

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: William R. McKenney Library

Other names/site number: Mayor John P. Dodson House; McKenney House; William R. McKenney Free Library; Petersburg Public Library; William R. McKenney Memorial Building; DHR ID# 123-0009, 123-0094-0113

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 137 South Sycamore Street

City or town: Petersburg State: VA County: Independent City

Not For Publication: ☐ N/A Vicinity: ☐ N/A

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A B C D

Julie D. Sargent
Signature of certifying official/Title:

11/12/2027
Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☒
- Public – Local ☐
- Public – State ☐
- Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☒
- District ☐
- Site ☐
- Structure ☐
- Object ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1
The nominated property is a contributing resource in the Poplar Lawn Historic District
(NRHP 1980; NRIS No. 80004315).

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

EDUCATION/library

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

WORK IN PROGRESS

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: STUCCO, STONE/Sandstone, BRICK, METAL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The William R. McKenney Library (hereafter referred to as the McKenney Library) is located on a .29-acre parcel at the corner of South Sycamore and Marshall streets in the Poplar Lawn Historic District in the City of Petersburg, Virginia. The two-story Italianate center-hall dwelling was constructed as a single-family residence in 1859 for John Dodson, the first mayor of Petersburg, and converted to a public library in 1924. The symmetrical five-bay main block originally had a one-story enclosed porch at the south end of the east (rear) elevation and an adjacent two-story ell. The building sits atop a full-height basement and retains sections of its historic stucco, brownstone window surrounds and ornamentation, fenestration patterns, window sashes, doors, and door surrounds, as well as interior materials such as flooring, historic woodwork, plaster ornamentation, marble mantels, and door and window openings. To facilitate the building's conversion to a public library, during the 1920s, the open-air porch at the south end of the east (rear) elevation was enclosed but remained connected to the adjacent two-story rear ell. A two-story brick wing was added to the north elevation of the rear ell and main block in 1958. The McKenney Library is the sole contributing resource on the property. A brick kitchen-and-service-quarters-building associated with the McKenney Library's historic period as a single-family residence stands to the east (rear) of the nominated property on what is now a separate tax parcel; the building was not accessible and it is not included in the nominated

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boundary. The McKenney Library retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association with its historical functions, first, as an urban mid-19th-century dwelling and, second, as a public library that was the site of significant Civil Rights Movement demonstrations in 1960.

Narrative Description

Setting

Located at the intersection of South Sycamore and Marshall streets in the Poplar Lawn Historic District, the William R. McKenney Library sits on an almost-square lot in what is now a mixed commercial and residential area. Most of the parcel is surrounded by a 19th-century wrought iron fence and the property has no driveway or parking area. The approach to the front entrance of the building is a brick and stone paver walkway, which is accessed from the sidewalk through an open section in the fence. Facing west, the house is the only building on the property.

The McKenney Library was constructed in 1859 as the personal residence of John S. Dodson, the first mayor of the City of Petersburg. The building comprises multiple phases of construction due to its change in use from dwelling to public library. The five-bay Italianate main block and rear (east) ell, along with a one-story rear porch, were constructed in 1859 as a single-family residence. A c. 1920 renovation that enclosed the rear porch and a 1958 addition to the main block and rear ell's north (side) elevation are associated with the property's use as a public library. The main block retains most of its original materials, layout, circulation pattern, and overall character, but its integrity as an Italianate dwelling has been compromised by the 1958 addition. When the building transitioned to a public library during the 1920s, the open-air porch at the south end of the east (rear) elevation was enclosed but remained connected to the adjacent two-story rear ell. The outlines of historic doors and windows remain intact on what originally was the exterior perimeter of the building prior to the enclosure of the porch.

Exterior

The five bay building rises two full stories above the raised basement and terminates in a hipped metal roof. The exterior's symmetrical form is ornamented by a wide projecting cornice with heavy brackets and enlarged modillions; brownstone window hoods atop tall, narrow windows; molded window casings; and a one-story west entrance portico. The stucco finish continues to the basement level, without any accent banding or belt course(s).

Historically, the house was covered in scored stucco, but the scoring only remains on the north and east elevations, whereas stucco repair and replacement on the other elevations is flat in texture. The north and south roof slopes contain four interior-end chimneys, two piercing each of the north and south slopes with two additional chimneys at the rear ell – one at the point where it connects to the main house and one exterior chimney at the east elevation. The chimneys are each constructed of brick, partially parged, and topped with a concrete crown. There are two inset segmental-arched brick flues within each of the four primary chimney stacks.

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On the east (rear) elevation, the original two-story ell remains intact and connected to the enclosed one-story porch.¹ A two-story, 1958 brick addition wraps around the building from the edge of the east elevation to the north, encapsulating the original exterior walls of the main block and ell.

The focal point of the façade is the front entry portico with wood decking, brick steps, metal railings, decorative scroll brackets, modillions, and Corinthian columns. Corinthian pilasters flank the entrance, which has a double door with round-headed arch. All historic windows remain intact on the façade and south (side) elevation of the main block and include one-over-one segmental-arched sash at the basement level; four-over-four round-headed sash at the first story; and four-over-four, segmental-arched sash at the second story. Above the entry porch, there is a tripartite segmental-arched window with flat sidelights. Brownstone hoods top each original window of the west, east, and south elevations.

The south elevation is intact with the window sash, openings, and ornamentation remaining on all floors. The central windows at each story light each of the two rooms on the south side of the building. At the basement level, below the easternmost window on the first floor, three-panel double doors provide exterior access, with a second access door further east underneath the south porch. The hooded segmental arch door continues the style of window on the west and south elevations. Five concrete steps lead from the street level garden down to the entrance door.



Figure 1. Historic photograph from the NW corner of the parcel showing the original entry porch newel posts, balusters, and steps, no date. (Image source: Petersburg Public Library Archives).

¹ "Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Petersburg, Independent Cities," Virginia, Sanborn Map Company, 1890, accessed on October 3, 2023, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3884pm.g3884pm_g090561903.

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At the east elevation, the original four-light windows remain intact at the second story. On the first story, the main block's only original window was removed when the porch was enclosed in the 1920s. At the enclosed porch, four original casement windows remain on the east elevation – one fifteen-light, two pairs of fifteen-light, and one narrower fifteen-light. The narrower window appears to have been a replacement for what could have possibly been a door previously. Molded brownstone sills sit below each of the ell windows. A concrete wheelchair ramp was added to the north elevation, leading from the sidewalk to a secondary entrance to the 1958 addition. On the south elevation, three pairs of large four-light replacement windows span the length of the wall. At the cornice and frieze, there are widely spaced brackets and flat trim, a minimized version of that on the main block and ell.

The two-story rear ell is finished in the same manner as the main block, with scored stucco walls, a heavily bracketed and decorated frieze and cornice, and tall, narrow windows topped by brownstone hoods. At the ell, only the south elevation contains windows, with the east side never having had windows and the north side encapsulated by the 1958 addition. On the south elevation, one 19th-century, two-over-four window sash remains, while it appears that a matching one was removed and infilled with stucco, as the hood remains intact. The nine-light window sash closest to the main block sits at the same height as the windows along the east elevation of the main block.

Addition, c. 1958

The 1958 addition is attached to the north elevation of the rear ell and main block and wraps around the ell's northeast corner. At the time of its construction, the two-story, brick wing was built to attach seamlessly to the rear ell by encapsulating a portion of the west wall with brick veneer, while the main block's original roofline and north wall are visibly demarcated from the addition. The red brick is laid in five-course common bond with scored mortar joints. Five-light, steel-frame, awning windows are spread symmetrically throughout the addition's basement, first, and second stories. On each level of the north (side) elevation, six windows punctuate the solid brick surface and have graduated height: at the basement level, the sash have two-lights; at the first, three lights; and at the second, four lights. On the east (rear) elevation's first floor, the windows include a row of five-light sash and on the second floor, four-light. The addition has no ornamentation other than thick concrete windowsills. The only exterior entrance to the addition is on the east (rear) elevation, accessed by a concrete ramp, and has a steel entrance door.

