely known in Alexandria, it's not generally included in the an-

nals of civil-rights history. Perhaps this is because the German invasion of Poland later that month overshadowed the civil-rights struggle. Maybe it was because the protest happened in August, when many people were likely out of town or not paying attention. Whatever the reason, Alexandria's 70-year-old protest seems to be a well-kept secret.

"We like to call it the most famous civil-rights event you never heard of," said George Combs, branch manager of the library's local history collection. "It happened and then seems to

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## Lifelong Dream

City manager selects Earl Cook as the city's next chief of police.

By MICHAEL LEE POPE  
GAZETTE PACKET

From his childhood home in a public-housing complex known as "the Berg," Earl Cook would look out across the street and see officers buzzing in and out of the old Alexandria Police Department headquarters. According to family members, Cook's attraction to the force began at an early age — the allure of grit and determination from the men in blue who acted as role models and friends. That childhood fascination led to a 30-year career in the department in which Cook became the city's first black police

captain and now the city's first black police chief.

"I think he was impressed by the big boots and fancy uniforms," said Keith Spinner, Cook's uncle. "More than anything else, he was impressed by the idea of public service."

A native of Alexandria, Cook is a 1973 graduate of T.C. Williams High School. As a junior in high school, he was a member of the famous football team immortalized in the movie

"Remember the Titans." During a Tuesday afternoon press conference announcing Cook's appointment, Mayor Bill Euille pointed out that

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**"He's a role model, a mentor and a strong leader but most of all well-respected and caring leader who will give you the shirt off his back."**

— Mayor Bill Euille

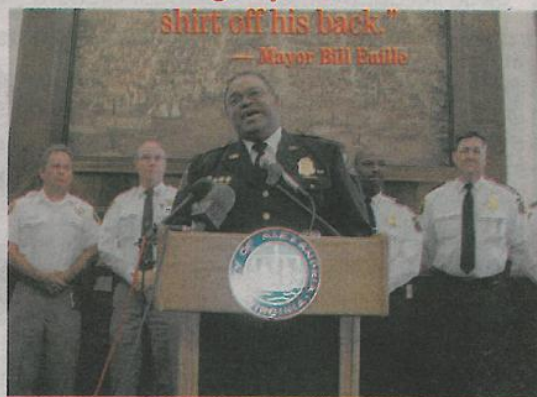


PHOTO BY MICHAEL LEE POPE/GAZETTE PACKET

**Alexandria Police Chief Earl Cook at Tuesday's press conference.**

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# Little-Known Protest Could Have Become Landmark Case

FROM PAGE 1

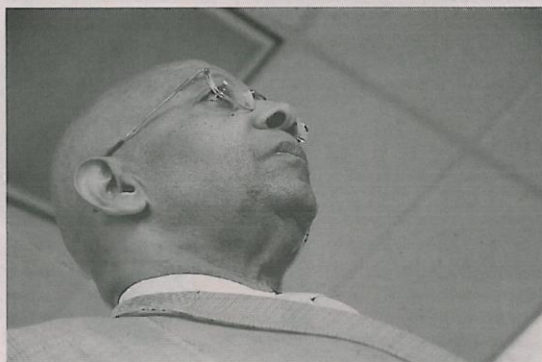
have passed out of the consciousness of most Alexandrians."

The anniversary offered a way to remind people about the landmark event. So librarians worked with city officials for months to put together an anniversary celebration of the protest. The program featured relatives of those who were arrested, civil-rights songs, speeches and a re-enactment of the arrest featuring third-grade students from Samuel Tucker Elementary School. As Vice Mayor Kerry Donley pointed out, it was fitting that the event honoring a sit-down protest would draw a standing-room only crowd.

"They were just trying to read, and they didn't even do anything wrong," said Andrew Stabile, a Tucker student who portrayed one of the cops arresting protestors. "It makes me kind of ashamed."

For the children, it was an opportunity to learn about Jim Crow segregation by participating in a re-enactment of it. For the city, it was a way to shine a spotlight on a significant moment that's been all but lost to history. And for those who remember that day 70 years ago, it was a way to honor the participants of the sit-in who put themselves in the crosshairs of an all-white police department at a time when segregation was an unquestioned premise of southern life.

"They didn't know what was going to happen," said Dorothy Turner, whose brother was one of the five men arrested. "My brother



Eugene Thompson, first director of the Alexandria Black History Museum delivers the keynote address.

