

“Local African American Empowerment through Huston-Tillotson’s Downs-Jones Library:
Dr. Mary E. Branch and the Tillotson College Library”

See: President Mary E. Branch Administration: The Founding of a College Library

Introduction

Mary E. Branch, Tillotson College’s first African American woman president, was instrumental in founding the institution’s first library through her outreach to national Congregationalist Churches and “contributions from friends”. Miss Branch’s appointment to the Tillotson College presidency by the American Missionary Association took effect on July 1, 1930. Her first impression of the campus after arriving in Austin was “shock and disgust”. The college had suffered “years of declining enrollments and inadequate administration for some years”. Miss Branch and her Administration began a “five-year plan of development” starting with the library. As an advocate of W. E. B. Du Bois’ philosophy regarding the “Talented Tenth” and her desire to attract the best African American women students, she knew it was critical to provide them with the best on-campus resources possible.

History

Tillotson College was founded at the beginning of post-Reconstruction on February 10, 1877, and located in central Austin. The college’s original name was Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute after ordained Congregationalist minister, Reverend George J. “Jeffrey” Tillotson of Hartford, Connecticut. Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute was supported by the Freedmen’s Aid Society (Freedmen’s Bureau) and the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Churches (now known as United Church of Christ).ⁱ The Freedmen’s Bureau operated in Texas from late September 1865 until July 1870.ⁱⁱ Before the Freedmen’s Bureau was dismantled in Texas in 1870, white and Black supporters believed in its purpose: “To supervise the newly freed slaves in the southern states”ⁱⁱⁱ and “provide Blacks with the tools they needed to function effectively in a literate society.”^{iv} White resistance to African American participation in the political and economic realms of southern society led to the Bureau being dismantled in the South. But the seeds of Black education had already been planted in Austin, Texas. The Texas State Charter recognized Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute on January 17, 1881. It was located at what is now known as “Bluebonnet Hill” on “23 acres bound by Mesquite Street (now E. 11th Street), Bois d’Arc (now E. 7th Street), Chicon Street, Chalmers Avenue.”^v On June 2, 1909, a new Charter was issued and the school was renamed Tillotson College. Its purpose was to train “teachers (for) the black community.”^{vi} Tillotson College was reorganized in 1925 as a Junior College. It became a Women’s College in 1926, and a Senior Co-educational institution in 1935.^{vii}

The Mary Elizabeth Branch Administration and the Tillotson College Library: 1930-1935

Mary E. Branch’s experiences as a student and faculty member began when she was Home Schooled by her manumitted parents, Tazewell and Harriet. She attended Virginia State College from 1895 until 1897, and became a faculty member there from 1904 until 1925. Miss Branch continued her education at the University of Chicago where she received her B.A. in 1922 and a

M.A. in 1925.^{viii} She taught English at Sumner Jr. College in Kansas City, Kansas from 1925 until 1926, and was Dean of Women at Vashon High School in St. Louis, Missouri from 1926 until 1930.^{ix} Mary Crayton Williams May wrote in “Miss Mary E. Branch, The Great Designer” in the *History of Tillotson College, 1881-1952*: “The American Missionary Association had the answers. They invited Miss Mary E. Branch to become president of Tillotson College.”^x Miss Branch arrived in Austin in 1929 at the beginning of the Great Depression.^{xi} The experienced educator and administrator was appointed the first African American woman president of Tillotson College—a Women’s College—on July 1, 1930. Her first impression of Tillotson College was “shock and disgust.”^{xii} President Branch’s administration began a “five-year plan of development” during her first year in office.^{xiii} The campus revitalization campaign started with the library. “The library facilities received immediate relief from the worst of the situation when she implored generous contributions from friends. Representatives of the school besieged second-hand bookstores which were a reservoir of used local college and university books. They took a practical look at everything and sought the means of relief. From this point on the library grew steadily to twenty thousand volumes in 1944 under Miss Branch’s encouragement.”^{xiv} President Branch placed an advertisement in the *Congregationalist*.^{xv} George F. Work responded to her request.^{xvi}

President Branch received a letter from George F. Work dated February 19, 1934.^{xvii}

Dear Madam: Yesterday after reading in the *Congregationalist* of your needs for a college library, I went to Sunday School and brought the matter of their contributing books from their home libraries to this use. They responded heartily and I am sending this letter to ask you to state your desires as the class of books you wish.

.....

I am personally interested in doing this for the colored people, both from the fact that they as a class are so prejudicially mistreated by the states at the South, especially Texas, where I understand no colored person is allowed to enter a public library, and also because of my personal contact with the race, having been a captain in command of Negro soldiers during the Civil War.

President Branch responded to Work in a letter dated February 21, 1934.^{xviii}

I was very happily surprised in receiving your letter this morning, and to know that you are thinking about us in our efforts to build up our library. We shall be very grateful for whatever books you can collect and send us. Please express my pleasure to the Sunday School of the Congregational Church.
...

We need any books that will be useful in a college library, any fiction which young women would be interested in, biography, or in fact, any type of book that would suit college students.

...

It is quite a joy to know that there are always in the world people who are interested in others. Yes, the lack of opportunity for reading good books is quite an obstacle to the advancement of the Negroes in the South especially during the times of unemployment. With the future outlook of shorter hours, young people should have the opportunity of reading good material. I am doing the best I can to interest young people wherever I go in reading good literature.

