

CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT

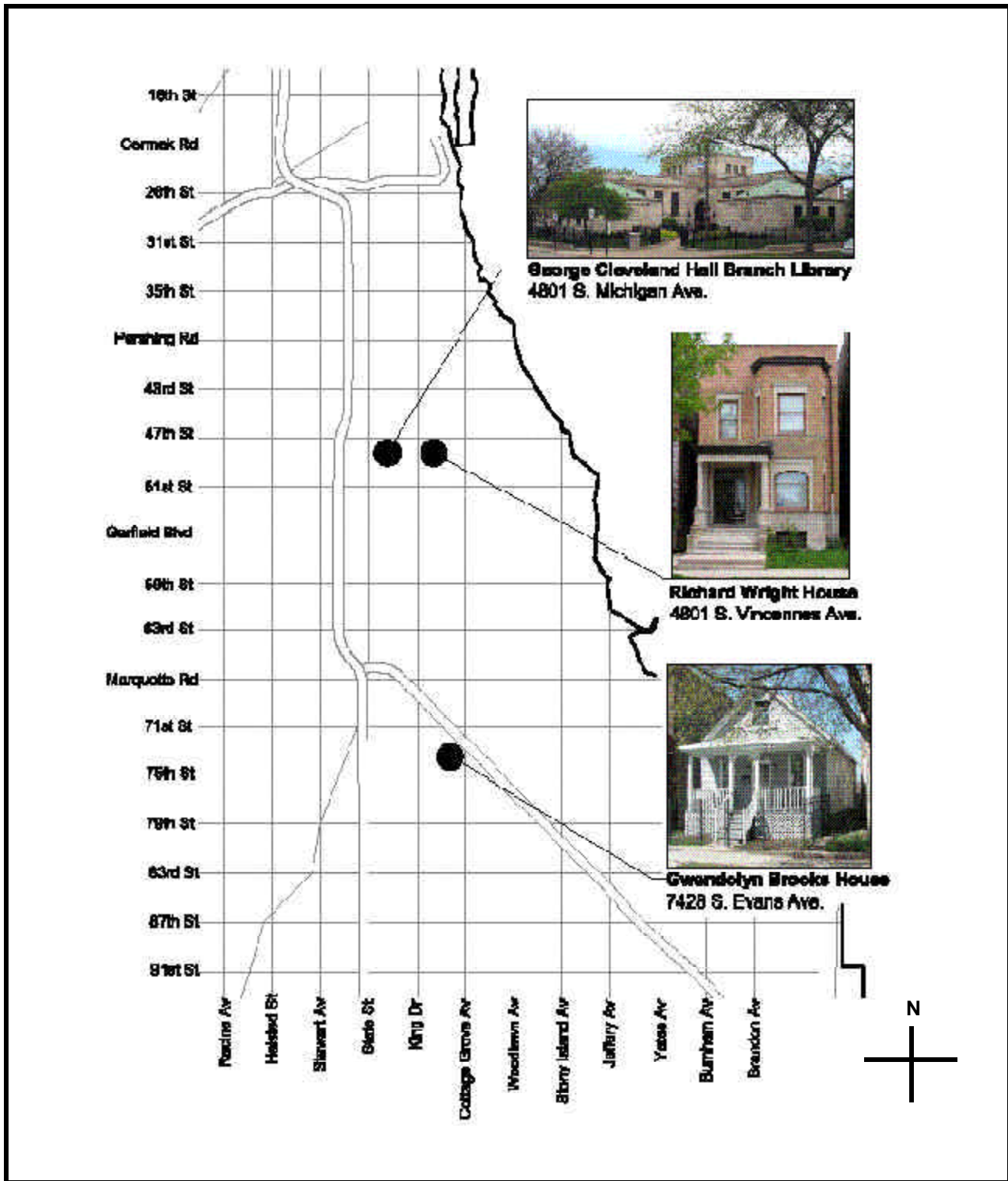
**GEORGE CLEVELAND HALL BRANCH,
CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY
4801 S. MICHIGAN AVENUE
BUILT: 1931
ARCHITECT: CHARLES HODGDON
PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1931-1950s**

**RICHARD WRIGHT HOUSE
4831 S. VINCENNES AVENUE
BUILT: 1893
ARCHITECT: UNKNOWN
PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1929-1932**

**GWENDOLYN BROOKS HOUSE
7428 S. EVANS AVENUE
BUILT: c. 1890
ARCHITECT: UNKNOWN
PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1953-1994**

For their associations with the “Chicago Black Renaissance” literary movement and iconic 20th century African-American writers who emerged during this movement, the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, the Richard Wright House and the Gwendolyn Brooks House possess exceptional historic and cultural significance. A vibrant literary movement, born of diverse creative and intellectual forces in Chicago’s African-American community from the 1930s through the 1950s, the Chicago Black Renaissance yielded such acclaimed writers and poets as Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000). These prominent literary figures, influenced by their personal experiences and observations in Chicago and elsewhere, illuminated the dehumanizing effects of racial prejudice. Their eloquent and powerful novels, poems, and plays vividly depicted the spectrum of racism against African-Americans during the Jim Crow era through the years leading up to the Civil Rights movement—ranging from wide-spread segregation and institutionalized discrimination to glaring acts of brutality and violence.

In addition to giving rise to some of the most significant American literature of the 20th century, the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement also produced venerable community centers in Bronzeville that cultivated African-American cultural and intellectual pursuits. One of the most significant of these institutions was the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library located at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue. With an immense



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African-American research collection and pioneering programming developed by Vivian G. Harsh, the first African American to head a branch of the Chicago Public Library, the Hall Library fostered the work of many Chicago Black Renaissance writers by providing them with a forum to develop and share their work with library patrons.

THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT

The Chicago Black Renaissance is the name given to the surge of artistic expression, community organizing, and social activity in Chicago's African-American community during the 1930s through the 1950s, and which figured prominently in the years leading to the modern Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Through the tumultuous years of the Depression, World War II, and a second "Great Migration" of African-Americans to an almost completely segregated Chicago of the 1940s and 1950s, this multi-disciplinary collaboration of artists, writers, scholars, and activists promoted the study of black history, art and politics to inform social protest against racism and discrimination. During this dynamic era Chicago was one of, if not *the* center, of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction, and sociological study.

The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement emerged from broad social and cultural changes that accompanied the unprecedented expansion of the African-American community on Chicago's South Side, beginning with the Great Migration of 1916-1918 and continuing with successive migrations throughout the 1950s that brought blacks from the Deep South to the urban North. The inception of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement coincides with the onset of the Great Depression of 1929 and the resulting collapse of the "Black Metropolis," the center of the city's African-American political, social, economic, and cultural life that developed in the 1910s around 35th and State Streets. Many blacks migrating to Chicago found that the North could be as hostile as the South, especially when it came to issues such as membership in trade unions, access to employment, and lending, insurance and housing restrictions that confined the black population to portions of the West Side and to the "Black Belt," the overcrowded chain of neighborhoods on the city's South Side. Their response was one of demonstrated urgency to improve conditions for their own and future generations.

By the 1930s, the Black Belt, euphemistically renamed the "Black Metropolis" existed as a narrow 40-block-long corridor running along both sides of State Street on Chicago's South Side. African-American residential settlement was predominately confined to this enclave which was almost completely segregated. Its oldest northernmost section which encompassed the once-thriving Black Metropolis was characterized by extreme overcrowding, dilapidated tenements, high rents, and cramped "kitchenette" apartments. African-Americans fortunate enough to purchase homes often settled in the southern portions of the Black Belt or nearer the lake as they found their choices limited by discriminatory practices including housing covenants, redlining tactics, and violent protests in nearby white neighborhoods. Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime, and over-crowded conditions contributed to a palpable sense of frustration with the denial of citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s.

Despite the gravity of these problems, African-Americans promoted solidarity within their community and its institutions. Bronzeville, one of the largest black communities in the United States, became the center of African-American culture in Chicago. Its important institutions sought to uplift the community during the

time by encouraging intellectual discourse and artistic expression celebrating African-American culture and a pan-African identity that sought to unify people of African descent throughout the world.

Since its opening in 1932, the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue served as one of the important intellectual centers in Chicago cultivating the arts and fostering the work of many African-American writers. Under the founding direction of Vivian Gordon Harsh (1890-1960), the first African-American branch librarian in the Chicago Public Library system, the library began compiling one of the most important research collections on African-American history and literature in the United States. From 1933 to 1953, the Hall Library hosted a thriving African-American salon culture where everyone from artists, writers, teachers, and factory workers gathered to discuss the works of authors ranging from Richard Wright to Plato. The gatherings drew African-American authors—local and national, well-established and emerging—into a face-to-face dialogue with Chicago’s African-American reading public.

The struggle to succeed in the face of discrimination, the tension between hope and frustration, and the outrage over the escalating violence in the South are themes that anchor the novels, poems, and plays of such acclaimed Chicago Black Renaissance writers as Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry (who, respectively, can be said to represent the beginning, middle, and final phases of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement). Through their works, the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement gave a voice to the injustices that would culminate in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

For example, the eloquent novels and essays of internationally-acclaimed author Richard Wright were shaped, in large part, by his experiences during the eight years that he lived and worked in Chicago. During his time in Chicago, Wright was viewed as the galvanizing force of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. In Chicago’s highly charged literary atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s, Wright participated in the Illinois Writers’ Project of the WPA and organized the South Side Writers Group to encourage other aspiring African-American authors. Despite relocating to New York, Wright often returned to Chicago throughout the 1940s to research and lecture; maintaining a close association with the African-American cultural community in the city and mentoring emerging writers of the Black Renaissance movement. Richard Wright’s influential books, *Native Son* (1940), and his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), established him as one of the greatest writers of his generation and propelled him to international fame.

Poetry also flourished during the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. Prolific author, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Chicago resident for nearly eighty years, Gwendolyn Brooks is often regarded by literary critics as an “American poetic original.” Brooks’ first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, appeared in 1945 and was followed by the Pulitzer Prize-winning volume, *Annie Allen* (1949); a highly-acclaimed novel, *Maud Martha* (1953); and a collection of poetry entitled, *The Bean Eaters* (1960). Considered to be one of the United States’ most significant poets, Gwendolyn Brooks was a central figure in the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and was later appointed Illinois Poet Laureate in 1968.