Interior

From the front entrance portico, a vestibule with double doors leads to the primary interior entrance. The internal set of double doors is topped by a round-headed arch and flanked by sidelights that contain red and blue flashed glass with a floral motif. The round-arched transom above the door has a fixed sash divided into eight lights with symmetrical wood tracery between the glass panels.

On the first floor, the original center hall layout remains largely intact with two primary rooms on either side of the hall and a passage between the northwest parlor and dining room. Throughout, original plaster walls and ceilings, hardwood flooring under carpet, pocket and

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swinging doors, elaborate moldings, trim, paneling, and ceiling medallions remain, along with carved marble mantelpieces, original tile fireplace surrounds, and hearths in the four primary rooms. Geometric shapes are emphasized in ceiling and wall trim and ornamentation. The wide entry hall spans the length of the main block and has ceilings reaching almost to the top of the staircase. The hall's plaster ceilings are ornamented with three molded octagons, with the central shape containing a plaster medallion. Throughout the first floor, wide window and door casings, heavy crown molding, and tall baseboards remain intact. Historic doors include wood two- and four-panel.

The southwest parlor is accessed from the entry hall by a wide cased opening. A fireplace with marble mantle is directly across the room on the south wall. The mantelpiece mirrors that in the adjoining southeast room and is light gray in color with a central cartouche, scalloped ledge, and arched opening. As in most of the other rooms, decorative trim and the central ceiling medallion are intact. The east wall is covered in trim and contains a set of wide segmental-arch-shaped pocket doors that lead into the southeast parlor. The southeast and southwest parlors have intact hardwood flooring and fireplace hearths that are covered by carpet. In both parlors, wainscoting decorates the walls on either side of the dividing pocket doors but extends to the ceiling in the larger southwest parlor.

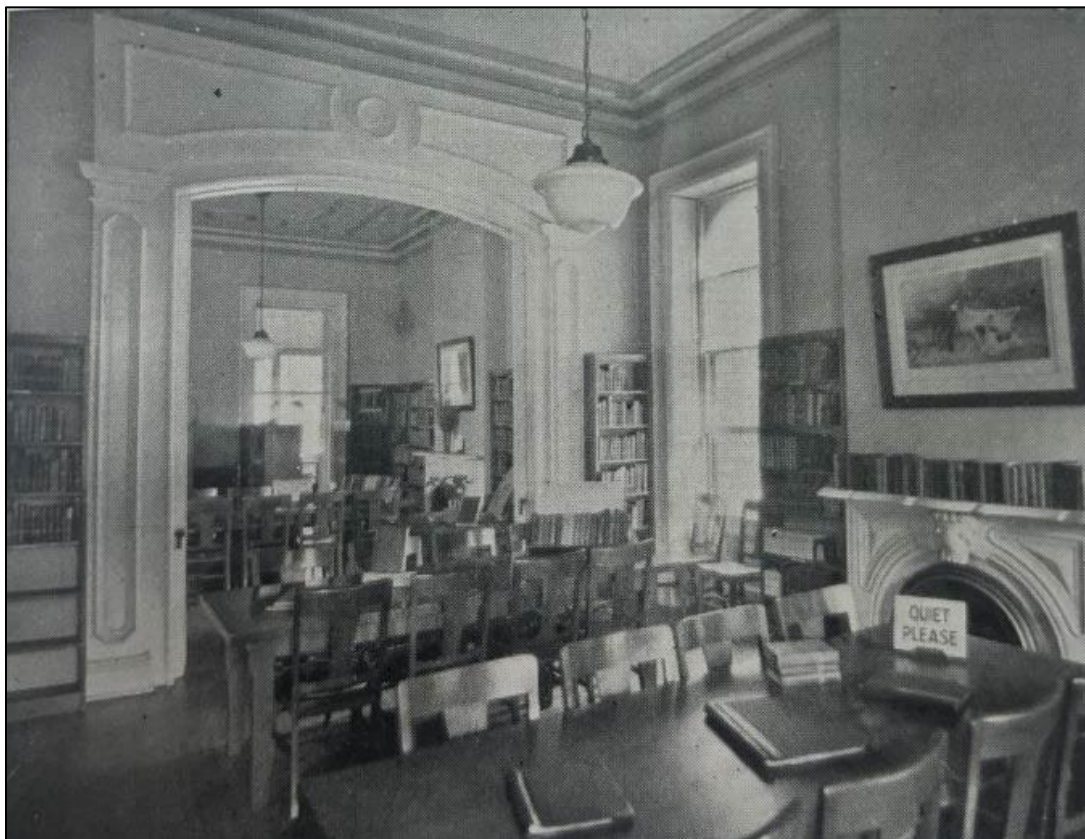


Figure 2. Southwest parlor, looking east toward the southeast parlor and south porch, c. 1929. (Image source: Petersburg Public Library Archives)

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On the north side of the central hall, both the northwest parlor and dining room contain carved pink marble mantelpieces with a curved shelf, arched opening, and large cartouche within the keystone. The northwest parlor at the front of the house has no trim but retains its ceiling medallion. The tile hearth remains intact.

The dining room is accessed by the central hall and has a chair rail and intricately paneled wainscoting. The fireplace hearth is covered by carpet. Two exterior window openings and surrounds remain in place but have been infilled with shelves on the interior and covered by the 1958 addition on the exterior. The door opening leading to the ell remains in form, but without the door. The shorter doorway closest to the north fireplace wall historically led to the butler's pantry but has since been infilled with shelves associated with the building's use as a public library.²

The curved, U-shaped primary staircase retains original treads, stringer, and balustrade with turned balusters. The oversized octagonal newel post has an inset beaded detail on each of the eight sides. The handrail is flat and tread brackets are scroll shaped. There is an arched niche with molded hood and sill matching those on the exterior of the house. Almost at the top of the staircase, there is a small four-light window above another niche.

Upon reaching the landing at the second story, a full-height partition wall comprised of three doors with transoms separates the central hall into two spaces. This wall appears to have been a later addition, likely related to the building's use as a public library. The central hall's layout has not changed, and two rooms flank either side. The second floor contains a restrained version of the first story's finishes, including carved marble mantelpieces, original tile hearths, ceiling medallions, and wide trim surrounding the doors and windows.

The southeast and southwest chambers are separated by a wall with an access door. Both rooms contain light gray marble mantelpieces that resemble those on the first floor. The main difference between the two southern rooms is an additional door to the central hall in the southwest room. The door height is much shorter than the original doors and the molding profile more complex and appears to be a later addition – both contain four-panel doors with similar panel details.

The northeast and northwest chambers on the opposite side of the central hall are separated by a narrow hallway. The northwest chamber remains intact with its historic doors and windows in place and has a gray marble mantel matching those on the south side of the house. When the 1958 addition was attached to the main block, the windows in the northeast chamber were covered, but the window openings and trim remain in place. The northeast chamber contains a mantel unlike the others in the main block – it appears to be black marble with red and white veining.

At the first floor, the enclosed porch, rear ell, and 1958 addition are accessed through the main block's northern rooms. On the second floor, the ell and 1958 addition are accessed through the

² Untitled and undated document outlining the building's history and previous room uses, Petersburg Public Library Archives, McKenney Library Files.

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front block's northern rooms. During the 1920s, when the porch was enclosed and finished into an interior space as part of the building's conversion to a library, most of the original door and window openings on the east (rear) wall of the main block were left intact.

If the window(s) and door(s) matched those on what was the exposed south wall of the ell, they would have been topped by a transom, crosshead, and surrounded with molded trim. Except for the shorter door at the center of the wall, the height and width of the openings match the remaining ell window and door openings. Corner bead trim embellishes both sides of the largest opening into the southeast parlor. Within the enclosed porch, the original brick/stucco exterior wall has been covered by what appears to be drywall, a drop ceiling has been installed, and floors have been covered by carpet.

An exterior door to the basement level remains intact on the easternmost wall but is partially covered by the first story floor on the interior side – what remains visible is part of the panel door with butt hinges and what could have been a transom but is now infilled with a wood panel. The partially exposed door likely provides evidence of the basement's original ceiling height prior to the enclosure of the porch.

