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Mayor Greenberg announces memorialization of Joseph S. Cotter, champion of Western Library and founder of Cotter Cup writing contest

Louisville Free Public Library and Library Foundation to place memorial headstone in Eastern Cemetery at Cotter's family's gravesite

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (September 28, 2026) – Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg announced today that a memorial headstone will be dedicated for Joseph S. Cotter, a poet and educator who championed the opening of the Western Library in 1905. Cotter is well-known for establishing the “Cotter Cup” children’s storytelling contest in 1913, a tradition revived in 2021.

Cotter is buried at Greenwood Cemetery. However, because his exact gravesite is unknown, he will instead be memorialized at Eastern Cemetery at the known gravesite of his wife and three children. A memorial plaque will also be unveiled, dedicated to Cotter’s family buried there: Maria Cox Cotter, Florence Olivia Cotter, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., and Leonidas M. Cotter.

“Our libraries have a long legacy of creating opportunities for every person to learn, grow, and connect. It’s community members like Joseph S. Cotter who helped make that possible,” said Mayor Greenberg. “As we continue investing in our libraries and building on the legacy he helped create, I’m proud to help ensure that Joseph S. Cotter and his family are honored and remembered for generations to come.”

Western Library opened in 1905 as the first free public library in the nation for African Americans that was also staffed entirely by African Americans. Joseph S. Cotter started the Cotter Cup at Western Library in 1913, offering children the chance at \$5 to best retell a tale heard at storytime at the library. More than 80 years after the original competition faded away, Western Library Branch Manager Natalie Woods revived it in 2021, honoring Cotter's own legacy as a poet by inviting students to tell their stories through original poetry.

Through a partnership between the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL), the Library Foundation and the Community Foundation of Louisville, the revived Cotter Cup has continued to grow and reach a new generation of young writers. This year, decades after Cotter's death in 1949, nearly 100 students from across Louisville entered the contest.

The Cotter Cup and Joseph S. Cotter memorial marker are made possible through the Library Foundation with generous grant support from the Community Foundation of Louisville.

On Saturday, October 3, at 10:30 a.m., the Library Foundation and LFPL will host guests in Eastern Cemetery for the dedication of a memorial headstone. All are invited to the dedication. Limited seating will be available.

For more information on the Cotter Cup and Cotter's legacy, visit lfpl.org/cottercup.

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About Louisville Free Public Library

Louisville Free Public Library connects the residents of Louisville and Jefferson County to knowledge and information at our library locations and on the web at LFPL.org. Come on in, the whole world's inside.

About The Library Foundation

The Library Foundation strives to ensure every Louisvillian has the tools, resources, and information they need to flourish in their community and their lives by opening the doors for community members to engage with, advocate for, and dedicate time and treasure to the Louisville Free Public Library. Learn more at LFPLfoundation.org.