MAJOR FORCES IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY SHAPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE

The creative outpouring of art, literature and theater of the Chicago Black Renaissance was fueled by dissatisfaction with economic, social and political conditions in Chicago’s African-American community that evolved nearly a half century earlier. The Reconstruction period after the Civil War lasted until 1877 and



The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was born of diverse creative and intellectual forces in Chicago's African-American community. Left: Author Richard Wright and Vivian Harsh, the director of the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library, discuss Wright's groundbreaking novel, *Native Son*. Bottom: Pulitzer-prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks at a poetry reading at the Hall Library in the 1940s.



saw a steadily increasing number of rural blacks from the South relocating to Chicago. Throughout the 1880s, African-American settlement in Chicago was largely confined to the city's South Side between 16th Street to 24th Street, concentrated in several blocks west of State Street. Despite a series of state laws in the 1870s and 1880s, including an 1885 law against discrimination in public places, instances of segregation remained widespread. More important, laws were rarely enforced and did nothing to address blatant employment discrimination and restrictive housing practices.

By 1890, the African-American population in Chicago had risen to nearly 15,000—more than double the 1880 total of approximately 6,500. Dwarfed by a burgeoning European immigrant population, blacks accounted for just over 1 percent of the city's total population that exceeded one million people. During this time, the major area of residential settlement and commercial development the Black Belt stretched from 24th Street to 35th Street between Federal and State Streets in the Douglas community area. The narrow strip of land was bordered on the west by rail yards and industrial properties and on the east by affluent white residential neighborhoods.

During this time, new civic leaders emerged from within the African-American community to confront racial inequalities in Chicago and beyond. Some of the most prominent and vocal leaders were attorney Edward H. Morris, Dr. Charles Edwin Bentley, S. Laing Williams and Fannie Barrier Williams, along with Ferdinand L. Barnett. Barnett who established Chicago's first black newspaper, the *Conservator*, in 1878, and his wife, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a journalist and activist who spearheaded campaigns to protest lynchings in the South, advocated for the women's suffrage and settlement house movements and played a key role in establishing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The Ida B. Wells-Barnett House at 3624 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, a direct physical link to Wells' life in Chicago, was designated a Chicago Landmark in 1995. Wells' outspoken criticism of racially motivated brutality stirred the nation and encouraged a strong spirit of social activism and women's organizing within the African-American community.

Over time the combined influences of oppression faced by African-Americans in the South and economic and social opportunities in the North prompted many to leave their homes and families and move to Chicago. With the advent of World War I, as military production demands rose and industrial workers were drafted into military service, Chicago lost a critical supply of then-predominately white industrial workers during a time of intense need. As a result, African-Americans who were previously excluded from industrial jobs found new opportunities for employment. The *Chicago Defender*, the nation's most influential black weekly newspaper, recognized the significance of this shift and encouraged southern blacks to relocate to Chicago.

Pullman porters, working in railroad cars that criss-crossed the country, also served as agents of change, distributing thousands of copies of the *Defender* with its ideas of freedom and tolerance available in the urban North. With more than two-thirds of its readership base located outside of Chicago, the *Chicago Defender* utilized its influence to wage a campaign to support a "Great Migration" of blacks from the segregated agricultural south to the factories and stockyards of Chicago. It published blazing editorials, articles and cartoons lauding the benefits of the North, posted job listings and train schedules to facilitate relocation, and declared May 15, 1917, as the date of the "Great Northern Drive." The *Chicago Defender's* support of migration contributed significantly to the decision by its Southern readers to migrate to the North in record numbers. Between 1916 and 1918, at least 50,000 people migrated to Chicago, nearly doubling the city's black population.



BRING MORE OUT SOUTH TO WORK

Hundreds of our men and women are arriving in Chicago and other Northern cities each week. It is a good sign. It shows that at last the members of our Race who have been living in the shadow of death by the lynchings and under the baneful influences of the Jim Crow laws and other humiliating conditions which make the Southland a good place to steer clear of, are waking up. It shows further that the wonderful Southern conditions, the public school



The unprecedented population growth of the African-American community on Chicago's South Side began with the Great Migration of 1916-1918. Top left: Economic and social opportunities in Chicago prompted many families to relocate to the city from the Deep South. Top right: The *Chicago Defender* was an important voice in encouraging Southern blacks to migrate to Chicago. Left: During World War I, good-paying industrial jobs in factories and steel mills became available to African-Americans. Bottom: By the 1920s, Chicago's thriving "Black Metropolis" gained national recognition as a model of African-American achievement.



During the Great Migration of 1916-1918 and successive migrations continuing into the 1950s, tens of thousands of African-Americans from the rural and urban South arrived in Chicago. For many, Chicago held the allure of possibilities—good paying jobs and a more egalitarian society—that stood in sharp contrast to the dearth of opportunity and the pervasive, legalized racism that plagued the predominately agricultural southern states. While some economic opportunities may have been realized in Chicago during this time, however, the promise of full equality was slow in coming.

Continuing in the early 1900s, African-Americans continued to finance and build their own commercial and institutional structures in the area centered at State and 35th streets. These undertakings were encouraged by the competitive spirit pervading the city as well as being a reaction to the segregation that discouraged Chicago's African-American community from competing with white-owned companies. A thriving "city-within-a-city" known as the "Black Metropolis" gained nationwide publicity in the early 1920s as a model of African-American achievement. This center of the city's African-American social, economic, and cultural life derived its spirit from the same set of stimuli that other recently arriving groups from Europe tapped into to develop their culturally distinctive enclaves throughout the city. By the late-1920s, the prosperous Black Metropolis commercial district reached the height of its prosperity. (Eight buildings and a public monument considered to be some of the most significant surviving commercial and institutional properties of "Black Metropolis-Bronzeville" were designated as Chicago Landmarks by City Council in 1997.)

The influx of Southern blacks to the already overcrowded South Side prompted those families who could afford to move from the northernmost sections of the community to seek housing south of 35th Street, extending the Black Belt to 55th Street and east of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. This area, encompassing portions of the Douglas, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park communities, collectively assumed the sobriquet of "Bronzeville" by the end of the 20th century. During the 1920s, the expansion of the Black Metropolis was met with vigorous resistance from white neighborhoods situated in all directions. Racial tension escalated to violence during the Chicago Race Riot of July 1919, when a black youngster drowned at the 27th Street beach on the lake, the result of a rock throwing incident. Five days of rioting left 38 African-American Chicagoans dead and over 300 wounded. After the riot, racial tensions hardened as whites were increasingly determined to exclude blacks from their neighborhoods.

In the then-predominately white Washington Park neighborhood, opposition to African-American settlement took the form of a mass meeting on October 20, 1919. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, nearly 1,200 white protestors unified by the slogan, "They Shall Not Pass," gathered to demonstrate their opposition to African-Americans relocating to the area. Organizations such as the Hyde Park-Kenwood Property Owners' Association were established to reinforce the boundaries of segregation through the promotion of discriminatory housing practices and restrictive covenants that made it nearly impossible for African-Americans to acquire mortgages and insurance. Also at this time, a smaller group known as the Washington Park Court Improvement Association vowed not to sell or rent property to African-Americans.

The frequency of violent outbreaks rose throughout the early 1920s as African-American homeowners and realtors who sold or rented property to blacks were targets of a bombing campaign. Jesse Binga, a prominent African-American banker and real estate dealer, was the target of numerous acts of violence. Between March 1919 and November 1920, Binga's home at 5922 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (extant) was bombed ten times. Black homeowners in the 4500 block of Vincennes Avenue and the 4400 block of Grand Boulevard (now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) were also victims of unidentified bombers. Undeterred, African-Americans continued to expand the boundaries of the Black Belt by moving further south into the Grand Boulevard and Washington Park neighborhoods during the 1920s. Also

RIOT SWEEPS CHICAGO

Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets
Keep the City in an Uproar

4,000 Troops in Armory Ready
to Patrol City; Scores Are Killed



Racial tension escalated to violence during the Chicago Race Riot of July 1919. Top: *Chicago Defender* headline from August 2, 1919. Left: Five days of rioting left 38 African-American Chicagoans dead and over 300 wounded. Bottom: Many houses surrounding the stockyards were set ablaze during the rioting.



between 1925 and 1929, black Chicagoans gained unprecedented access to civil service jobs and won offices in state and local government.

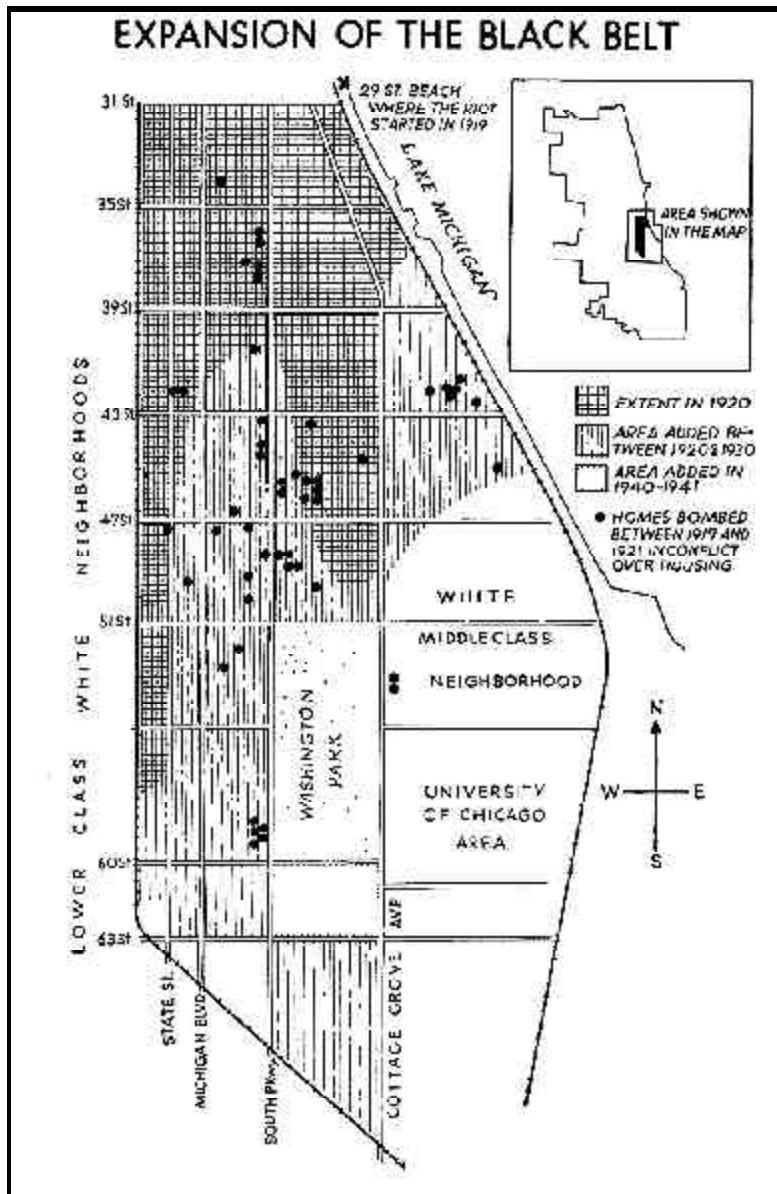
White businessmen, who previously ignored the economic potential of the African-American community, began to develop an alternate business area on 47th Street between Indiana and St. Lawrence Avenues that catered to African-Americans. During the Great Depression of 1929, their well-financed chain stores presented insurmountable competition to the independent African-American businesses in the Black Metropolis at 35th and State Streets. As a result, most of African-American-owned banks, insurance companies and other businesses in the Black Metropolis were forced to close. Despite targeted boycotts at chain stores that would serve, but would not hire, African-Americans, the commercial center catering to the African-American community shifted to this area centering on the intersection of Grand Boulevard and 47th Street.