The first floor of the ell has been partitioned into storage space, two restrooms, and an elevator shaft. On the south wall of the ell, what would have originally been an exterior wall, there are three window or door openings. The easternmost six-light window remains intact with its four-light transom and crosshead. The middle door opening historically matched the window beside it, but the six-light window was replaced with a glass and two-panel door to access one of the restrooms (what was originally the butler's pantry connecting the dining room to the ell, see Figure 23) and short hallway connecting the addition to the ell. This hallway provides access to one of the original ell rooms, what appears to be the primary first floor ell service space with its original firebox, simple wood mantelpiece, and four-panel door intact. The door at the west end of the wall is much shorter, without a transom or crosshead, and contains a four-panel door to one of the restrooms. Corner bead trim adorns several wall edges on the south wall of the ell. Within the westernmost restroom, the northern brick wall separates the elevator shaft from the restroom and the ceiling is covered in beadboard.

The second story of the ell is accessed by the elevator or secondary staircase, which connects the main block and ell. The staircase possibly dates to the c. 1859 house but may have been relocated when the ell and main block were combined with the 1958 addition. Entering the ell from the main block's northeast chamber, three steps lead up from the room into a narrow hallway. At the threshold to the hallway, a small restroom is located on the north side, directly above the restroom on the first story. At the end of the hallway, another set of three steps lead down to the single room on the second story.

The ell's primary second-floor room retains its black marble Eastlake mantelpiece with encaustic tile hearth. The mantelpiece, with its geometric motifs, shallow carvings filled with gold paint and straight lines, diverges from the earlier Italian marble surrounds throughout most of the primary rooms. Angular brackets support the mantel shelf, which also appears to be marble. A

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tile hearth retains its square and diamond pattern and imprinted motifs. The mantel's material and finish match that in the northeast chamber, which appears to be black marble with white and rust veining, but the one in the ell is more elaborate and identifiable as dating to the late 19th century. The floors in the ell hallway and main room are covered by carpet but are likely wood underneath. The doors in the ell are a blend of historic four-panel and modern ¾-lite doors; the door into the ell from the main block, into the bathroom from the hallway, and into the addition from the primary room are all modern. The door into the primary room from the hallway is a four-panel door with a three light transom above and matches most of the historic doors in the rest of the main block.

The 1958 addition is attached to the ell and accessed through a connector to the main block and its northeast hallway. The addition contains a large room on each level. On the first floor, carpet covers wood floors, plaster walls remain primarily intact with deterioration due to water infiltration, and the awning windows are partially concealed by a drop ceiling. The second floor of the addition can also be accessed through the main block's second story northeast room. As on the first level, the floors are carpeted, but there is no drop ceiling.

Raised Basement

The basement retains its center hall layout, but with a small entry hall between the southeast and southwest parlors, a partition wall in the stair hall, and an additional hallway spanning the east end of the main block. The main block has been preserved with access doors on with its geometric motifs, shallow carvings filled with gold paint and straight lines on the west, south, and east elevations. At the first and second floor, the ell and enclosed porch were expanded; however, at the basement level, the spaces were only enlarged to include another hallway, exit access door, a small restroom, and storage space. The basement staircase is located under the main staircase and has its original turned balustrade, railing, and oversized newel post. Rubber treads cover the wood treads and risers.

At the base of the staircase, a central hall leads to several rooms on either side with two primary rooms on the north and south sides and smaller rooms branching from secondary hallways. At the base of the stairs, looking west, there is a door directly in front that leads to a small hallway with access to the northwest and southwest rooms. The southwest room contains a central fireplace with black marble mantel in disrepair. The historic window surrounds and sills remain, but a drop ceiling covers the top part of the windows.

Directly behind the staircase is what appears to have been the original east wall of the main block's exterior with a glass-and-panel door surrounded by sidelights and transom window. This section has been enclosed and is below the access ramp to the 1958 addition. There are two exterior entrances to the basement – one on the south elevation of the main block and one underneath the enclosed porch section.

Integrity Analysis

The William R. McKenney Library retains the seven aspects of integrity. The building remains in its original **location**, while integrity of **setting** has eroded from the time it was a private

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dwelling. During the late 19th century, the area surrounding the house was primarily residential, with dwellings extending several blocks north, up S. Sycamore Street to the intersection with E. Wythe Street (Hwy 301), all within the Poplar Lawn Historic District. Today, this area remains primarily residential, but north and west of the McKenney Library have become more commercial in nature over the years. The building also retains integrity of **design** for both periods of its historic use. While the original design of the dwelling was diminished by the 1958 addition, through the retention of its primary architectural features, such as the entry portico, fenestration of the main block, the two-story center hall layout with its curved staircase and applied ornament, its integrity of design remains. It reads as an Italianate building with a mid-century addition. The interior retains a high percentage of its historic **materials**, including doors, flooring, woodwork, marble mantelpieces, plaster ceiling medallions and motifs, light fixtures and hardware, and stair newel posts and balusters. The extant finishes and expansive layout exemplify the fine Italianate domestic architecture of mid-19th-century dwellings in Petersburg. When the building was converted to a public library during the 1920s, minimal loss of original materials occurred. Some of the historic fabric, such as wood flooring and fireplace hearths, were covered with carpeting. The rear one-story porch was enclosed to create more usable space for library patrons and staff. Shelving for library books is still extant in some rooms. When the 1958 addition was constructed, portions of the bracketed wood cornice and exterior walls of the main block and rear ell's north (side) elevation were covered. A small number of windows and interior doors have been infilled, although trim remains to mark their location. The most extensive changes occurred in the basement, where lath and plaster have been removed and historic floors have been altered in some sections and at the north elevation wall on which the 1958 wing was attached. This loss of original material, however, does not compromise the overall integrity of the property as the changes occurred during the property's period of significance. Therefore, the McKenney Library retains high integrity of materials and **workmanship**. The property's integrity of **association** and **feeling** is demonstrated through its architectural integrity as well as ample historic documentation about its use as a private dwelling, and public library, as well as its association with a significant Civil Rights demonstration during 1960.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION

ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK

SOCIAL HISTORY: CIVIL RIGHTS

Period of Significance

1923 – 1974

Significant Dates

1924

1925

1960

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The William R. McKenney Library, located at 137 S. Sycamore Street in the City of Petersburg's Poplar Lawn Historic District, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion A** in the areas of **Education, Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Social History: Civil Rights** for its significance at the local level as Petersburg's first "free library," which led to the building being the site of a major Civil Rights Movement demonstration that led to full integration of the library. In 1923, property owner Clara P. McKenney bequeathed the private, single-family dwelling to the City of Petersburg for use as a public library. McKenney stipulated that the building must remain in use as a library with spaces designated for Black and White patrons. The building opened to White patrons in 1924 and Black patrons in 1925. In 1960, the building was the site of a significant sit-in led by nationally prominent Civil Rights Movement leader, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, which led to the library's temporary closure and ultimately resulted in its integration. The period of significance extends from 1923 to 1974, beginning with the donation of the building for use as a free library and ending with the 50-year cutoff to reflect the building's continued importance as the City's central public library; the McKenney Library remained the main branch of the Petersburg Public Library until its closure in 2014. The significant date of 1960 encompasses the Civil Rights demonstrations at the library (February 27 and March 7) as well as the library's subsequent desegregation.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

CRITERION A: Education

Establishment of public education for African Americans in Petersburg

Antebellum education in Petersburg consisted of private tutors, schools, and academies for wealthy students and free schools for poor Whites. Education for African Americans, both free and enslaved, was almost non-existent and often operated under secrecy. Free African Americans that were able sent their children to Northern schools, and in many Southern urban areas like Petersburg, churches and benevolent societies established informal schools.³ Robert Mayo and Joseph Gallee, both free Blacks, established and operated schools in Petersburg prior to the Civil War.⁴ In the post-Civil War period, Northern missionary societies operated schools for African Americans in the city, and by the end of 1865, there were approximately thirteen day schools and two night schools for African Americans.⁵ African American schools were established in the

³ Rosy Rash, curator, "Petersburg Pupils, Education in the Cockade City," typescript of exhibit captions at Centre Hill Mansion. Petersburg Museums., Department of Tourism, Petersburg, Va., 1998.

⁴ Ashley Neville, "Peabody-Williams School" National Register of Historic Places nomination form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2000) Section 8.

