



Phyllis Wheatley Branch

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In 1913, a group of Negro women calling themselves the Employment Club began meeting on Sunday afternoons with the purpose of finding work for members and sponsoring recreational programs. Made up of participants from a girls' industrial club and members of the YMI Auxiliary, this group was sowing the seeds of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA branch, which was the Negro YWCA branch. Some of their early meetings occurred upstairs above a pharmacy on Market Street. In 1916, under the leadership of Maggie Jones and other Negro community leaders, the Employment Club purchased a building on Market Street. During World War I, they turned this building over to the U.S. government for use by soldiers.



Adela Ruffin was the first Executive Secretary of the Phyllis Wheatley branch and served in this position from 1924-1938. She was a powerful and influential presence in the both the Negro and White communities.

After the war, the Market Street building was returned to the women and they subsequently sold it in order to purchase a house on College Street, which was the first official Phyllis Wheatley branch and formally opened on September 5, 1921. This building was located near the current approach to the Beaucatcher tunnel. Located in close proximity to the Phyllis Wheatley branch was Berry Temple



Phyllis Wheatley exterior, 1939. Copyright 1939, Asheville, NC Citizen-Times. Reprinted with permission.

United Methodist Church, John Hopkins AME Zion Church, and The Allen School for Girls, a school for Negro girls supported by the United Methodist Church.

The first floor of the Phyllis Wheatley branch was used for office and meeting rooms. The second floor served as the residence for Ms. Adela Ruffin, the Executive Secretary, and provided economical housing for Negro women seeking lodging.

By 1938, the Phyllis Wheatley residence on College and Hollywood was nearly 100 years old and structurally inadequate. An extensive building project occurred resulting in the renovation of the original structure, the creation of a residence with community space and the building of a gymnasium. This project cost \$10,000.

"[The Phyllis Wheatley branch] filled a real need for the Negro community — it was a community within itself — all the clubs, parties, teas, and other co-ed social and educational functions were held at the Phyllis Wheatley."

—E. Thelma Caldwell, Former Executive Director

For several decades, weekly classes, meetings, and games occurred at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA branch. In addition to YWCA activities, many Negro groups used the facility to gather including the Red Cross Auxiliary and the Flower Guild. Important community functions also occurred at this location, such as the annual dance for N.C. Association of Black Educators. All the Negro schools in Asheville used the gymnasium for intramural games, concerts, plays, dances, and proms.

The Phyllis Wheatley branch at 360 College Street was one of the primary centers of Negro social activity in Asheville for almost forty years. In 1961, the College Street location was demolished in order to make way for an arterial street link between the east and west sides.

The Phyllis Wheatley branch briefly was housed at 194 Ashland Avenue, a former city recreation building, before moving to 185 South French Broad Avenue, home of the today's YWCA of Asheville.

The Phyllis Wheatley branch from 1939-1961 was one concrete building composed of four bedrooms upstairs (which served up to nine women); an office, lounge, club room, kitchen, and dining room downstairs; and a frame building which held a gymnasium, restrooms, hat check room, and an office.



Women outside of the Phyllis Wheatley branch, 1940s. [0656] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.



Phyllis Wheatley interior, 1950s. [0636] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.



Basketball team in the Phyllis Wheatley gymnasium, 1945. Photo courtesy of the YMI Cultural Center.

The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA branch was the only fully serviced gymnasium in the South when it was built in 1938. This gym was used by all of the Negro schools in town including Hill Street, Livingston Street, Mountain Street, Shiloh, and Stephens Lee.



Group in the Phyllis Wheatley branch, 1950s. [0649] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.



Phyllis Wheatley millinery class, 1961. [0682] YWCA Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, UNC Asheville 28804.

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