In 1929, distinguished Jewish philanthropist and Chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company, Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) provided nearly \$3 million to develop the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments, a pioneering private housing complex located at 4618 S. Michigan Avenue. With construction of the apartments, Rosenwald strived to prove that reasonably priced housing for tenants with relatively low incomes could be developed while still achieving a fair return on investment. Unfortunately, the opening of the building in 1929 corresponded with the onset of the Great Depression, and only minimal financial returns were realized. The project however, became a model for future public housing projects.

Rosenwald funded other important initiatives in the Bronzeville community including donating the property for the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue. Of all his philanthropic efforts, Rosenwald was most famous for the more than 5,000 “Rosenwald Schools” he established throughout the South in rural black communities, and the 4,000 libraries he added to existing schools. In 1927, Rosenwald received a special gold medal from the William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement in Race Relations for his contributions to the education of African-American youth.

By the early 1930s, the majority of Chicago’s African-American population resided in the Grand Boulevard and Washington Park neighborhoods of Bronzeville. The subdivision of apartments into kitchenettes contributed to the overcrowding of the area, and these substandard apartments diminished the quality of neighborhood life by turning the western part of the neighborhood along Federal and Dearborn streets into a district of rooming houses. The eastern section of the Grand Boulevard neighborhood and the apartments around Washington Park, however, remained home to solidly middle-class African-Americans.

The momentum of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was encouraged in 1940 with the opening of the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. Held at the Chicago Coliseum (demolished in 1982, located on southwest corner of 14th Street and S. Wabash Avenue) from July 4 through September 2, 1940, the American Negro Exposition celebrated and promoted black achievement in cultural, intellectual and commercial endeavors over the seventy-five years from the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 to 1940. With exhibitions from every state in the United States, from several Caribbean islands, and from the African nation of Liberia, the exposition was described as the first black-organized world’s fair. Principally organized by Claude Barnett, the founder of the Associated Negro Press, the event offered evidence of black Chicago’s awareness of its pivotal place in American life. One of the more important contributions of the exposition was the compilation of a book entitled, the *Cavalcade of the American Negro*. Produced



Housing restrictions confined blacks to the “Black Belt,” an overcrowded chain of almost exclusively African-American neighborhoods on the city’s South Side. Left: A map from the groundbreaking sociological study, *Black Metropolis*, by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, documents the expansion of the Black Belt.

The oldest, northernmost section which encompassed the once-thriving Black Metropolis was characterized by extreme overcrowding and high rents. Below: A cramped “kitchenette” apartment. Bottom: A view of dilapidated tenements on South Dearborn Street in the 1930s.



by the Illinois Writers' Project of the WPA, this sweeping history of black contributions to all phases of American life from 1865 to 1940, was edited by Arna Bontemps and illustrated by Adrian Troy, of the Illinois Writers' and Art Projects, respectively.

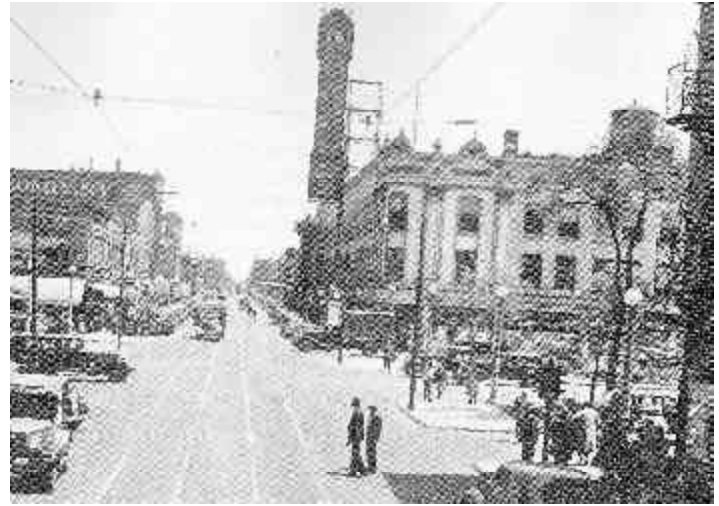
In 1944, only 10% of the 337,000 African-Americans living in Chicago resided outside of the Black Belt. Another large-scale wave of African-American migration to Chicago occurred following World War II. The rise in population was not matched by a corresponding increase in housing units in the increasingly dilapidated and already densely-populated Bronzeville community. In addition to creating even more overcrowded conditions, the segregated housing market also resulted in inflated rents. African-Americans were forced to pay higher rents for the same amount of space than did other ethnic groups.

Between 1940 and 1950, the African-American population in Chicago nearly doubled (from approximately 278,000 to nearly 495,000), but the Black Belt remained confined within the same area. Increased employment and housing demands of African-Americans in Chicago resulted in racial conflicts in several South Side neighborhoods. From 1945 to 1954, at least nine major race riots occurred in Chicago, with housing issues cited as the major cause of each conflict. Gwendolyn Brooks expressed her concerns about the housing problem in a political essay entitled, "They Call it Bronzeville."

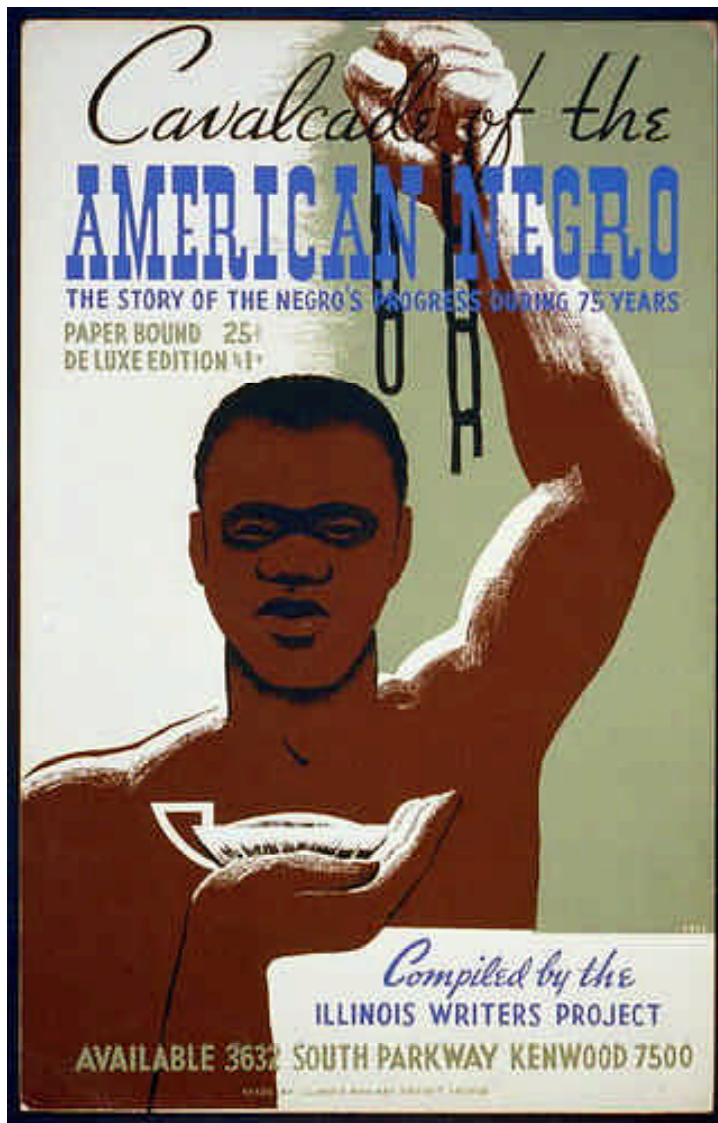
The lack of housing and the pressure of a growing population led to increases in poverty and crime within Bronzeville, which prompted many middle-class African-American families to move from the area. As predominately white neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side racially changed in the 1940s and 1950s, the housing market for middle-class, African-American homeowners expanded to include such communities as Woodlawn, Chatham, Greater Grand Crossing, and Englewood. The exodus of the middle-class however, had important consequences on the continued economic stability of Bronzeville. Neighborhood businesses struggled as their middle-class customer base rapidly dwindled.