⁵ Ibid.

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Pocahontas, Blandford, Poplar Grove, Poplar Lawn, and Gillfield neighborhoods, as well as at First African Baptist and Third Baptist churches.⁶

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, there was a drive for the “education of the Negro,” and the Underwood Constitution of 1869 established mandatory state-sponsored segregated public schools in Virginia. Petersburg had established a public school system in 1868, before the state’s mandate. African American schools in Virginia were typically dependent on funding from state and local governments controlled by Whites, resulting in education programs with few resources for both African American students and teachers.⁷ Enrollment during the 1868-69 school term included 430 White students with twelve teachers in three elementary schools and one high school. For the African American population, four elementary schools were operated out of rented quarters, including one church, for 575 students with twelve teachers. A high school for African Americans was not established initially.⁸

In 1870, the public school system was established in Virginia; at that time, there were four public schools for Black students in Petersburg: “Colored Elementary #1,” which became Peabody School, and three others located in the Pocahontas and Blandford areas and at the Fairgrounds. In January of 1870, a second story was constructed at “Colored Elementary School #1” to accommodate the opening of the institution as a high school. This was reputedly the first African American public high school in the state. Maj. Giles B. Cooke, who had acted as General Robert E. Lee’s staff officer during the Siege of Petersburg, served as the school’s first principal.⁹ All administrators and teachers up until the 1882-1883 school term were White because it was the general practice for them to be hired and serve in such positions; the City of Petersburg’s first African American principal was Alfred Pryor, principal of the Peabody School.¹⁰ Between 1872 and 1890, six African Americans served on the School Board, and the Petersburg Common Council funded education for African American students along with monies supplemented by the Freedman’s Bureau and Peabody Fund.

African American students continued filling the seats at Peabody School, which housed both the high school and an elementary school. High school curriculum was taught in one room of the building with the elementary students in the remainder. During the 1875-1876 school term, the school was crowded, with seventeen high school students and 411 elementary students. A classical course of study that included mathematics, algebra, grammar, spelling, English, geography, history, writing, and bookkeeping was offered to the high school students.¹¹

⁶ Neville, “Peabody-Williams School,” Section 8.

⁷ “The Civil Rights Movement in Virginia,” Virginia Museum of History and Culture, accessed October 6, 2024, <https://virginiahistory.org/learn/civil-rights-movement-virginia/beginnings-black-education>.

⁸ Neville, “Peabody-Williams School,” Section 8.

⁹ “Earliest Known Public High School for African Americans in Virginia Petersburg, Virginia,” The Historical Marker Database, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=180100>.

¹⁰ “History,” Peabody High School National Alumni Association, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.phsnaa.org/history/>.

¹¹ Neville, “Peabody-Williams School,” Section 8.

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While public education for African Americans was offered, facilities remained inadequately funded in most parts of the state and were typically substandard in quality and size compared to those for White students.¹² In 1889, fifty high school students attended the Peabody School, limited to one room of the building. At that time, the principal of the entire school also taught high school classes. In 1910, 843 students attended elementary and high school in the same building, and in 1913, the Superintendent of the Petersburg school system noted that there had been no improvement in the city's African American schools over the previous forty years and described the schools as "badly located, utterly lacking in ventilation, improperly heated, insufficiently lighted, unsanitary, overcrowded, and poorly equipped."¹³ At that time, the high school was not accredited due to a lack of a science laboratory.¹⁴

In 1915, the School Board proposed that the high school and elementary school be separated with the construction of two buildings, one to house each level. The board purchased a property located on the southern edge of the Gillfield area, which had been largely an African American community since the 1870s. The buildings of the Peabody-Williams School opened in 1920. The building that housed the high school continued to be called "Peabody" and the Williams Building, the junior high school (introduced by the state in 1914) instead of an elementary school, was named for Henry Williams, the prominent minister of Gillfield Baptist Church. In 1923, the Federal Street Elementary School (later named the Giles B. Cooke Elementary School) was built one block to the rear (east) of the Peabody-Williams School, creating a complex of educational buildings that included an elementary, junior high, and high school.¹⁵ The Peabody-Williams curriculum extended from a three- to four-year course of study, and Peabody High School appeared on the list of standard three-year high schools in 1917. The high school was placed on the list of accredited four-year high schools for the 1921-1922 school term, and by 1935, student enrollment reached 409. The number of high school teachers increased from one in 1889 to forty-three in 1935.¹⁶

The Peabody-Williams Building was constructed during a burst of school construction in the City of Petersburg and throughout the state, during a time when Progressive Era reformers sought to reinvent the public school as a community hub with a wider influence than strictly education for children. They envisioned every public school in the state as a "community center where the citizens may unite for the improvement of the educational, social, moral, physical, civic, and economic interests."¹⁷ In the early twentieth century, the State Board of Education gained traction and power, and the state legislature passed several financial incentives for the construction of new schools that led to increased construction for both Black and White schools. The value of school property in Virginia increased from \$8.5 to \$39 million between 1910 and

¹² "Remaking Virginia: Education," Virginia Memory, Library of Virginia, accessed on October 31, 2024. <https://www.virginiamemory.com/online-exhibitions/exhibits/show/remaking-virginia/education>.

¹³ Neville, "Peabody-Williams School," Section 8.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "History," Peabody High School National Alumni Association.

¹⁷ J. L. Blaire Buck, *The Development of Public Schools in Virginia, 1607-1952* (Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Education, 1952), 257.

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1923.¹⁸ With the disbursement of money for local schools, the state exercised greater control over the planning and construction of school buildings and required all plans to be approved by local and state superintendents. By 1911, the Department of Public Instruction supplied plans and specifications for sixteen different school designs, and by 1920, the newly established Division of School Buildings provided plans, wrote specifications, and supervised the construction of educational buildings, which raised benchmarks throughout the state.¹⁹

During this period of progressive reform and state participation, many of Petersburg's schools were constructed. By the first quarter of the 20th century, both Black and White city schools were overcrowded and inadequate, and the city strove to improve facilities. City schools built during this period include the 1908 Duncan M. Brown School (White), the 1910 A P. Hill School (White), the 1911 Robert E. Lee Elementary School (White), the 1917 Petersburg High School (White), the 1920 Peabody-Williams School (Black), the 1923 Federal Street Elementary (Giles B. Cooke) (Black) School, and the 1926 Anna Bolling Junior High School (White).²⁰ Student enrollment continued to grow, as did the curriculum, and African American schools quickly became overcrowded. In 1948, the Petersburg School Board began planning for a new high school for African American students, adjacent to the Peabody-Williams School. The new high school, Peabody High School, opened in September of 1951 school year. It served as the high school for African American students until the integration of students in the 1970-71 term, when all students funneled into the formerly White Petersburg High School.²¹

During the 1950s and 60s, African Americans in Petersburg played an active role in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in relation to education. Throughout this time, Petersburg, like other Virginia localities, maintained a "separate but unequal" policy regarding its public buildings and spaces, but particularly its educational facilities. Not only did the curriculum and extracurricular activities differ, but so did the school buildings and supplementary structures.²² With the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, Petersburg's school board reacted negatively toward desegregation and resisted such change by constructing several new city schools in an attempt to prolong segregation.²³ Only later, in the 1970-1971 term, did Petersburg schools formally integrate.²⁴ While public schools gradually developed and served African American students, libraries took a similar trajectory and one was not publicly available in the city until 1925, upon the opening of the McKenney Free Library, which remained segregated until 1960.

