

RESEARCHING AND WRITING A BIOGRAPHY IS A JIGSAW JOURNEY

By Nancy Noyes Silcox



I never thought I would write a book. It took nine months during two years for *Samuel Wilbert Tucker: The Story of a Civil Rights Trailblazer and the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In* to become a published book. My research journey led me down roads I never expected to travel, to facts I never dreamed of finding. It was like putting together a puzzle. In the end, all the conclusions had to be based on evidence I could defend.

THE BEGINNING

In September 2000, when I became the first librarian at the new Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, I heard about the sit-in Tucker had organized at the public library to protest their whites-only policy. Evidence suggests this was the earliest known civil rights sit-in in America. I learned that Tucker went on to argue hundreds of cases all over Virginia to fight for public school desegregation and challenge Virginia's massive resistance to integration. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in his 1968 case *Green vs. New Kent County* that school boards had to show immediate progress desegregating public schools. This ruling brought in busing as a tool to integrate schools. People said this ruling did the most to speed up public school desegregation since the *Brown* decision fourteen years earlier.

As his namesake school's librarian, I knew students needed a book to learn more about this remarkable man. When I retired in June 2011, I decided to tell Tucker's story myself. As a librarian, I knew what good biographies for young readers should look like. For almost thirty-five years, I had been teaching children how to do research. Now it was time to do what I had been teaching.

I started my research in December 2011. Most of the people who had known Samuel Wilbert Tucker were no longer alive. His sister, Elsie, had presented his portrait at Tucker Elementary School's dedication on October 19, 2000, but I didn't know I would write his biography then. By the time I decided, Elsie had died. Tucker had no children. My attempts to contact close family were unsuccessful. So the information would have to come from other sources.

To build background knowledge, I spent hours at the Alexandria Black History Museum and in the Alexandria Library's Special Collections Department. These repositories had file folders filled with newspaper clippings about the sit-in and copies of Tucker family photographs and documents. I also checked the Wikipedia article on Tucker and found links to other sources.

I then went back to third-grade classes at Tucker Elementary School, told them what I was researching, and asked what questions they wanted answered. From my work with students on their research projects, I knew the kinds of questions they asked often weren't answered in biographies. They wanted to know things that helped them make connections to people who lived before they were born. The students wanted to know what Tucker did for fun and what

growing up under Jim Crow segregation was like for him. One student, who remembered Thurgood Marshall from second-grade social studies, asked if Marshall was on the U.S. Supreme Court when Tucker argued the *Green* case in 1968. I said I didn't know, but would find out and put it in the book. Marshall, appointed to the Supreme Court in 1967, was there to listen to Tucker's argument when the court heard his *Green* case. This fact is in the book because a third grader asked the question.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Almost all of the information for the book came from primary sources. Primary sources provided first-hand evidence from real people about events as they were experienced. These sources included personal interviews, newspaper articles, photographs, documents, military records, census records, and city directories. Some were interviews I conducted; others were interviews preserved by oral history projects.

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In 1985 William A. Elwood, an English professor at the University of Virginia, interviewed civil rights attorneys for *The Road to Brown*, a documentary film about public school desegregation. I learned that these videotaped interviews were housed at the University of Virginia Library in Charlottesville, a three-hour drive away. Luckily, in February 2012, the library digitized the interviews and put them on its website. Over and over again, I watched five hours of interviews with Tucker, two of the Alexandria Library sit-in protesters, and Tucker's law partner, Oliver W. Hill. I listened to and watched these people tell their stories in their own words.

Another source I used was an Alexandria oral history project, which included transcripts of two interviews with Tucker's sister, Elsie. She talked about living in a racially mixed neighborhood, but attending a segregated school. Additionally, the producer/director of *Out of Obscurity*, a documentary about the sit-in narrated by Julian Bond, shared his interview transcripts with me.

Public records gave me information about Tucker's Alexandria neighborhood and the people in his life. Alexandria city directories from 1910-1940 identified neighborhood businesses and housing patterns. An asterisk next to a name identified African Americans and African American businesses. Because directories were created annually, you could see changes in businesses, occupations, and addresses over a short time. U.S. Census records from 1890-1940 provided details about race, birthplace, birth date, age, marital status, occupation, home ownership and value, literacy, and educational attainment.

Primary sources have been held up as the "gold standard" for information, but primary sources are tricky. Census records are snapshots of a community at a moment in time, once every ten years. Information is self-reported and might be incorrect. The census takers who record the data might not have heard or written information accurately. For

example, in the 1890 census, when birthdates were given, Tucker's mother was seven years older than his father. By the 1940 census, they were the same age. When interviewing, it is important to ask open-ended questions and avoid leading a person to the conclusion you want. However, stories come through the filters of people's memories. These stories can change with time and retelling. I heard the same story in two different interviews, but attributed to two different people. It was a great story, but I couldn't use it because I couldn't verify it with a third source. When writing nonfiction, facts need to be meticulously verified to reach conclusions you can defend.

UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS

The chapter about Tucker's military service was only two paragraphs long until I met a man whose father had served with Tucker in Italy during World War II and who had been researching their Army regiment. He shared military reports Captain Tucker wrote, which recorded duty assignments. I also interviewed a ninety-five-year-old soldier from Tucker's company who told me about his wartime experiences.

Samuel Wilbert Tucker

The Story of a Civil Rights Trailblazer
and the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In



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One of Tucker's law partners, Virginia senator Henry L. Marsh III, fact-checked my manuscript, shared some of his own Tucker memories, and wrote the book's foreword.

When I was close to finishing the manuscript, I decided to drive out to Midland, Virginia, in rural Fauquier County, to see where Tucker's mother grew up. Midland is tiny, having only a post office, a craft store/gift shop, and a few houses. When I told the store owner about Tucker, she said that he sounded a lot like the relative her friend always talked about. I never expected her friend to be Tucker's second cousin! After gladly agreeing to be interviewed, the cousin told me stories of Tucker's visits to the family farm for a meal when he was in the area for court cases.

BOOK PROPOSAL

Early in my research journey, someone asked if I had written a book proposal yet. Having no idea what that was, I bought a how-to book and followed the advice, chapter by chapter. My proposal included why I was qualified to write a biography of Tucker, who the audience would be, why they should buy the book, marketing strategies, and summaries of the chapters. I sent the proposal to three major publishers of quality nonfiction books for young readers. I heard nothing from two of them. The third one gave a nibble with a form letter. I was discouraged because I wanted the book to be published by June 18, 2013, the 100th anniversary of Tucker's birth. Self-publishing was an option, but before I had a chance to read a how-to book on that, I was introduced to a local publisher who specialized in history books. It would prove to be a good fit.

THE WRITING PROCESS

My original intent was to write a biography for elementary school students, like the ones at Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School. Soon I realized there was too much great information that couldn't be left out. I decided to write Tucker's story the way it needed to be told and address the reading level later. It took many rewrites and revisions to make sure I used the best words and clearest sentences. I needed to eliminate idioms, define difficult words within the text, and change passive sentences to active ones. I also checked and rechecked my facts to make sure the story was accurate. When I thought it was perfect, I sent the manuscript to the editor.

MAKING THE BOOK

Many decisions go into turning a manuscript into a published book. Having a publisher and editor meant that other eyes were looking at this project. The first "slash and burn" session with the editor was disheartening. So many of my carefully chosen words and sentences were declared "too much information" and cut out! My writing style turned out to be at a tenth grade reading level. With help I reduced it to seventh grade.

Once the text was finalized, we started adding photographs, captions, fact boxes, and maps. The last parts to be added were the timeline, a "learn more" section, source notes, bibliography, glossary, illustration credits, and index. Other decisions included the size and style of the font best for young readers, how the color scheme could help readers move through the book, whether glossy or matte paper was better to counter the reflectivity of overhead classroom lights, and what to put on the back cover.

I also wanted the book to meet school and library specifications. Teachers still require students to read biographies of at least 100 pages. When I asked my publisher how this could happen, she said that if the illustrations were enlarged, the margins increased, and the maps, timeline, and the rest of the back matter were included, the book would be over 100 pages. This emboldened me to ask if the spine could be wide enough so the title and call number could be read easily when the book was sitting on a library shelf. No problem; a heavier-weight paper was the

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answer. The publisher's logo was moved from the bottom of the spine to the top because I told her the call number label would go at the bottom. The book was originally published in paperback, but I knew libraries would want a hardcover edition because paperbacks don't last through multiple circulations. The book is now available in both bindings. When all these pieces finally fit together, the book I had envisioned became a reality.

TELL THE STORY

I was motivated to tell Samuel Wilbert Tucker's story because he was an ordinary person whose life and work made a difference in the lives of people today. Also, he never received the full recognition he deserved for his legal work to desegregate public schools. Unsung heroes need to be recognized. Many are ordinary people whose actions profoundly affected the course of historical events. Many are people whose experiences help us make personal connections to an earlier time. It's important to tell all these stories. All it takes is for someone to put the pieces together.

Works Cited

Silcox, Nancy Noyes. *Samuel Wilbert Tucker: The Story of a Civil Rights Trailblazer and the 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In*. History4All, Inc., 2014. Print.

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