At the same time, plans for the "renewal" of the Bronzeville community were developed. The Chicago Housing Authority opened the Ida B. Wells Housing Project at 37th and Vincennes in 1941. Blocks of deteriorated homes in the once-thriving community were classified as tracts of "slum and blighted" property. In the years that followed, entire blocks were razed for the construction of public housing projects, the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology, and the Dan Ryan Expressway. More public housing developments would follow, and over time these placed added pressure on neighborhood schools and further reinforced the segregated housing pattern on the City's South Side. Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime, and over-crowded conditions contributed to a palpable sense of anger and frustration with the denial of citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court had declared in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was illegal. This decision marked the climax of decades of legal challenges and initiated a new level of resistance to racism and discrimination. The resistance crystallized in 1955 with the brutal murder of Emmet Till and the refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white passenger. (Robert Temple Church of God in Christ at 4021 S. State Street, the location of Till's funeral and three-day visitation, was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2006.) In response to the arrest of Rosa Parks, the Montgomery bus boycott was staged. Lasting for more than one year, the boycott led to the desegregation of buses in 1956 and marked the beginning of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership rise in the Civil Rights Movement. Boycotts and sit-ins intensified as federal troops were called into Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to prevent interference with school



After the decline of the Black Metropolis, the commercial center of the African-American community centered on Grand Boulevard and 47th Street. Unlike the Black Metropolis, shops along 47th Street were largely controlled by white businessmen. Left: A view of 47th Street in 1941. Right: 47th Street in 1937 looking east across South Parkway (now, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) toward the Regal Theatre (demolished).



The momentum of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was hastened by the 1940 opening of the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, which celebrated and promoted black achievement in cultural, intellectual, and commercial endeavors. Below: A poster advertising the Expo. Left: A sweeping history of black contributions to American life entitled, *Cavalcade of the American Negro*, was introduced at the Exposition.





Another large-scale wave of African-American migration to Chicago occurred following World War II. The rise in population was not matched by an increase in housing units, resulting in added racial tension. Organizations like the Woodlawn Property Owners Association sought to reinforce the boundaries of segregation through the promotion of discriminatory housing practices, restrictive covenants, and blatant racism (top left). Top right: Fear of “trouble” as a result of blacks moving into this South Side community brought police to the neighborhood.

Right: Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime and over-crowded conditions contributed to a sense of anger and frustration with the denial of basic citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago in the pre-Civil Rights era.



integration. After these catalytic events, the Civil Rights Movement shifted to a strategy of “direct action”—primarily boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, marches and similar actions that relied on mass mobilization, nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. This mass-action strategy typified the Civil Rights movement from 1960 to 1968.

LITERARY ATMOSPHERE OF CHICAGO’S AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY (1930s-1950s)

Ironically, the Great Depression of 1929 led to a flowering of Chicago literature and art. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement rivaled the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Its diverse influences ranged from the Illinois Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration to the Chicago School of Sociology. Literature produced by Chicago Black Renaissance artists like Richard Wright turned from the Harlem Renaissance’s retrospective focus on black southern folk culture to an emphasis on a “literary naturalism” that revealed the nuances of urban ghetto life. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton exemplified the new intellectual style in their classic *Black Metropolis*, which remains the most detailed portrait of black Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s. Gwendolyn Brooks’ Pulitzer Prize-winning *Annie Allen* provided a poetic voice to the lives of everyday black Chicagoans with such works as “Beverly Hills, Chicago” and “The Children of the Poor.” Finally, important institutions in Bronzeville like the Parkway Community House, the South Side Community Art Center and the Hall Library encouraged broad-based involvement of Chicago’s African-Americans in community art collectives, writers’ workshops, and literary discussion forums as a means of uplifting the community and promoting artistic expression.

Illinois Writers’ Project

The Illinois Writers’ Project, part of a national WPA effort from 1935 to 1943 to employ artists and writers who might otherwise have been unable to find work during the Great Depression, brought together a diverse group of Chicago’s most talented young writers. The program, directed by Northwestern University professor John T. Frederick, included Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Willard Motley, Saul Bellow, Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, and Louis “Studs” Terkel. Its official publications included local guidebooks and a massive guide to Illinois prepared for publication in the American Guide Series. The project also afforded writers time to work on their own projects. Richard Wright began to develop ideas for his landmark novel *Native Son*. Nelson Algren wrote his breakthrough novel, *Never Come Morning*, while employed by the project. Writers on the project influenced one another, as most of them shared a commitment to social realism and left leaning politics.

Arna Bontemps, author and administrator of the Illinois Writers’ Project, was a participant in both the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Black Renaissance. Often viewed as the link between these two generations of African-American writers, Bontemps wrote that “Chicago was definitely the center of the second phase of Negro literary awakening.” The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement extended the momentum of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, as Bontemps put it, “without finger bowls but with increased power.”

Sociological Writing and Literary Realism

Another significant aspect of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement included the writing of nationally significant sociologist, author, and community organizer Horace R. Cayton, Jr. (1903-1970). Cayton, co-author (with George S. Mitchell) of *Black Workers and the New Unions* (1935) and (with St.

Clair Drake) of *Black Metropolis* (1945), guided Richard Wright in the production of *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), Wright's documentary study of African-American migration to Chicago.

In *Black Metropolis*, the ground-breaking sociological study of the African-American community in Chicago considered to be one of the most important books on African-American life published in the mid-20th century, Richard Wright offered this description of Chicago in the introduction:

I, in common with the authors, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, feel personally, identified with the material in this book.... All three of us migrated to Chicago to seek freedom, life... Drake came from the South; Cayton from the Northwest; and I went to Chicago as a migrant from Mississippi. And there in that great iron city, that impersonal, mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke, the snowy winds, the blistering suns; there in that self-conscious city, that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating, we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have...

Arriving in Chicago on the eve of the Great Depression, African-American migrants like Richard Wright found themselves engulfed in economic chaos, social turbulence, and complete uncertainty. Wright encouraged his fellow writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement to face the social injustices of the era with realism. Cayton's view of sociology not only as an academic discipline, but as a documentary spirit that contributes to the artist's imagination, informed Wright's approach.

During his time in Chicago (1931 to 1946), Horace Cayton's home became a haven for young African-American intellectuals. After 1940, he served as the Director of the Parkway Community House located at 5120 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (a designated Chicago Landmark, originally built for the Chicago Orphan Asylum), a significant institutional anchor for the Bronzeville community providing a variety of social services, classes and activities for children and adults. The center also sustained its own resident theatrical group, the Skyloft Players, and was closely associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance movement, often serving as home away from home for many Chicago Black Renaissance writers. Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright frequently stayed at the Parkway Community House when lecture tours brought them through the Midwest.

Most importantly, Horace Cayton facilitated the exchange of ideas among the African-American community's greatest social thinkers and writers. As a social scientist at the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago during the school's influential period between 1915 and 1930, Cayton approached his work as scientific and objective. Through his pragmatic reporting in the *Black Metropolis*, Horace Cayton sought to construct an accurate description of the community in order to provoke social improvement. He is credited with being the crucial link between the Chicago School of Sociology and the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement.

South Side Writers' Group

One of the most important drivers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was the South Side Writers' Group. The group emerged from a panel discussion led by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright at the founding convention of the National Negro Congress held in Chicago in 1936. Several of the African-American writers of the Illinois Writers' Project participated in the group along with other aspiring African-American authors, all in the initial stage of their careers. Beginning in 1936 and continuing for two years, the writers met weekly at the Abraham Lincoln Center at 700 E. Oakwood Boulevard to read aloud



Influences on the Chicago Black Renaissance ranged from the Illinois Writers' Project of the WPA to the Chicago School of Sociology. Top left: The Writers' Project's official publications included massive guidebooks. Top right: While working on the Project, author Richard Wright began to write his landmark novel *Native Son*. Left: Pioneering sociologist and Director of the Parkway Community House, Horace Cayton (pictured with writers Langston Hughes, left, and Arna Bontemps, right), facilitated the exchange of ideas among the African-American community's greatest thinkers and writers. Bottom: The Parkway Community House at 5120 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive played an important role in promoting the literary movement.





Top right: The South Side Community Art Center encouraged broad-based involvement of Chicago's African-American community in art collectives, writer's workshops, and literary discussion forums. Top left: A meeting of the Poetry Study Circle at the South Side Community Art Center in 1944. Right: Poet Gwendolyn Brooks attended and later conducted poetry workshops at the South Side Community Art Center. Brooks maintained a close association with the institution throughout her career.



their works-in-progress, discuss each effort, and explore its broader implications in the context of African-American literature. Richard Wright was the guiding force of the group, and some of its more prominent members included poet Frank Marshall Davis, playwright Theodore Ward, and author Margaret Walker.

Chicago Poets' Class of the South Side Community Art Center

Poetry flourished during the Chicago Black Renaissance, with much of it by poets connected to the Chicago Poets' Class, a famous poetry workshop of the South Side Community Arts Center (a designated Chicago Landmark) located at 3831 S. Michigan Avenue. Established in 1939 under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, the South Side Art Center provided a full curriculum of arts instruction for adults and children in disciplines including visual arts, music, theater, and literary forms of expression.

In 1941, Gwendolyn Brooks attended the workshop conducted by Inez Cunningham Stark, a wealthy Chicagoan who served as a reader for *Poetry* magazine. Stark, a familiar figure in Chicago art circles, was a demanding critic who encouraged her class to actively critique the work of their peers. In addition to Brooks, the class fostered several distinguished artists including Margaret Danner, a poet who became an associate editor of *Poetry*, and Margaret Goss Burroughs, an accomplished painter who later became the director of Chicago's DuSable African American History Museum. When Brooks' first collection of verse, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published in 1945, the Center was the site of an autograph reception. As an instructor and the co-founder of the Center's creative writing forum, Gwendolyn Brooks maintained a close association with the South Side Community Art Center throughout her career.

THE GEORGE CLEVELAND HALL LIBRARY AND VIVIAN G. HARSH

An important intellectual and cultural center in Bronzeville was the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library located at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue, which fostered the work of African-American writers during the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. Dr. George Cleveland Hall (1864-1930), a prominent Chicago surgeon, social activist and civic leader, championed the establishment of the library. Dr. Hall's civic achievements were numerous and his dedication promoting progress within the African-American community was legendary. In 1915 he was one of five original members of the organization, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), founded by Carter G. Woodson, and Dr. Hall became its first president. In 1926 he became the second African-American appointed to the Board of Directors for the Chicago Public Library. Soon after his appointment, Dr. Hall began to advocate for a full-service library in the thriving Bronzeville community.

Dr. Hall enlisted support from community organizations and also persuaded his close personal friend and prominent philanthropist, Julius Rosenwald, to secure a site for the library. Upon the completion of the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments, his pioneering private housing complex at 4618 S. Michigan Avenue, Rosenwald also donated land for the library at 48th Street and Michigan Avenue. In May 1929 the library's Board of Directors approved construction of the branch library. The distinctive library, with its octagonal central tower and Art Deco-inspired details, was designed by architect Charles Hodgdon.