The Development of Libraries in Petersburg

¹⁸ Neville, "Peabody-Williams School," Section 8.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mary Ellen Bushey, et al., "African Americans in Petersburg: Historic Contexts and Resources for Preservation Planning and Interpretation," The City of Petersburg, Dept. of Planning and Community Development, 1994, 38. Accessed on July 24, 2024, https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DW-017_A-A_in_Petersburg_Historic_Contexts-Preservation_Planning_Resources_1994_VCUARC_report.pdf

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

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As early as 1793, Petersburg had a Library Association, at that time, “the Speculative Society of the Town of Petersburg,” but due to “delinquent members,” the society disbanded sometime prior to 1830.²⁵ In the 1840s, a private athenaeum located in the Exchange Building on Bank Street served as an informal library and held books, periodicals, and lectures for members and White residents.²⁶

The first library in the City of Petersburg was established in 1853 with the incorporation of the Petersburg Library Association, which held the power to “collect, hold, and preserve a library.”²⁷ A “Hall,” “Reading-Room,” and “Conversation Room” were outfitted to contain reading material and spaces to gather.²⁸ This library was likely private, with 840 members and 3,600 volumes as of March 1854.²⁹ The association constructed its own building in 1859 on the northeast corner of Sycamore and Bollingbrook streets, which was “a cherished institution.”³⁰ After the Civil War, the library shifted to more of a social space, but with the Great Depression, the building was demolished in 1932.³¹ The Petersburg Benevolent Mechanic Association also established a technical library and museum for its members after its founding in 1826. By the 1880s, the library was well supplied with “all the leading American and English papers and magazines,” along with resources donated by the United States government, totaling 4,286 volumes at that time.³² What eventually became the 12,000 volume Benevolent Mechanics’ Association Library served as the “nucleus” for imagining and establishing a new library. The Association gave their collection to the city to help establish a public library – what would become the McKenney Free Library.³³

In the 1896 United States Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court upheld a Louisiana state law that allowed for “equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races.” Although in a different state, the ruling set a broader precedent for legal segregation as long as “equal” facilities were provided.³⁴ The decision influenced public and private spaces throughout the South, including public libraries. Public libraries serving African Americans developed earlier in several other states prior to their opening in Virginia. In 1903, a branch of the Cossitt Library in Memphis, TN serving African Americans was established at the LeMoyne Institute. In 1904, a one-room wing was added to the Eighth Street Colored School in Henderson, KY. In

²⁵ James G. Scott and Edward Wyatt, IV. *Petersburg’s Story: A History* (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1960), 121.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Preface,” undated published document, Petersburg Public Library Archives, McKenney Library Files.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Frenchman’s note,” untitled and undated document, Petersburg Public Library Archives, McKenney Library Files; Scott and Wyatt, *Petersburg’s Story*, 122.

³¹ Scott and Wyatt, *Petersburg’s Story*, 122.

³² Edward Pollock, *Historical and industrial guide to Petersburg, Virginia* (Petersburg: T. S. Beckwith & Co, 1884) pdf accessed on October 6, 2024. <https://www.loc.gov/item/rc01002915/>.

³³ Lisa Ellis, “City library has grown since opening in ’24,” *Progress-Index*, August 1974.

³⁴ David Kimble, Mae Breckenridge-Haywood, and Margaret Windley, “Portsmouth Colored Community Library” National Register of Historic Places nomination form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2009), Section 8; “Plessy v. Ferguson,” National Archives, accessed on July 21, 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.

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1905, Central High School in Galveston, TX served as a school and public library for African Americans. In 1910, businessman and philanthropist James H. Gregory of Marblehead, Massachusetts, funded a traveling library extension service for Southern African Americans.³⁵ For African Americans throughout the South, repositories and libraries were typically located in the private collections of African American professionals. The first public library for African Americans in the state of Virginia opened in 1921 in Norfolk. Until the opening of Norfolk's Blyden Branch, "the Negro population of Virginia was approximately 700,000 and there was 'not' a single library in the state that provided service to Negroes."³⁶

Prior to 1924, the city of Petersburg did not provide public library services to residents of any race, which was unusual for a city of its size and standing. In November of 1924, librarian Teresa D. Hodges penned her thoughts on the prior absence of a public library in Petersburg, which was read before the Virginia Library Association at their annual meeting in Richmond. She outlined that "a city of 33,000 has only just now established a public library," and that the "tardy" movement to establish a library was not a new one. She reasoned that the only explanation possible for the previous failed attempts were due to "the snags of the negro question, lack of city funds, and the inability of some in authority to absorb the idea of the democratic necessity of public library service."³⁷ According to Hodges, the transition to a "city manager form" of local government in 1920 came with an increased awareness of the local government's functions and responsibilities to its citizens.³⁸ It was during this period when Clara McKenney offered to give the city her personal residential property at 137 S. Sycamore Street to house a public library.

From Private Residence to Public Library

Mayor John P. Dodson commissioned his dwelling at 137 S. Sycamore Street, which is now known as the William R. McKenney Library, in 1859, and lived there until c. 1867. In 1860, around the time of the house's construction, Petersburg was the second-largest city in Virginia and fiftieth-largest city in the country.³⁹ By that time, the city's location alongside the Appomattox River, efficient Petersburg railroad system, and direct Upper Appomattox Canal access powered industrial development and bolstered regional access to the city's industries and businesses, which thrived and prospered.⁴⁰

During the Civil War, the Confederate military built extensive fortifications to protect Petersburg and its transportation and industrial assets. The U.S. Army, however, took advantage of this same infrastructure and waterways with soldiers using the railroad, river, and canal during the

³⁵ Kimble, et al., "Portsmouth Colored Community Library" National Register of Historic Places nomination form, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2009), Section 8; "Gregory Biography," Save Seeds, accessed on September 31, 2024, <http://www.saveseeds.org/biography/gregory/>.

³⁶ "History of the Blyden Branch Library." Norfolk Public Library website http://npl.lib.va.us/branches/blyden/blyden_history.html.

³⁷ Theresa D. Hodges, "The Wm. R. McKenney Free Library, Petersburg, VA," *The Virginia Teacher*: Vol. 5. Iss.12 (1924): p. 312. Accessed on October 23, 2023, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/va-teacher/vol5/iss12/6>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Scott and Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*, p.157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

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long siege of Petersburg from June 1864 to March 1865.⁴¹ Shortly after Petersburg's defenses fell, the retreating Confederate army surrendered to U.S. forces at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. During or slightly prior to 1867, Mayor Dodson sold the house at 137 S. Sycamore Street to Confederate General William Mahone, who also was a civil engineer, railroad executive, and Virginia state politician.⁴² The postwar Reconstruction Era brought a slow rebuilding and regrowth of the city, with the local economy in general having been decimated; between 1860 and 1870, the financial resources of Petersburg's businesses decreased by 63 percent. The rebuilding process, coupled with the resilience of the city's residents and new investments from wealthy Northerners seeking business opportunities, gradually improved the city's fortunes and the final decades of the 19th century found many of the city's wealthiest residents commissioning new houses in Victorian-era styles, resulting in an influx of Italianate architecture.⁴³

In 1911, the Italianate house was purchased by Virginia lawyer and U.S. Representative William Robertson McKenney, and upon his death in 1916, it was left to his wife, Clara Justine McKenney (Pickrell). In 1923, Clara McKenney presented the property to the city of Petersburg as a memorial to her husband, William R. McKenney.



Figure 3. Entry hall, c. 1929. Looking east toward the south porch.

⁴¹ Richard Lykes, *Campaign for Petersburg* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1970), 9.

⁴² "Political Life in Virginia: William Mahone," *The Library of Virginia*; Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, "Poplar Lawn Historic District" National Register of Historic Places nomination form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1979).

⁴³ William D. Henderson, *Gilded Age City: Politics, Life, and Labor in Petersburg, Virginia, 1874-1889*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1980), 4.

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In her bequest, she stated that the building was to be used as a library, more specifically, as Petersburg's first "free library," a public lending library type widely found in Northern and Midwestern states but more rarely in the Southern states. The new library building was named the William R. McKenney Free Library.



Figure 4. Historic photo of the dining room, used as a reading room, shortly after the library's opening, n.d. Petersburg Public Library Archives.

McKenney's deed of transfer stipulated that the library was "to be maintained for both white and colored [*sic*] persons: all of the building ... including the first floor and all above that [was] to be for the exclusive use of white persons; and the basement of the building [was] to be kept and maintained for the exclusive use of colored persons with separate entrance and exit thereto." Such restrictions were typical of Virginia during the 1920s, where Jim Crow segregation prevailed in state and local laws.⁴⁴ The library entrance for Black patrons was the exterior door underneath the parlor of the main block.⁴⁵ The city received the property's deed on January 1, 1924, which included the following stipulations: "first, that the city should appropriate at least \$10,000 for the remodeling, equipment, and preparation of the building for library use; second, that the city appropriate not less than \$7,500 annually for maintenance of the library; third, that

⁴⁴ Carl Tobias, *Untenable, Unchristian, and Unconstitutional*, 58 Mo. L. Rev. (1993), pg. 855. <https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/mlr/vol58/iss4/2>.