## The Sit-In Five

- ♦ William Evans, 19
- ♦ Edward Gaddis, 21
- ♦ Morris Murray, 22
- ♦ Clarence Strange, 21
- ♦ Otis Tucker, 22

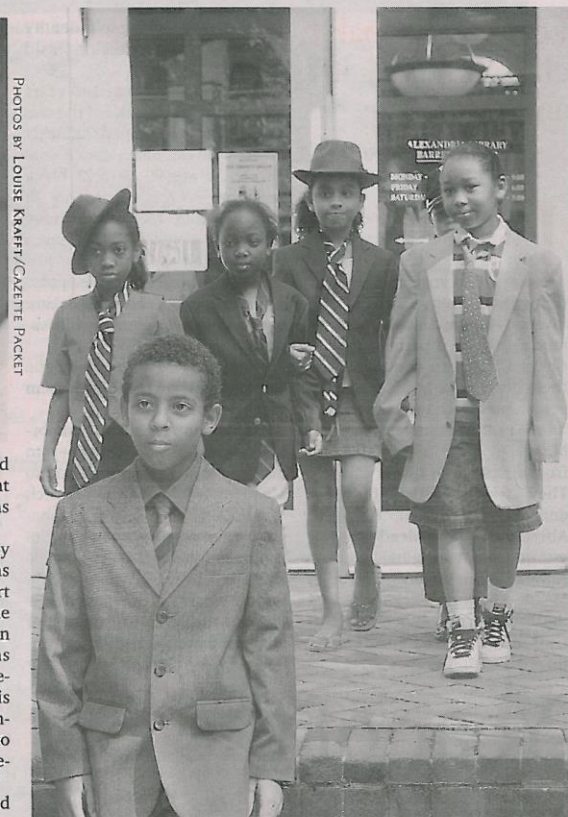
didn't even tell my father about it because he was afraid he might not let him be part of it."

**NEWSPAPER COVERAGE** of the original event was spotty, even though Tucker made a point of alerting editors about the event beforehand. The Alexandria Gazette ran a brief four-paragraph story that afternoon about the arrest. The story explained that five "colored youth" were arrested after they ignored a request to leave, and referenced an earlier attempt

by Tucker to work with a retired African-American Army sergeant named George Wilson who was trying to get a library card.

"The library has been used by white persons only since it was donated to the city by Dr. Robert S Barrett several years ago," the Gazette reported in its afternoon edition. "However, action was taken by a colored resident to secure library privileges, and his petition to secure a writ of mandamus compelling the librarian to issue a card is now under advisement of the Corporation Court."

Although the protest received minimal coverage locally, a photograph of the arrest accompanied a front-page article in the Chicago Defender about the incident. Under a photo caption reading "It's a Crime to Use This Library," the



Third grade students for Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School re-enact the August 21, 1939 sit-in at the Alexandria Library on Queen Street.

Defender explained that the protest was being viewed as a "test case" in Virginia. It also included a description of the court hearing in which the police officers testified about their arrest.

"Were they destroying property?" asked the Tucker.

"No," responded the officer.

"Were they property attired?"

"Yes."

"Then they were disorderly only because they were black?"

**ACCORDING TO THE DEFENDER**, the officer admitted in court during Tucker's cross-examination that the only disorder in question was because the men were members of "the Race" and that the library was for white people. City Attorney Armistead Boothe requested a continuance, and Judge James Duncan delayed the case several times before postponing the trial indefinitely. The next year, the city responded by building the Robert Robinson Library for blacks, which was not as well stocked as the white library.

"This was not a satisfactory solution for Samuel Tucker," said Audrey Davis, curator of the Alexandria Black History Museum. "He didn't want separate but equal, and so he used to often say he would walk past it and feel disappointed."

Today, the building that once housed the Robinson Library is the Alexandria Black History Museum. The city has a black mayor, a black library director, a black city attorney and, this week, a black police chief. And the concept of racially segregated schools is so foreign to elementary students that explaining the Jim Crow era to children takes patience and creativity — even at a school named after Samuel Tucker.

"They don't understand it at all," said Tina Jobkar, a teacher at Tucker Elementary School who worked with the students to prepare them for the re-enactment. "But dressing up as the participants and acting it out really helped them understand segregation."



Relatives of William Evans, Otto Tucker, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray, Clarence "Buck" Strange and Samuel W. Tucker stand to be recognized at the program.