In 1930 during the construction of the library, Dr. Hall succumbed after a five-month-long battle with illness. Upon his death the *Chicago Defender* described Dr. Hall as, "one of the most prominent professional men in the country, a leader whom Julius Rosenwald, internationally known philanthropist, recently termed as the man who was more interested in the progress and welfare of his people than any other man he knew." To

acknowledge the tireless efforts of Dr. Hall, the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library voted to name the library for him.

On May 25, 1931, while the Hall Library was still under construction, library Commissioner Carl Roden announced the appointment of **Vivian Gordon Harsh** (1890-1960) as its head librarian. Harsh's appointment, which made her the first African-American branch librarian in the Chicago Public Library system, was hailed by black newspapers. In the summer of 1931, the Rosenwald Foundation awarded Harsh a traveling scholarship to tour African-American collections in the Northeast. After her visit to the pioneering Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library, Harsh was determined to develop a "Special Negro Collection" in Chicago.

The collection's first materials were donated by prominent dentist Charles E. Bentley, a founding member in 1905 of the Niagara Movement led by W.E.B. DuBois, and an uncompromising foe of segregation. Dr. Bentley willed his collection of nearly 300 books on African-American history and literature to the Hall Library. In the fall of 1931, Andrew J. Kolar, President of the library's Board of Directors, nervously voiced concern during a period of eviction riots that enveloped the city that Harsh's appointment and the books on black history that Harsh was collecting for the new library were "likely to cause a 'race riot.'" Library Commissioner Roden defended Harsh's work, insisting that there was nothing in the "Special Negro Collection" of "an incendiary or revolutionary character."

The George Cleveland Hall Library opened to the public on January 18, 1932. The *Chicago Defender* headline proclaimed the community's excitement, "Crowd Jams Library on Opening Day." (Vivian Harsh reported that 1,186 people had signed the library's guest register.) Not only was the library a tremendous source of pride for the Bronzeville community, it was also a great resource and a supportive environment that nurtured the work of black students, scholars and writers. The late Mayor Harold Washington wrote, "Miss Vivian Harsh was instrumental in pulling together the most comprehensive collection of books on Afro-American history in Chicago. It was in that collection that I was first exposed to black authors such as Carter G. Woodson, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington."

Throughout the 1930s, the reputation of the Hall Library and its special collection grew. Vivian Gordon Harsh, along with the library's children's librarian, Charlemae Rollins, organized an immense collection of books and also initiated a number of community programs, including storytelling sessions, classes in conversational French, drama clubs, an African-American history club, and a series of "appreciation hours" that underscored black contributions to literature and the arts. Harsh's work was governed by the belief that librarians had a "deep responsibility for intellectual and civic leadership in their communities." She and Charlemae Rollins organized a women's "Reading Guidance Clinic" which developed into one of America's first African-American book groups.

The Hall Library was also home to one of the most significant facets of the Chicago Black Renaissance movement—the "Book Review and Lecture Forum." Inaugurated as the "Book Club for Adults," the forum held its first meeting at the Hall Library in October 1933. Harsh envisioned the gathering as much more than a discussion group, and among its stated goals were "to enrich the leisure time of those who want to be informed," "to bring to the library well-informed persons as speakers and discussion leaders," and to promote reviews and discussions of current books," drawing attention to books and the authors that wrote them.

The Book Review and Lecture Forum held meetings semi-monthly from October through April for more than twenty years. A planning committee composed of 6 to 10 community members and 2 library staffers



During the Black Renaissance, one of the most important intellectual and cultural institutions in Bronzeville was the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library (above). Philanthropist Julius Rosenwald (far left) donated the land for the library and civic leader Dr. George Cleveland Hall (left) championed its establishment. Upon Dr. Hall's death in 1930, the library board voted to name the branch in his honor. Bottom left: Constructed in 1931, the library opened on January 18, 1932. Bottom right: The *Defender* carried the details of the opening day.



Crowd Jams Library on Opening Day

Eleven hundred and eighty-six persons visited the new George Cleveland Hall library, 48th St. and Michigan Ave., on opening day, according to the report of Miss Vivian Harsh, head librarian.

Because of the dearth of funds the library was opened without the usual ceremony that accompanies such events.

Hundreds of cards were applied for, but only 49 had been accepted at closing time Monday, 12 hours after

paired books with reviewers, and brought patrons together with authors, creative artists, historians and newsmakers. Appointment to the planning committee was considered a great honor; Vernon Jarrett, the pioneering African-American journalist, recalled being “thrilled to be asked. It meant that I was becoming somebody.”

In what became the signature style of the Chicago Black Renaissance, authors and scholars including Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Arna Bontemps presented and defended their views before an audience of critical community members and activists. Two weeks apart in 1938, Margaret Walker reviewed Edna St. Vincent Millay’s collection of verse and presented her own poetry, followed by Langston Hughes reporting from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War. For many writers the Forum served as a way to test and promote their works while doing research at the library. Langston Hughes came to the Hall Library to write his memoir, entitled *The Big Sea* (1940). Margaret Walker used the library’s collection when assisting Richard Wright with research for *Native Son*. In 1949, noted writer Langston Hughes praised the Hall Library as one of the “Things I Like About Chicago” in a *Chicago Defender* article. Harsh was the Hall Library’s head librarian until 1958.

Architecture of the George Cleveland Hall Library

With its octagonal central tower flanked by symmetrical wings, the George C. Hall Library possesses a commanding presence on the southeast corner of E. 48th Street and Michigan Avenue. The building was designed in a “modernistic” architectural style that reflects the varied efforts in the late 1920s and 1930s to design contemporary buildings in a synthesis of historic and non-historic forms and ornament.

The overall appearance of the library is rectilinear and blocky. Randomly-laid lannon stone walls create a sense of massive simplicity. Window openings have no surrounds except sills, emphasizing the modern simplicity of the walls. The two-story octagonal tower with a low pyramidal roof is the focus of the library’s design. A main round-arched monumental entrance is ornamented by a prominently-rusticated surround and leads directly into the building. One-story wings with both flat and hip roofs step down from this central tower and “zig-zag” out to form a sheltered entrance court set back from the street corner, creating a sense of procession as a visitor approaches the library’s main entrance.

Building ornament combines both Classical and Art Deco motifs. The rusticated stone walls of the building have Classical-style details such as keystones, arches and copings. Low-relief abstracted-floral panels above the main entrance, carved-stone municipal seals on the one-story wings, and copings on the central tower impart an Art Deco-style character to the building.

Inside the entrance portal is the library’s central circulation space, a spatially-dramatic two-story pavilion. This octagonal “lantern” space has Classical Revival-style wood paneling covering lower walls, while above, are plaster walls and rectangular clerestory windows. The entrance hall’s wood paneling is finely ornamented with tall carved pilasters that support a simply-carved entablature while framing the entrance doorway, a wood-paneled circulation desk opposite the doorway, and openings that lead to the rest of the library. The entrance doorway and circulation desk are further embellished with round arches, carved Classical-style swags, keystones, and other Classical-style moldings and ornament.

Identified as “orange” in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, the George Cleveland Hall Library is an unusual and significant library building in the context of Chicago architecture. Compared to most neighborhood branch libraries built before World War II, the Hall Library is a dramatically-designed building meant to stand out in the Bronzeville neighborhood.



Top left: Vivian G. Harsh, the first African-American librarian to serve as the director of a branch library in the Chicago Public Library system, led the Hall Library and was the founder of the “Special Negro Collection.” Harsh’s innovative programming brought library patrons together with the major African-American writers and intellectuals of the day and fostered writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance. Top right: Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes lecture at the library. Below: Writer Arna Bontemps conducts a children’s reading group at the Hall Library in the 1940s.



In the early days of the Chicago Public Library into the early 20th century, the institution focused its attentions on a central collection downtown, eventually building the grandly-scaled, Classical Revival-style main library building at 78 W. Washington that is now the Chicago Cultural Center. Built in 1897 by Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, the building is a designated Chicago Landmark. Neighborhood distribution of books was sporadic and most often was handled by somewhat informal “stations,” including drugstores and groceries, where books could be left for patrons.

In the early 20th century, the Chicago Public Library began to build neighborhood branch libraries. The first, the Timothy B. Blackstone Branch, built in 1902, was a gift of Mrs. T.B. Blackstone in memory of her husband and is a Classical Revival-style building with portico and saucer dome in the Kenwood neighborhood (extant). During the next three decades, the Chicago Public Library established over three dozen branch libraries around the City. Some, including the Legler Regional Library on Chicago’s West Side, were clearly conceived as prominent public buildings with their large scale and handsome ornamentation, usually Classical in nature. Most branches, however, were relatively modest in scale and design.

Its block-like composition, random-ashlar stone facades, abstracted Classical-style detailing, and combination of hip and pyramidal roofs, make the Hall Library unlike any other branch library in Chicago. It denotes permanency through its finely-laid stone walls, its geometrical-block massing and simple, abstract Classical detailing in turn were elements of modern design. Inside, the use of handsomely-carved wood detailing, including Classical-style pilasters and swags, gave the entrance hall the feel of a grand residence. Designed by one of the successor firms to Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge (the architects of the 1897 main library, now the Chicago Cultural Center), the Hall Library was conceived as a neighborhood “landmark,” which it has remained to this day.

After Vivian Harsh’s death in 1960, the Special Negro Collection of the Hall Library was renamed in 1970 the Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. In 1975 the collection was moved from the Hall Library to the newly-opened and larger Carter G. Woodson Regional Library at 95th and Halsted. In 1998 a new wing was added to the Woodson Library to house the growing volume of black history materials held in the Harsh Research Collection. In May 2009, the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers, which chronicle the history of the Chicago Defender newspaper and its founding family, were donated to the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. The collection, considered to be one of the most significant resources of African-American history and culture found anywhere in the United States, includes over 70,000 books and original manuscripts by Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps.