⁴⁵ Email from Wayne Crocker to Joanna McKnight, June 29, 2023.

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the first floor (or rather, basement) be equipped and used for a library branch for negroes; and fourth, that the library be known as the William R. McKenney Free Library.”⁴⁶

On August 6th, 1924, the William R. McKenney Free Library opened its doors to the public with approximately 3,600 catalogued books on the shelves and around 5,000 un-catalogued resources available for reference. By October of 1924, the library had recorded over 1,600 borrowers.⁴⁷ The basement section for African American users opened in April of 1925.⁴⁸ It remained the city’s only public library space until 1976.

While the building was large, it eventually became too small for the library’s growing collection and service offerings. With the need to expand, the Petersburg City Council authorized an addition to the library in 1957, and it was completed in 1958. The addition was partially funded by a gift made by Gabriella Cameron Gilbert, in memory of her father, George Cameron. Gilbert not only provided substantial financial support for the addition but had contributed funding for the library in general since its establishment in 1924.⁴⁹ Other Cameron family members also aided the library’s growth, from 1924 through 1928, with the purchase of 4,500 books for the permanent collection. In acknowledgement of the Cameron family’s generosity, the room was initially denoted the “Gilbert-Cameron Room,” but later became “The George Cameron Memorial Room,” based on Gilbert’s wishes in her bequest.⁵⁰

The 1958 addition was planned to house the Anna Dunlop Art Gallery on the second floor, a memorial to the prominent Petersburg artist, as well as the non-fiction book section, the children’s department, and a dedicated research room.⁵¹ As one of the most well-known artists in Virginia at the time, Dunlop was born in Petersburg and known as “the dean of Petersburg artists.” She always hoped for the establishment of an art gallery in the City of Petersburg and desired a space for the community’s creativity to thrive that was “a place for public enjoyment and another civic attraction.”⁵² When the addition to the library was proposed, a group of residents requested that the city council establish an art gallery in one of the rooms. Prior to her death, Dunlop promised to donate a collection of her paintings if a gallery space could be provided. Thus, when Dunlop’s sister became aware of the library’s potential gallery space, she followed through and donated five of Dunlop’s paintings to the cause.⁵³ The expansive well-lit room on the second floor of the addition provided an ideal space for the gallery, as well as other

⁴⁶ Carl Tobias, *Untenable, Unchristian, and Unconstitutional*, pg. 855.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 856.

⁴⁹ “Suggestions for Plaque,” untitled document, Petersburg Public Archives, Dunlop Gallery files.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ 123-0009_Dobson_House_1983_Grant_Documents, Virginia Cultural Resources Information System (V-CRIS), “McKenney Library (123-0009),” Virginia Department of Historic Resources; Untitled and undated document outlining the building’s history and previous room uses, Petersburg Public Library Archives, McKenney Library Files; “Petersburg Public Library” floor plans with room uses, undated, Petersburg Public Library Archives, McKenney Library Files.

⁵² Mary Cherry Allen, “Library Art Gallery Dream of Miss Anna,” unspecified publication, Petersburg Public Library Archives, Dunlop Gallery Files.

⁵³ Ibid.

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programming functions throughout its years of operation.⁵⁴

The city needed more library space and added the A.P. Hill Library, which opened on the second floor of the A.P. Hill Community Center in 1976, and the Rodof Sholom Branch Library at 1865 S. Sycamore Street in 1988. By the 1990's, however, space had become a significant issue and the aging buildings were not designed with such capacities nor 21st century technology in mind. The Petersburg Library Foundation was founded to fund raise for and plan a new state-of-the-art facility and the new building at 201 W. Washington Street opened in April of 2014. Between 2010 and 2019, the library issued 26,964 library cards; added 53,793 items; checked out 1,004,131 materials; and had approximately 600,000 guests.⁵⁵

CRITERION A: Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History: Civil Rights

The William R. McKenney Library is also significant because of its direct association with pivotal events that took place during Petersburg's Civil Rights Movement, which included leadership by individuals such as the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker. The building was the site of a substantial sit-in demonstration at a public library. The property played a major role in the struggle to integrate public buildings in Petersburg.

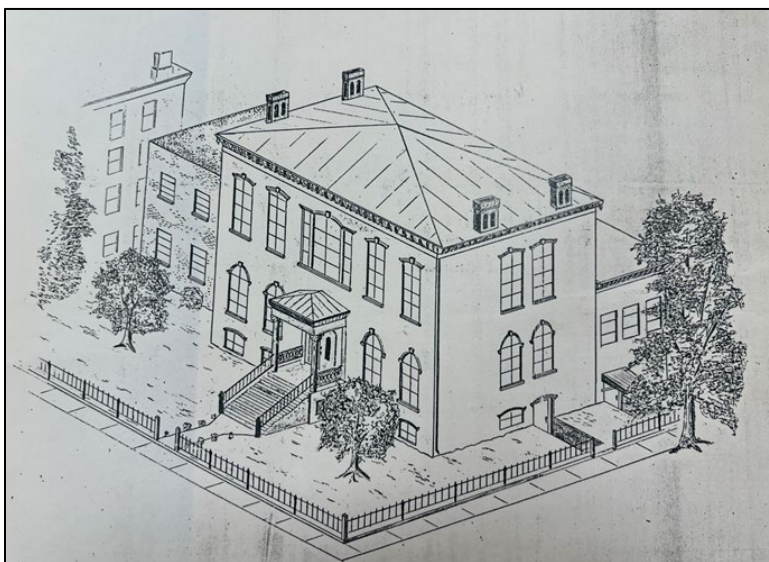


Figure 5. Sketch of the William R. McKenney Library featuring a visualization of the basement entrances, n.d. Petersburg Public Library Archives.

⁵⁴ "Art Gallery Committee Appointed," unspecified publication, Petersburg Public Library Archives, Dunlop Gallery Files.

⁵⁵ "Petersburg Public Library History," Petersburg Public Library, accessed on October 23, 2023, <https://www.ppls.org/history/#:~:text=The%20Petersburg%20Public%20Library%20was,the%20first%20mayor%20of%20Petersburg.>

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Civil Rights Era

The Civil Rights Movement sit-ins and other demonstrations in Petersburg began in 1960 and were carried out by mostly African American students from Virginia State College and Peabody High School, along with leadership from the local Gillfield, Zion, and First Baptist churches. The locations that the students targeted included restaurants and other public spaces. The sit-ins and protests were a part of a nationwide effort led by the assistant to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, who participated in and served as a leader during the demonstrations in Petersburg.



Figures 6-9. Children and students preparing for non-violent civil disobedience in Petersburg, Va., 1960. Howard Sochurek/Life Pictures/Shutterstock <https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960>.

Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker was a pastor, civil rights leader, strategist, and chief of staff for Dr. King. Walker moved to Petersburg in 1952 to become the head pastor of Gillfield Baptist Church. He described Petersburg as “the most segregated town in Virginia.”⁵⁶ The Civil Rights movement in Petersburg began with lunch counter protests in downtown Petersburg on February 23, 1960, composed of students from Peabody High School. The students sat in at three different establishments; no one was arrested, but the stores were temporarily closed.

⁵⁶ Wyatt Tee Walker, *Wyatt Tee Walker oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in Richmond, Virginia*, 2014. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655400/>.

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Figure 10. Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker observing training for sit-in harassment, Petersburg, Va., 1960.
<https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960>.

Not long after the protests started, the McKenney Library became a targeted site for another set of sit-ins. On February 27, 1960, around 140 African Americans met with Reverends Walker and Robert Williams at Gillfield Baptist Church. Most of the protesters were students from Peabody High School and Virginia State College. Located at 209 Perry Street, Gillfield Baptist Church is one of the oldest Black Baptist churches in Petersburg.