Work joined forces with President Branch to build Tillotson College's library because he wanted to help "the colored people." President Branch wanted "good reading material" and "good literature" for her female students, therefore, having the best library possible was necessary. The Tillotson College library would be central to students receiving what she considered a classical education—the kind W. E. B. Du Bois advocated. President Branch championed Du Bois' "Talented Tenth" philosophy and wanted to attract the "best female students" who would become future leaders in their communities. It became Tillotson College's mission to train educated African American women for leadership in the Central Texas area. There was no better way, she believed, than to have books that would fulfill that need. Mr. Work's service in the Northern Army during the Civil War when he commanded "Negro Soldiers" gave him the insight into Black people's willingness to still fight for a nation that enslaved and discriminated against them. Mr. Work, like President Branch, knew education was a means toward self-improvement, self-reliance and success.

In Work's final letter to President Branch dated March 5, 1934, he wrote:

Yesterday at Sunday school I had your letter read. It will start the work of collecting the books, also our Ladies Missionary Society will take a hand in the work by appointing a committee at their meeting this week and I am hoping for a successful campaign so that in course of two or three weeks we may be able to ship them.^{xix}

President Branch also received correspondence from Mrs. Charles L. Vile of Waltham, Massachusetts. Mrs. Vile wrote in her letter dated March 4, 1934.^{xx}

In a recent issue of the *Congregationalist* I read a short article entitled: 'When Books are Scarce'. ...This article stressed the need of good books for high school girls as well as for your college library. In our church school,—the First Congregationalist of Waltham—there are now a few books which might be of use to you. ...French and German books which we could send if of any use to you. ...We up here know nothing about Austin or about your college. We would be very glad to hear about your work, and something of *the life plans* of your girls. ...Hoping to hear from you at your convenience, and with cordial greetings from snowy New England. Very Sincerely, Clara. V. Viles.

Members of the Congregationalist Church reading in the *Congregationalist* heeded President Branch's plea for books for Tillotson College's fledgling library. From the tone of Work's and Vile's letters, they believed in her mission to have "good reading material" and "good literature" as a way of maximizing the college's growing library, which would be in the best interest of her female students achieving their "life plans." Both respondents believed in President Branch's mission to educate young African American women at a time when it was difficult to provide Black people with an education. President Branch and her supporters understood the power of education especially at an historic Black college in Central Texas. Therefore, it was incumbent on President Branch and Tillotson College to *build a building* to house the donated books. In 1935, two sketches were made of the campus grounds—including a library.^{xxi}

President Branch's success at Tillotson was not limited to her expansion of its library. Her other innovations included "constructing new buildings, renovating existing buildings, expanding the library, doubling the size of the faculty, and hiring with considerable rigor. She also worked hard to deepen and improve the college's relationship with the community. Five years after she began her work at Tillotson, it was reorganized as a coeducational, four-year college."^{xxii} Most importantly and long-lasting, though, was President Branch's influence on her female students. The first African-American woman president of Tillotson College taught them "self-respect" and "inculcated in listeners the seed of self-determination and pride in the Negro heritage."^{xxiii}

President Mary Elizabeth Branch's tenure at Tillotson College lasted from 1930 until 1944. She died on July 6, 1944 in Camden, New Jersey.

i On March 3, 1865, Congress passed "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees" to provide food and shelter, clothing, medical services, and land to displaced Southerners including newly freed African Americans. See Texas State Historical Association, "Freedmen's Bureau, accessed August 8, 2021.

<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/freedmens-bureau>.

ii See Texas State Historical Association, Freedmen's Bureau, accessed August 8, 2023. www.tshaonline.org.

iii See Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021

<https://www.sutori.com/story/huston-tillotson-university>

iv See Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021 www.tshaonline.org.

v See Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021 www.sutori.com.

vi See Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021 www.sutori.com.

vii See Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021 www.sutori.com.

viii Mary E. Branch (1881-1944), accessed June 13, 2019 <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history>

ix Staff, MSRC, "Branch, Mary E. (2015). *Manuscript Division*. Paper 16.

<https://dh.howard.edu/finaid> manu 16

x Maybe Crayton Williams May, "Miss Mary E. Branch, The Great Designer" in *The History of Tillotson College, 1881-1952*. (Thesis, Texas Southern University, 1967, A#, Box Number 1,

Folder #], Huston-Tillotson University Archives, Downs-Jones Library, Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, TX. May, 91; *Informer* (Houston), July 15, 1944, 1.

^{xi} May 97.

^{xii} May 97.

^{xiii} May 98.

^{xiv} May 98, *Tillotson College Bulletin*, 3.

^{xv} Source unknown.

^{xvi} George F. Work was born on March 1, 1839 in Harrison County, Ohio. He was 22 years old when he resided in College Farm, Iowa. He enlisted in the army as a Private on June 24, 1861. He was wounded on September 19, 1862 in Luka, Mississippi. Work was promoted to Corporal on November 24, 1861, and then Captain on September 24, 1863. As Captain, he led Co. E. 60th USCT Infantry. After the war he lived in Nebraska. He died on December 4, 1937, and is buried in Parkview Cemetery, Hastings, Nebraska. History George F. Work American Civil War Research Database. See www.civilwardata.com.

^{xvii} George F. Work to Mary E. Branch, 19 February 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University. See Addendum **Figure 1**.

^{xviii} Mary E. Branch to George F. Work, 21 February 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University. See Addendum **Figure 2**.

^{xix} George F. Work to Mary E. Branch, 5 March 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University. See Addendum **Figure 3**.

^{xx} Clara W. Viles to Mary E. Branch, 4 March 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University. See Addendum Figure 4.

^{xxi} See Addendum **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**.

^{xxii} See <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/branch-mary-elizabeth-1881-1944>

^{xxiii} See Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University, Folder 3. "Tillotson College for Women, Austin, Texas": "'As a college for women, Tillotson has a definite place in the scheme of education, and should be developed into a college of high rate.' Tillotson stands for the highest ideals of Christian womanhood. It aims to give its students a high type of culture, a deep appreciation for the beauties of home life, to develop the spirit of scholarship, to give them a full appreciation of the duties of good citizens in a democratic government."