WRITERS OF THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT

Segregation and discrimination confining blacks to inferior schools, substandard housing and limited employment opportunities, conflicts between the races, and outrage over the escalating violence in the South are themes that anchor the great American novels, poems, and plays of such acclaimed Chicago Black Renaissance writers as Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry. Counterbalancing these external societal constraints, these writers presented blacks as a people with hope and resilience in the face of adversity. Accordingly, through their efforts, the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement gave a voice to many of the injustices and inequities that would eventually culminate in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.



Its block-like composition, abstracted Classical and Art Deco motifs, and combination of hipped and pyramidal roofs give the Hall Library a distinctive and commanding presence. Inside the library features finely-crafted wood detailing and Classical ornament.



Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Richard Wright has been called the galvanizing force behind the Chicago Black Renaissance movement. Writer, poet, political activist and expatriate, Wright resided in Chicago for a decade, from 1927 to 1937. Despite having left Chicago for New York in 1937, the author maintained a close connection with the city, returning frequently for extended periods to visit family and friends, to lecture and to do research for his books. During the 1940s, through his continued involvement with Chicago's African-American cultural community, Wright influenced emerging writers of the Black Renaissance movement. Throughout his career Chicago played a vital role in Wright's work. Wright transformed his life experiences in the racially-segregated Deep South and on the South Side of Chicago into social commentary through his prose, short stories and novels, the latter of which catapulted Wright into the national spotlight as one of the most celebrated and revered black writers in America.

Born in Roxie, Mississippi, in 1908, Richard Wright was the eldest son of Nathaniel Wright, a sharecropper, and Ella Wilson Wright, a schoolteacher. Wright spent much of his childhood moving between extended family members in Mississippi and Arkansas, as well as spending a short time in an orphanage in Memphis, Tennessee. After Wright's father abandoned the family in 1913, his mother worked as a cook and domestic for a number of years until she suffered a stroke, forcing Wright to leave school and work odd jobs to support the family at age 10. Wright soon became dismayed by the illiteracy and lack of education he witnessed among African-Americans in the Deep South and was determined not to follow the same path. As a result he became "obsessed" with reading and writing, and the income he saved from his various jobs allowed him to afford books, as well as food and clothing. In 1924 at the age of 16, Wright published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in the *Jackson Southern Register*, a black weekly newspaper.

In 1925 Wright graduated from the ninth grade as valedictorian from Smith-Robertson Junior High School in Jackson, Mississippi. Already showing independence borne from his life experiences, Wright refused to deliver the graduation ceremony speech prepared by the principal and instead delivered his own, titled "The Attributes of Life." Wright quit high school to earn more money. He moved to Memphis in 1927, where he began reading the works of journalist and essayist of H. L. Mencken, a long-noted critic of the white South. Wright was particularly impressed with Mencken's use of "words as weapons," and developed a reading list of his literary contemporaries including such authors as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and O. Henry.

In December 1927, at the age of 19, Richard Wright moved to Chicago with his Aunt Maggie and shared space in a cramped rooming house. Wright again found himself working odd jobs to support the family when his mother and brother joined them in early 1928. That summer, he gained temporary employment with the post office, and his earnings allowed them to stay in an apartment, but they moved frequently. Wright didn't earn a permanent position because years of poor nourishment caused him to fail the postal service's weight requirement that was part of the medical examination. Tension in the household over Wright's continued reading and writing was compounded by his failure to earn the postal job. Wright and his family, now joined by his Aunt Cleopatra, were forced to move once again.

In 1929 Wright retook and passed the medical exam after a crash diet increased his weight. The steady income from the job allowed the family to rent a four-room, second-floor apartment in a brick two-flat in the Bronzeville neighborhood at **4831 S. Vincennes Avenue**, and the added space allowed him to read and write in relative comfort. As a substitute clerk and mail sorter, Wright disliked the bureaucracy of the job but became friendly with many co-workers, both black and white, some of whom would play a future role in his literary career and political evolution.



During the ten years that he lived and worked in Chicago, and the following decade of his continued close association with the city, author Richard Wright (left) was a galvanizing force of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. Wright's most famous and influential book, *Native Son* (1940), drew in large part from his life experience in Chicago and established him as one of the most revered authors of his generation. Bottom left: Wright discusses *Native Son* with Chicago attorney Ulysses S. Keys. Bottom right: A movie poster for the film version of *Native Son*. Wright wrote the screenplay and starred in the lead role of Bigger Thomas.

'WRIGHT SHOWS NEW BOOK



Richard Wright, author of "Native Son," which has been selected as the book-of-the-month for March by the Book-of-the-Month club, points to an eloquent passage in his new book which Ulysses S. Keys, left, well-known Chicago attorney, is reading. Wright, who is spending a week in the city spoke at Washburn A.M.E. church Sunday, and reviewed his book for a group at the home of Attorney Keys Sunday evening.



Wright resided in this second-floor apartment for three years. Constructed in 1893, the building is typical of the ubiquitous Chicago “two-flat,” with its rectangular floor plan with the narrow end facing the street to maximize valuable street frontage. Set atop a raised basement, the building has a brick bay which projects toward the street. The building is constructed of honey-colored face brick and stone, with copper flashing and has simplified Classical-style details in its front porch and window surrounds.

When the Depression deepened in 1930, Wright was laid off from his postal job. His work experiences, however, formed the backdrop of his first novel, *Cesspool*, about black life in Chicago. Begun in 1930, the novel was repeatedly submitted and rejected by publishers for being too graphic. Later retitled as *Lawd Today!*, the book was published posthumously in 1963. Wright also published a short story titled “Superstition” for *Abbott’s Monthly Magazine*, but the publication failed before he was ever paid.

Wright’s heightened awareness of the inequities of race and class, brought on by his desperate need for work, spurred him to become politically active. He worked briefly with black precinct captains in both the Republican and Democratic parties before becoming interested in the views of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, a branch of the Communist Party. In 1932 Wright was called back to work at the post office for the Christmas season, but not before financial hardships forced him and his family to move from their apartment at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue.

In 1933, Wright was recruited by a fellow postal worker to join the newly-formed local branch of the John Reed Club, a national literary organization sponsored by the Communist Party. It proved to be a turning point in Wright’s literary career. Encouraged by its mostly white membership (which included Chicago author Nelson Algren), he was allowed to flourish, regularly publishing poetry, short stories and journalistic articles in such Communist publications as *Left Front*, *Midland Left*, *Anvil* and *New Masses*.

Wright received further acclaim when he was invited to speak at the American Writers’ Congress in New York City and to become a member of the League of American Writers. He also took an active leadership role in the South Side Writers Group, where he established friendships with such figures as Arna Bontemps, William Attaway, Margaret Walker and Horace Cayton. In 1935 while working for the Federal Writers’ Project (part of the Works Progress Administration), Wright published the story “Big Boy Leaves Home” in *The New Caravan*. It was the first of his literary works to receive critical praise from mainstream newspapers and journals.

Wright left Chicago for New York City in 1937 to pursue his career as a writer. In Harlem, he joined the local Communist Party and took an active leadership role by becoming the editor of the newspaper *Daily Worker*. As he did in Chicago, Wright used the publication to promote his political agenda as well as help fulfill his literary ambitions. He also joined the New York Federal Writers’ Project in 1938, where he published in a WPA writers’ anthology, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow—An Autobiographical Sketch.” The story gained the attention of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities. Undeterred, Wright continued to publish criticism of the nation’s discriminatory practices and policies and published the article, “Not My People’s War,” in *New Masses* in opposition to American intervention in the months leading up to World War II.

Wright’s professional and personal life from that point forward until his death in 1960 would be a series of triumphs and disappointments. Wright gained national attention for the collection of four short stories titled, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). The publication and favorable reception of *Uncle Tom’s Children* improved Wright’s status with the Communist party and enabled him to establish a reasonable degree of financial stability. By May 6, 1938, excellent sales had provided him with enough money to move to Harlem.



The two-flat building at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue (left and bottom) was where Richard Wright resided the longest (from 1929 to 1932) during his time in Chicago. It is where he effectively began his professional career and also where he began writing his first novel, *Lawd Today!*, which was published posthumously in 1963.



The collection also earned him a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to complete his first and most famous novel, *Native Son* (1940).

Often described as “fierce,” “angry,” and “powerful,” *Native Son* shocked readers with its violent realism, describing the emotional forces that drive a young man to commit murder. Drawing heavily on his Chicago experience, Wright crafted the novel’s complex protagonist, Bigger Thomas, to personify his own frustration and anger with segregation and the disadvantage imposed upon blacks. Bigger Thomas became one of the most vivid and indelible characters ever created by an American author. Thomas was a brutal murderer whose response to racism was to lash out at society. Wright’s message to society was that America’s racism would produce more Bigger Thomases, unless changes were made.

Controversy swirled around the powerful novel. Some critics, both black and white, argued that Wright’s portrayal of an evil, violent African-American only inflamed racial prejudice. Other critics praised Wright for validating the reality of the black experience in America at the time. Wright himself contended that he simply wrote what he saw and felt—his only objective to illuminate the strain of racism coursing through American culture. As literary critic Irving Howe wrote, “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever.”

Native Son was the first bestselling novel by a black American writer and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by an African-American writer. It sold 250,000 copies in its first three weeks of publication. The novel made Richard Wright the most celebrated and revered black writer in America; he was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s prestigious Spingarn Medal in 1941 for noteworthy achievement by an African American. In March 1941, *Native Son* opened on Broadway, with Orson Welles as director, to generally favorable reviews. *Native Son* continues to be regarded as Wright’s greatest novel and most influential book.

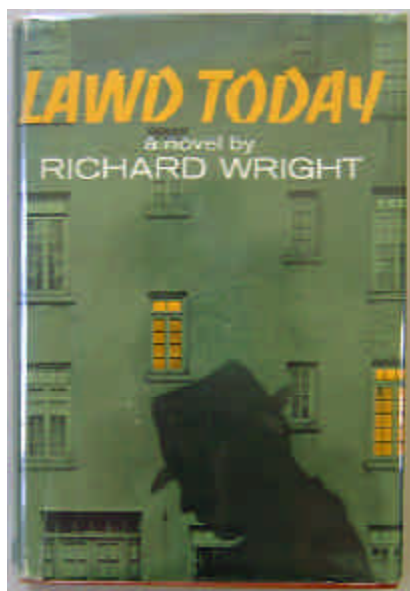
The same year Wright penned the text that accompanied a volume of photographs almost completely drawn from the files of the Farm Security Administration; *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* was published in October 1941 to wide critical acclaim. In the years that followed, Wright published one of his most critically-acclaimed works, the semi-autobiographical narrative *Black Boy* (1945). Literary critic, Alfred Kazin, identified *Black Boy* as “the seminal text in our history about what it means to be a man, black, and Southern in America.”