At the church, the protesters split into three groups and traveled different routes at four-minute intervals to the library.⁵⁷ At 11:30 a.m., the protesters entered the library through its “Whites Only” entrance and entered the reading room that was reserved for White patrons. Reverend Walker approached the library’s counter to request the first volume of Douglas Southall Freeman’s *Robert E. Lee Biography*, which he was refused.⁵⁸ During an oral history interview in 2014, Reverend Walker stated that he selected the book because, “I always thought Lee was guilty of treason, and I just thought I’d look at this book to see what the Southern view was, why they made him such a hero.”⁵⁹ In the same interview, Walker commented on the irony that it was that book that resulted in his arrest.⁶⁰

In response to the sit-in, Petersburg’s City Council closed McKenney Library for four days. During the closure of the Library, the Council enacted a strict ordinance to stop such “trespassing” at a council meeting on March 1, 1960. At the same meeting, Virginia State College student C.J. Mallory read a petition calling for the complete desegregation of the library, saying that “segregation was dead, and Petersburg should become a part of the American

⁵⁷ “McKenney Library Sit-In,” Historic Petersburg, December 14, 2017.

<http://www.historicpetersburg.org/mckenney-library-sit-in/>.

⁵⁸ Charlie Lawing, “Wyatt Tee Walker (1929–2018),” Encyclopedia Virginia.

<https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/entries/walker-wyatt-tee-1929-2018/>.

⁵⁹ “Wyatt Tee Walker Oral History Interview”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

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ideal.”⁶¹ The Petersburg City Council did not address the petition directly and read from a prepared statement that cited that when the building was given to the city, the deed required it to be segregated.

On March 7, 1960, the protesters returned to the library. Eleven were arrested and some were released on a \$100 bond, but even with extensive protesting around the city for their release, those in jail were tried at the Municipal Court on March 14. Reverend Walker and Reverend Williams were sentenced to thirty days in jail with a \$100 fine; the rest were sentenced to ten days in jail and a \$50 fine.

That same year, training sessions were held in Petersburg for practice dealing with the harassment that sit-in protestors would be facing. Photos from *Life Magazine*, originally posted in September 1960, show young potential protestors having cigarette smoke blown in their faces, drinks spilled on them, and other provocations they might face during non-violent civil disobedience. Protests continued throughout the city, although the McKenney Library was closed from July to November 1960. Finally, by the end of 1960, the McKenney Library, government offices, lunch counters, and other businesses were desegregated. Another four years passed before Petersburg started seeing proper representation in local government, with the election of the first Black city councilperson in 1964.

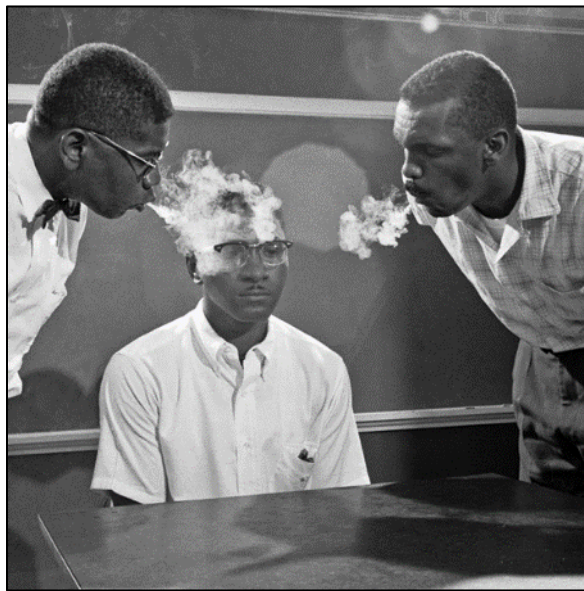


Figure 11. Virginius Bray Thornton, Founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) having smoke blown into his face as part of training for a sit-in.

https://www.cvillepedia.org/File:Virginius_Thornton_sit_down_strike.jpg.

⁶¹ “The Modern Civil Rights Movement in Petersburg, Virginia,” *Discovery Virginia*, accessed March 14, 2024. <https://discoveryvirginia.org/modern-civil-rights-movement-petersburg-virginia-booklet>.

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William R. McKenney Library

Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA

County and State

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William R. McKenney Library
Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA
County and State

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☒ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☒ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other

Name of repository: Department of Historic Resources, Richmond; City of Petersburg, VA; Petersburg Public Library Archives

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): DHR #123-0009, 123-0094-0113

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.29

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 37.225310 Longitude: -77.402070

2. Latitude: _____ Longitude: _____

William R. McKenney Library
Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA
County and State

3. Latitude: Longitude:

4. Latitude: Longitude:

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

1. Zone: Easting: Northing:

2. Zone: Easting: Northing:

3. Zone: Easting: Northing:

4. Zone: Easting : Northing:

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary for The McKenney Library is coterminous with the 0.29-acre parcel of primarily cleared, urban land in the City of Petersburg that is historically associated with the building. The rectangular shape boundary follows the property's current tax parcel lines (Parcel ID 022140012) fronting S. Sycamore Street with Marshall Street to the southeast, as shown on the attached Tax Parcel Map. The nominated property is bounded on all sides by urban residential and commercial properties. The true and correct historic boundary is shown on the attached Sketch Map, which has a scale of 1"= 94'.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The nominated boundary of the McKenney Library includes the property's current parcel lines and the boundary chosen represents the part of the property associated with the building during its period of significance.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Joanna McKnight and LaToya Gray-Sparks

organization: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

street & number: 2801 Kensington Avenue

city or town: Richmond state: VA zip code: 23220

e-mail: joanna.mcknight@dhr.virginia.gov; latoya.gray@dhr.virginia.gov

telephone: 804-482-6446

date: 12/19/2023

William R. McKenney Library
Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA
County and State

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: William R. McKenney Library

City or Vicinity: Petersburg

County: Independent City

State: Virginia

Photographer: Joanna McKnight

Date Photographed: April 19, 2021; October 27, 2021; March 3, 2023

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Photo Number	Description	Camera Direction	Date	Photographer
01	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0001_ View of Building and Setting	NE	10/27/2021	JM
02	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0002_ Southwest Oblique	NE	10/27/2021	JM
03	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0003_ West Facade	E	3/3/2023	JM
04	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0004_ West Façade Entry Porch	E	4/19/2021	JM
05	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0005_ Entry Porch Pilaster and Window Hood Detail	N	10/27/2021	JM

William R. McKenney Library
Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA
County and State

Photo Number	Description	Camera Direction	Date	Photographer
06	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0006_Southwest Corner	NE	10/27/2021	JM
07	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0007_South Elevation Basement Entry	NW	10/27/2021	JM
08	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0008_Southeast Corner	NW	10/27/2021	JM
09	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0009_Front Block North Elevation	S	10/27/2021	JM
10	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0010_1958 Addition West Elevation	E	10/27/2021	JM
11	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0011_Front Block and 1958 Addition	E	10/27/2021	JM
12	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0012_Entrance Door	W	10/27/2021	JM
13	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0013_Entry Hall	E	3/3/2023	JM
14	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0014_Double Parlor	SW	3/3/2023	JM
15	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0015_Connection between Double Parlor and Porch	NE	3/3/2023	JM
16	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0016_Double Parlor Ceiling	NE	3/3/2023	JM
17	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0017_Double Parlor Looking into Porch	E	3/3/2023	JM
18	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0018_Porch Looking Toward the Ell and Rear of the Main Block	NW	3/3/2023	JM
19	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0019_Northwest Parlor	NW	3/3/2023	JM
20	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0020 Dining Room	NW	3/3/2023	JM
21	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0021 East Chamber	NW	3/3/2023	JM
22	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0022 South Chamber looking into Ell	E	3/3/2023	JM
23	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0023 Basement original window	SW	3/3/2023	JM
24	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0024 Basemen Southwest Room	S	3/3/2023	JM
25	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0025 Basement Southeast Room	E	3/3/2023	JM

William R. McKenney Library
Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA
County and State

Photo Number	Description	Camera Direction	Date	Photographer
26	VA_PetersburgCity_McKenneyLibrary_0026 Basement Southwest Room Mantel	S	3/3/2023	JM