Despite his many literary successes, Wright’s life continued to be tempered with racial and political obstacles. In 1941 Wright married Ellen Poplar, a white Communist organizer from Brooklyn, and had to use their white lawyer to circumvent discriminatory practices in order to buy a house. The U.S. government hindered Wright’s overseas travel because of his past Communist ties, further highlighted by the nation’s anti-Communist fears spurred on by the McCarthy era. (Wright had denounced the Communist Party in 1944 over their refusal to confront wartime racial discrimination.) In 1947 Richard Wright, disillusioned by his political party and disappointed in his country, moved to Paris after having been warmly received by the French intellectuals there. Wright, his wife and their daughter Julia would become permanent expatriates and would never return to the United States.

An iconic writer of the 20th century, Richard Wright’s powerful novels were shaped by his life experiences in and long association with Chicago. During the decade the Wright lived in Chicago (1927-1937), he moved frequently. However, the two-flat building at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue was where he resided the longest (from 1929 to 1932). It is where he effectively began his professional career and also where he began writing his first novel, *Lawd Today!*, which was published posthumously in 1963. Wright resided at four



Top left: *Native Son* was the first best-selling novel and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by an African-American writer. The novel made Richard Wright the most celebrated and revered black writer in America. Center left: Wright's semi-autobiographical narrative *Black Boy* (1945) has been called “the seminal text in our history about what it means to be a man, black, and Southern in America.” Bottom left: Wright began work on *Lawd Today!* while residing in Chicago. Above: In 2009, the United States Postal Service honored the iconic writer and former postal worker with this commemorative stamp.



other known addresses during his time in Chicago including: 4601 S. Champlain Avenue (c.1932 -1933), 4804 S. Champlain Avenue (1933-c.1935), 2636 S. Grove Street (1935), and 3743 S. Indiana Avenue (1935-1937). Additionally, after Wright moved to New York, he returned to Chicago in 1940 to purchase a home for his family at 4011 S. Vincennes Street (he sold the property in 1950), and Wright made frequent visits to Chicago the decade after he moved to New York, returning for extended periods to visit family, to lecture, and to do research for his books. Of these properties, the two-flat at 4831 S. Vincennes is the only known residence occupied by Richard Wright during his time in Chicago that survives today and retains the strongest historical associations with Wright.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

A prolific author, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, and professor, Gwendolyn Brooks composed poetry and resided in Chicago for nearly eighty years. Brooks, a central figure of twentieth-century American poetry, is often regarded by literary critics as an “American poetic original.” Her poetry bridged the Chicago Black Renaissance and its aftermath, and led the way in establishing a multiracial, multiethnic American artistic heritage.

Born June 17, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was the first child of David and Keziah Brooks. Her family moved to Chicago shortly before her birth, her mother returned to Kansas to deliver Gwendolyn in her grandparents’ home. Throughout her life, Gwendolyn Brooks remained closely connected to the city’s South Side. Although she graduated from Chicago’s integrated Englewood High School, Brooks also attended Hyde Park High School, then a predominately white public high school, and the all-African-American Wendell Phillips High School (a designated Chicago Landmark). In 1936 Brooks graduated from Woodrow Wilson Junior College (now Kennedy-King College). Her experiences in these four quite different educational settings provided the basis for much of her poetic investigation of race, class, and social interchange within Chicago, and, by extension, within the United States as a whole.

Gwendolyn Brooks began submitting her poetry to magazines and newspapers when she was seven years old. Her first poem to be published appeared in the *American Childhood* magazine when she was 13. Brooks’ education in poetry came from a multitude of diverse sources. During her teenage years, she became acquainted with prominent Harlem Renaissance writers, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, who urged her to read modern poetry and emphasized the need to write with disciplined regularity. By 1934 Brooks had become an adjunct member of the staff of the *Chicago Defender* and had published almost one hundred of her poems in a weekly poetry column. In 1941 Brooks attended a modern poetry class for black writers that Inez Cunningham Stark, a wealthy Chicagoan who served as a reader for *Poetry* magazine, conducted at the South Side Community Art Center. Gwendolyn Brooks maintained a close association with the South Side Community Art Center throughout her career.

In 1938 at the age of 22, Gwendolyn Brooks married Henry Lowington Blakely. The young couple, both determined to be poets, faced the grim reality of finding work and affordable housing in a racially and class-divided Chicago. In 1940 Brooks gave birth to her son, Henry, Jr. The family moved through a series of dismal, cramped one-room apartments known as “kitchenettes” and small apartments on the city’s South Side. In her first volume of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks’ poems provide insight on the material and spiritual constraints of life in Chicago’s Black Belt—a world introduced in the first poem, entitled “Kitchenette Building.”

In the first half of *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks gave a voice to the “forgotten” inhabitants of Bronzeville as they witnessed their neighborhood deteriorate from disinvestment while the construction of public housing complexes swallowed up private homes and familiar gathering places around them. Throughout the collection Brooks offers loving and serious interpretation to the lives of those “who are poor, / Who are



Gwendolyn Brooks

You Made Me and Shall Keep Me, Chicago!

By Gwendolyn Brooks
(Author of "Mood Music")

When I was a little girl I often visited a now departed aunt Mrs. Joseph Small, in Kildare. She lived in a charming house on a big farm in one of the most beautiful sections of the city. It was surrounded by other charming houses. I would go wandering alone, breathing the sharp evening air, and looking at the nice architecture. At the time I was in the first grade, I would say, "When the grass is this green I must stay!"

Finally I grew and went there to stay. I lived there no more than seven weeks, when I had caught a fever. I discovered that you had not been the same place to stay. This is not entirely the best of the city. The trouble, chiefly, is that Chicago is right inside me, with all its light and folly and pain, whenever I go. Will the city accept the following with passionate joy, if I am ever again behind me, Chicago. It is mine, as the best friend and friend that I can. You did my withdrawing your congratulations and me, Chicago.

With a whisper: "Go back—where you belong and began." Then I remember the doors that you gave me, Chicago. Yes, and the ones that have been out of the way. You people and spirit, you red and negro, Chicago. You piece of present assembly and good people. You are my heart. . . . O, it is you, Chicago. To have your name, where my heart and my being were made!



Gwendolyn Brooks, a dominant figure of twentieth-century American poetry, is often regarded by literary critics as an "American poetic original." Her modest and unassuming lifestyle in no way reflected the international acclaim and critical recognition that her poetry received. Top right: Gwendolyn Brooks and her daughter, Nora, grocery shopping in 1961. Top left: Brooks' life-long connection to Chicago was both a source of inspiration and frustration that she explored in her poetry. Bottom: Gwendolyn Brooks shortly after being awarded the Pulitzer-prize for poetry for *Annie Allen* (1949).



adjudged the leastwise of the land, / Who are my sweetest lepers” (“the children of the poor”). The second half of the book detailed the unfair treatment of African-Americans in the military during World War II.

A Street in Bronzeville brought Gwendolyn Brooks instant critical acclaim. In 1945, she was selected as one of America’s “Ten Young Women of the Year” by *Mademoiselle* magazine. She became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1946 and twice received Guggenheim Fellowships for creative writing (1946, 1947). Following on this success, her second book of poems, *Annie Allen* (1949), won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950. Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African-American, in any genre, to win the award.

Following the birth of her second child, Nora, in 1951, Gwendolyn Brooks felt more determined to settle into a permanent home. She had spent most of her adult life on the move, and she was tired of the constant upheaval and the confining spaces. Gwendolyn and Henry began looking for a home and immediately faced the problem of a housing shortage and a lack of funds. Assuming that fiction would be more marketable than poetry, Brooks began work on a manuscript that would become the acclaimed novel *Maud Martha* (1953). This semi-autobiographical work depicted the life of an African-American woman living in the World War II era and explored the racism, classism, and sexism that she encounters by both whites and blacks.

While the novel did not generate a great profit for Brooks, it did garner more publicity and critical prestige for the author. Despite having received international recognition for her work, Brooks and her family continued to face financial challenges. After being contacted by her publisher Harper & Row to write children’s poetry, Brooks penned a collection of poems entitled *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1954).

On September 14, 1953, Brooks and her husband purchased a small, modest house located at **7428 S. Evans Avenue** in the Greater Grand Crossing community. The one-and-one-half-story wood-frame cottage with a front-facing gable roof and raised front porch was constructed circa 1890. Gwendolyn Brooks and her family resided in the home for more than forty years (1953-1994).

During the 1950s, Brooks’ poetry reflected the injustice and brutality that she witnesses as African-Americans struggled for civil rights. In *The Bean Eaters* (1960), a collection of poems protesting lynching and segregation, Brooks includes a piercing outcry against the murder in 1955 of Chicagoan Emmet Till in Mississippi.

A watershed in Brooks’ poetic career later occurred in 1967 when she attended the Fisk University Second Black Writers’ Conference. Brooks encountered many young black poets whose poetry and social thinking led her to greater involvement in the Black Arts Movement. One of the more visible spokespersons for “the black aesthetic,” Brooks rejected major publishing houses in favor of smaller but exclusively black publishers. She left her longtime publisher Harper & Row for Broadside Press, a small, Detroit-based company operated by African American poet Dudley Randall. With the move, Brooks’ work also became influenced by the improvisations of jazz and the spoken language of the black community. Critics noted that in such form, Brooks’ social commentary became more visible, energetic, and unguarded. Some responded with acclaim and others with alarm. Despite the differences in how Brooks’ critics viewed her politics, all of them recognized her success as a poet, as well as her vigorous commitment to art and the African-American community.

Brooks would go on to accrue many national honors. President John Kennedy invited her to read her work at a Library of Congress poetry festival in 1962. Succeeding Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks was



CHICAGO'S
GREAT LADY
OF POETRY

By Frank London Brown

*I rode into the golden yell
 Of the hollow land of June,
 And when I mentioned the raincoat
 They did not leave the room.*

"The Great Lady"

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1917. She was the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950. Her work is known for its powerful social commentary and its focus on the lives of African Americans in Chicago. Brooks' poetry often explored the struggles and triumphs of the Black community, and she is considered one of the most important voices of the Harlem Renaissance.

Gwendolyn Brooks was a poet, novelist, and educator. She was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1917. She was the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950. Her work is known for its powerful social commentary and its focus on the lives of African Americans in Chicago. Brooks' poetry often explored the struggles and triumphs of the Black community, and she is considered one of the most important voices of the Harlem Renaissance.

Top: Gwendolyn Brooks resided at 7428 S. Evans for more than four decades (1953-1994)—the majority of her adult life. Left: A beloved Chicago poet, Brooks' poems provided insight on the material and spiritual constraints of life in Chicago's Black Belt.

appointed Illinois Poet Laureate in 1968 and served until her death in 2000. As laureate, Brooks was active in Illinois communities where she developed and organized poetry activities in under-served areas of Chicago, and she encouraged young writers to lend their voices to poetry. She was also a co-founder of the South Side Community Art Center's (a designated Chicago Landmark located at 3831 S. Michigan Avenue) creative writing forum.

In 1976 Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African-American appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1985 she was appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. Later, Brooks was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the 1994 Jefferson Lecturer, the highest award in the humanities given by the federal government. During her long career, Brooks taught at Columbia College (Chicago), Northeastern Illinois University, Elmhurst College, Columbia University, Clay College of New York, and the University of Wisconsin. Additionally, Brooks produced such educational books as the *Primer for Blacks* (1980) and the *Young Poets Primer* (1981). For over seven decades, the poetry and fiction of Gwendolyn Brooks, whether from the perspective of mother, daughter, wife, or guardian of the black community, provided personal and communal insight into the desire and disillusionment, humor and injustice of African-American life experiences on Chicago's South Side.

A lifelong Chicagoan, Gwendolyn Brooks resided at 7428 S. Evans for more than four decades—the majority of her adult life. Like her home, her modest and unassuming lifestyle in no way reflected the international acclaim and critical recognition that her poetry received. Prior to purchasing the property, Brooks resided at three known Chicago properties including her parent's home at 4332-34 S. Champlain Avenue (demolished), an apartment at 6070 S. Lafayette Avenue (demolished), and a kitchenette apartment located above a tavern that once occupied the corner building at 623 E. 63rd Street (partially demolished). The house at 7428 S. Evans Avenue remains the property with the strongest historical association with Gwendolyn Brooks and her writings.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that these four buildings associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance each be designated as Chicago Landmarks: the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue, the Richard Wright House at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue, and the Gwendolyn Brooks House at 7428 S. Evans Avenue.

Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City's History

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois or the United States.

- These three buildings—two the one-time homes of nationally prominent writers and one a pioneering cultural institution—are associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance, the literary movement that emerged from the surge of artistic expression, community organizing, and social activity in Chicago's African-American community from the 1930s through the 1950s in the pre-Civil Rights years. Through

the tumultuous years of the Depression, World War II, and a second “Great Migration” of African-Americans to an almost completely segregated Chicago, this interconnected effort by artists, writers, scholars, and activists promoted the study of black history, art and politics, to inform social protest against racism and discrimination in the years leading up to the 1960s Civil Rights movement. During this dynamic era, Chicago was a national center of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction.

- The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was born of diverse creative and intellectual forces in Chicago’s African-American community, and yielded such acclaimed 20th-century writers as Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000). These pioneering writers drew from their personal experiences and observations in Chicago and elsewhere to illuminate the dehumanizing effects of racial prejudice. Their eloquent and powerful novels and poems vividly depicted the spectrum of racism against African-Americans during the Jim Crow era through the years leading up to the modern Civil Rights movement—ranging from wide-spread segregation and institutionalized discrimination to glaring acts of brutality and violence.
- The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement also produced venerable community centers in Bronzeville that cultivated African American cultural and intellectual pursuits. One of the most significant of these institutions was the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library, located at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue. With an immense African-American research collection and pioneering programming developed by Vivian G. Harsh, the Hall Library fostered the work of many Chicago Black Renaissance writers by providing them with a forum to develop and share their work with library patrons. From 1933 to 1953, the Hall Library hosted a thriving African-American salon culture where a diverse cross-section of the African-American community gathered to discuss the works of authors ranging from Richard Wright to Plato. The gatherings drew African-American authors—local and national, well-established and emerging—into a face-to-face dialogue with Chicago’s African-American reading public.

Criterion 3: Significant Person

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- During the ten years that he lived and worked in Chicago and the following decade of his continued close association with the city, **Richard Wright** was a galvanizing force of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. In the second-floor apartment of the two-flat building at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue, where Wright resided with his family from 1929 to 1932, he effectively began his professional literary career with his first novel, *Lawd Today!*, which was published posthumously in 1963. Richard Wright’s most famous and influential books, *Native Son* (1940) and his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), drew in large part from his life experience in Chicago and established him as one of the revered authors of his generation and propelled him to international fame. Controversial and powerful, these seminal texts are credited with forever changing American culture and redefining the portrayal of the Black experience in American literature.
- A prolific author, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, professor, and life-long resident of Chicago, **Gwendolyn Brooks** resided at 7428 S. Evans for more than four decades (1953-1994)—the majority of her adult life. Like her home, her modest and unassuming lifestyle in no way reflected the international acclaim and critical recognition that her poetry received. Brooks, a dominant figure of twentieth-century

American poetry, is often regarded by literary critics as an “American poetic original.” Brooks’ first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, appeared in 1945, and was followed by *Annie Allen* (1949), *Maud Martha* (1953), and *The Bean Eaters* (1960). Considered to be one the United States’ most significant poets, Brooks’ poetry bridged the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and its aftermath, and was a leading force in the establishment of a multiracial, multiethnic American artistic heritage.

- A pioneering leader in the movement to foster and preserve African-American history, **Vivian G. Harsh** was the first African-American librarian to serve as the director of a branch library in the Chicago Public Library system. Harsh was the founder of the “Special Negro Collection,” an invaluable resource to the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance and subsequent generations of researchers, that has grown into the largest repository of its kind in the Midwest. Harsh’s innovative programming, such as the women’s “Reading Guidance Clinic” which developed into one of America’s first African-American book groups and the “Book Review and Lecture Forum,” brought library patrons together with the major African-American writers and intellectuals of the day, fostered the Chicago Black Renaissance and established the George Cleveland Hall Library as an important intellectual center in Bronzeville.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- With its octagonal central tower flanked by symmetrical wings, the George C. Hall Library possesses a commanding presence on the southeast corner of E. 48th Street and Michigan Avenue. The building was designed in a “modernistic” architectural style that reflects the varied efforts in the late 1920s and 1930s to design contemporary buildings in a synthesis of historic and non-historic forms and ornament. Building ornament combines Classical-style keystones, arches, and copings and Art Deco-style low-relief abstracted-floral panels and copings.
- The library’s finely-crafted central circulation space, a spatially-dramatic two-story octagonal entrance hall, features Classical Revival-style wood paneling ornamented with tall carved pilasters covering lower walls, while above plaster walls are punctuated by rectangular clerestory windows.
- The George Cleveland Hall Library is an unusual and significant library building in the context of Chicago architecture. Compared to most neighborhood branch libraries built before World War II, the Hall Library is a dramatically-designed “modernistic” building meant to stand out in the Bronzeville neighborhood.

Criterion 6: Distinctive Theme

Its representation of an architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other theme expressed through distinctive areas, districts, places, buildings, structures, works of art, or other objects that may or may not be contiguous.

- For their associations with the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and the iconic 20th-century African-American writers who emerged as part of the movement, each of these three buildings—two the homes of nationally prominent writers and one a pioneering cultural institution—possess exceptional historic and cultural significance.

- The Richard Wright House, the Gwendolyn Brooks House, and the George Cleveland Hall Library, each demonstrate and commemorate the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement, the interconnected effort by artists, writers, scholars, and activists to promote the study of black history, art and politics, to inform social protest against racism and discrimination in the years leading to the modern Civil Rights era. During this dynamic era, Chicago was a national center of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction.

Integrity Criteria

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic value.

The George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue, the Richard Wright House at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue, and the Gwendolyn Brooks House at 7428 S. Evans Avenue all retain their original location, overall design, decorative details, historic materials, and workmanship. Each possesses excellent exterior integrity, reflecting the property’s period of significance and historic associations. Exterior changes to each building are generally minor and do not detract from each building’s ability to express its historic cultural, architectural and aesthetic value.

Exterior changes to the Hall Library include the replacement of several windows and doors on the wings flanking the octagonal center tower. Additionally, the building’s original tile roof has been replaced with a standing-seam metal roof. The double-height main circulation space on the interior of the library, with its handsomely-carved wood detailing, including Classical-style pilasters and swags, retains a high degree of integrity.

The Richard Wright House has experienced few exterior alterations. Its original cornice has been removed and the parapet wall has been reconstructed. Overall, the Wright House retains the great majority of its historic details and historic materials, including windows and doors.

The original wood siding of the Gwendolyn Brooks House has been covered over with artificial siding (a reversible change), and the gable window has been altered. Additionally, the front entry door has been replaced. Despite these alterations, the overall visual character of the building reflects its historical association with Gwendolyn Brooks.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its evaluation of these three buildings associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance—the George Cleveland Hall Branch, of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue, the Richard

Wright House at 4831 S. Vincennes Avenue, and the Gwendolyn Brooks House at 7428 S. Evans Avenue—the Commission recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of each building; and
- the double-height main interior circulation space of the George Cleveland Hall Library.



The Chicago Black Renaissance movement produced venerable community centers in Bronzeville that cultivated African-American cultural and intellectual pursuits. One of the most significant of these institutions was the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library at 4801 S. Michigan Av. (left).



The dynamic movement also gave rise to some of the most significant American literature of the 20th century by such acclaimed figures as author Richard Wright and poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Homes associated with these nationally prominent writers are: the Richard Wright House at 4831 S. Vincennes Av. (left), and the Gwendolyn Brooks House at 7428 S. Evans Av. (right).

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Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning

Patricia A. Scudiero, Commissioner

Brian Goeken, Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation

Project Staff

Heidi Sperry, research, writing, photography, and layout

Susan Perry, research and writing

Terry Tatum, writing and editing

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