Embedded Images Log

Figure No.	Caption
1	Undated historic photograph from the NW corner of the parcel showing the original entry porch newel posts, balusters, and steps. Photograph located at the Petersburg Public Library Archives. Photograph by Joanna McKnight, October 2, 2023.
2	Southwest parlor, looking east toward the southeast parlor and south porch, c. 1929. Source: Wm. R. McKenney Free Library, "Fifth Annual Report," pg. 7. Image from Petersburg Public Library Archives. Photograph by Joanna McKnight, October 3, 2023.
3	Entry hall, looking east toward the south porch, c. 1929. Source: Wm. R. McKenney Free Library, "Fifth Annual Report," pg. 7. Image from the Petersburg Public Library Archives. Photograph by Joanna McKnight, October 3, 2023.
4	Historic photo of the dining room, used as a reading room, shortly after the library's opening, undated. Image from the Petersburg Public Library Archives. Photograph by Joanna McKnight, October 3, 2023.
5	Sketch of the McKenney Library featuring the basement entrance, undated. Image at the Petersburg Public Library Archives. No publishing information. Photograph by Joanna McKnight, October 3, 2023.
6	Children and students preparing for non-violent civil disobedience in Petersburg, Va., 1960. Howard Sochurek/Life Pictures/Shutterstock https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960 .
7	Children and students preparing for non-violent civil disobedience in Petersburg, Va., 1960. Howard Sochurek/Life Pictures/Shutterstock https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960 .
8	Children and students preparing for non-violent civil disobedience in Petersburg, Va., 1960. Howard Sochurek/Life Pictures/Shutterstock https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960 .

William R. McKenney Library

Name of Property

City of Petersburg, VA

County and State

Figure No.	Caption
9	Children and students preparing for non-violent civil disobedience in Petersburg, Va., 1960. Howard Sochurek/Life Pictures/Shutterstock https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960 .
10	Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker observing training for sit-in harassment, Petersburg, Va., 1960. https://www.life.com/history/life-and-civil-rights-anatomy-of-a-protest-virginia-1960/
11	Virginus Bray Thornton, Founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) having smoke blown into his face a part of training for a sit-in. https://www.cvillepedia.org/File:Virginus_Thornton_sit_down_strike.jpg .

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours

Tier 2 – 120 hours

Tier 3 – 230 hours

Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.



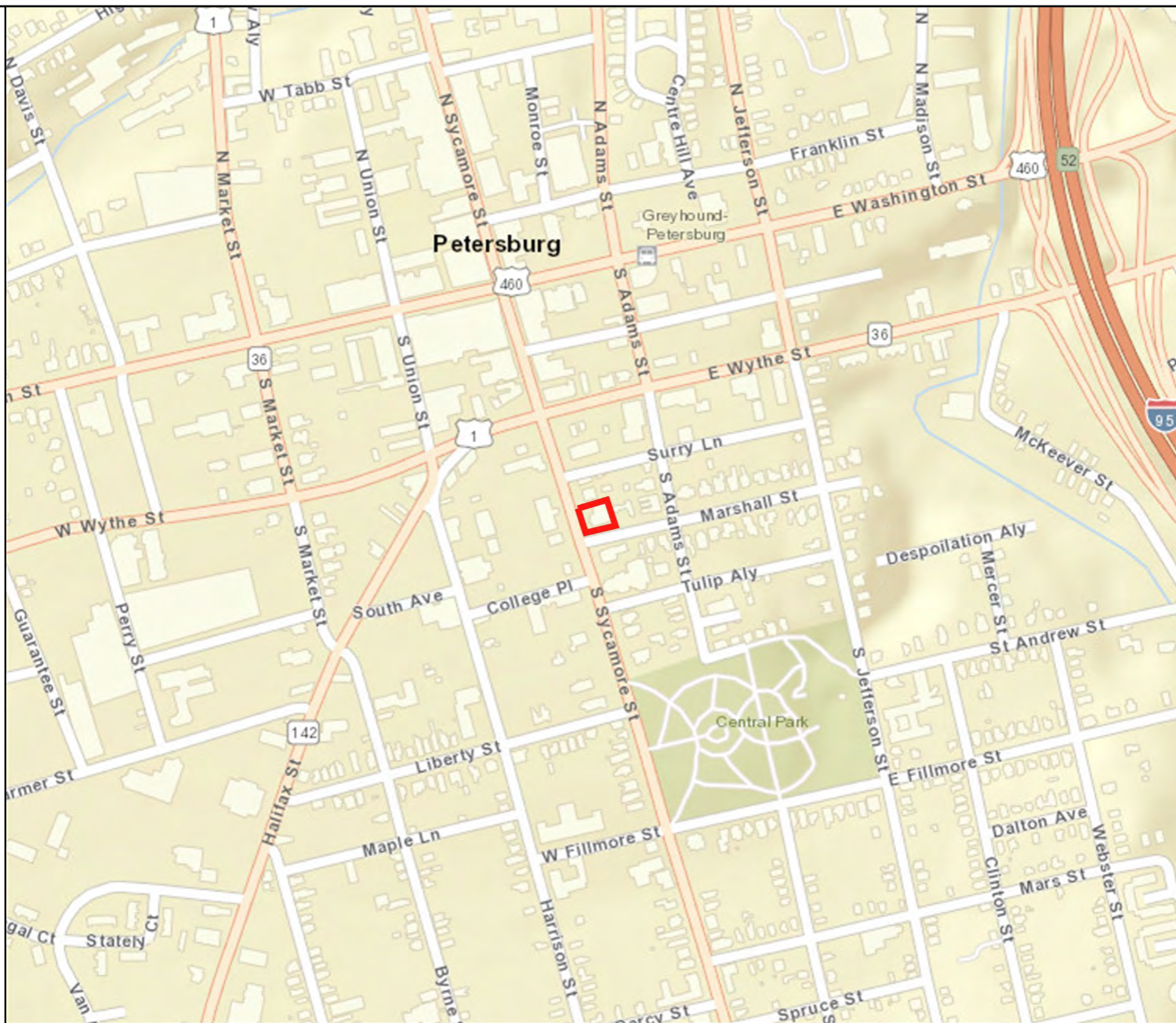
STREET MAP

William R. McKenney Library

137 South Sycamore Street

City of Petersburg, VA

DHR No. 123-0009



 Nominated Boundary



Feet

0 200 400 600 800

1:9,028 / 1"=752 Feet

Date: 11/1/2024

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Notice if AE sites: Locations of archaeological sites may be sensitive the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and Code of Virginia §2.2-3705.7 (10). Release of precise locations may threaten archaeological sites and historic resources.




LOCATION MAP

William R. McKenney Library
137 South Sycamore Street
City of Petersburg, VA
DHR ID# 123-0009

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates
37.225310, -77.402070

 Nominated Boundary

0 50 100
 Feet




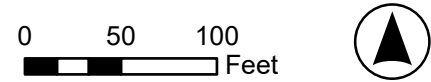


LOCATION MAP

William R. McKenney Library
137 South Sycamore Street
City of Petersburg, VA
DHR ID# 123-0009

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates
37.225310, -77.402070

 Nominated Boundary







022140012

TAX PARCEL MAP

William R. McKenney Library
137 South Sycamore Street
City of Petersburg, VA
DHR ID# 123-0009

Parcel ID# 022140012

 Nominated Boundary

0 50 100
 Feet



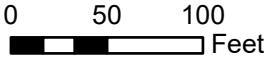


TAX PARCEL MAP

William R. McKenney Library
137 South Sycamore Street
City of Petersburg, VA
DHR ID# 123-0009

Parcel ID# 022140012

 Nominated Boundary





SKETCH MAP

William R. McKenney Library

137 South Sycamore Street

City of Petersburg, VA

DHR No. 123-0009

**1. William R. McKenney Library
(Contributing)**



Nominated Boundary



Feet

0 20 40 60 80

1:1,128 / 1"=94 Feet



Date: 11/1/2024

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PHOTO KEY

William R. McKenney Library
137 South Sycamore Street
City of Petersburg, VA
DHR No. 123-0009



Photo Locations



Feet

0 20 40 60 80
1:1,128 / 1"=94 Feet



Date: 11/1/2024

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