

[HOMEPAGE](#)

First African-American 'Motorman' was a Woman



Arcola Philpott, sociologist and Motormanette. 1944.

Arcola Philpott was born Arcola Ruffins on July 21, 1913. She married Robert Philpott and had two children, Robert Jr. and Ethel. Arcola was an accomplished pianist and spoke several foreign languages. Prior to coming out to Los Angeles from Chicago, she performed welfare work for seven years and also worked in research for the University of Chicago's History Department.

She attended Loyola University studying social science, and attended City College while in Los Angeles. We located her 1945 payroll record in our archives and discovered that she lived near the corner of Adams and Central, at 1119 E. Adams, near the heart of the vibrant Central Avenue jazz district.

Arcola worked out of Arthur Winston Division 5 and drove the "F" line from 116th/South Vermont Avenue to Union Station traveling up Vermont to Santa Barbara (now Martin Luther King Boulevard), Grand, Jefferson, Main, Macy (now Cesar Chavez) to the Union Station Passenger terminal. While in Los Angeles, she also worked at the Brown Derby restaurant.

After she returned to Chicago, she worked as a licensed practical nurse as well as a journalist for the Chicago Defender and Pittsburgh Courier. In her later years she worked as a docent for the Museum of

Second in a two-part series.

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First African-American Motormen Pioneered Social Justice on the Los Angeles Railway

By MATTHEW BARRETT

(March 24, 2005) Los Angeles Railway was not previously known as a socially progressive organization, nor were many other industries or job markets of the early 1940's.

Hiring women as streetcar and bus operators in 1942 was a small start. Noting the newspaper headlines of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and *California Eagle* from 1942-1944, racial integration of the ranks of motormen was a major change from past practices, skillfully negotiated by the Rev. Clayton Russell's *Los Angeles Negro Victory Committee*, the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the Fair Employment Practices Commission and the reform-minded Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron.

In August of 1944, and without much fanfare, Los Angeles Railway hired its first African-American motorman, a motormanette, Mrs. Arcola Philpott.

Maybe it was Philadelphia's William Barber, or New York's first black motorman William Bath that were her inspiration to walk into the employment office of the L.A. Railway and apply, or maybe it was the community's support, or maybe it was the sight of women all over the U.S. working as streetcar operators and other important jobs.

(See [TIMELINE](#))

Arcola Philpott's employment at the Los Angeles Railway earned her an important place in Los Angeles transportation history. She helped open two doors that had previously been closed.

Arcola Philpott's daughter, Ethel Philpott of Chicago, believes it was the inspiration of other women going to work in what had been known as traditionally men's jobs that inspired her mother to become a streetcar operator.

"My mother was just like that, born in the wrong era for all the things she wanted to do, she was a real go-getter. She was

Science and Industry and the Chicago Public Library. Arcola Philpott passed away on May 14, 1991. She is survived by her daughter, three grandchildren and one great-grandchild. -- from Matt Barrett and Jim Walker

extremely intelligent, courageous, fearless and a life long learner," she said,

Within a few weeks of hiring Mrs. Philpott, Los Angeles Railway hired its first black motormen.



Los Angeles Railway F Line, Vermont and 116th Station

They were Louis S. Bernard, Hoyt. A. Brown, Percy B. Hill, Roosevelt Mills, Butler James Mitchell, W.B. Jones, E. M. Morris, W.S.A Weary, James Womack and probably more trailblazers whose records have been lost over the ensuing 60 years.

[more photos](#)

As street railways were increasingly converted to bus lines, Los Angeles Railway sold out to the Los Angeles Transit Lines Company in 1945.

Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority, the first publicly governed transit agency, purchased Los Angeles Transit Lines routes and assets in 1958. That agency became the Southern California Rapid Transit District in 1964 and in 1993, it merged with the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission to form the current Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Today bus and rail operator workforce of Metro of nearly 5,000 employees includes 32 percent women, 49 percent African-American men, and 23 percent African-American women.

Nathaniel Lewis, third from left, with fellow operators in 1958.

[More photos.](#)





TIMELINE

In the early 1940s, the Rev. Clayton Russell's *Los Angeles Negro Victory Committee* and his *People's Independent Church of Christ* was fighting for equal opportunity and social justice in Los Angeles.

This included gaining motormen and conductor opportunities for African Americans on the Los Angeles Railway, and a halt to prejudice by labor unions.

He had a weekly radio address that conveyed his messages of equality loud and clear. He also organized marches and rallies to demand that a fair share of the wartime defense industry jobs go to African Americans.

Rev. Russell strategically formed an alliance with labor and gained sympathy from the greater Los Angeles community through bond sale rallies featuring popular black entertainers such as Ethel Waters, Noble Sissle and Ben Carter that raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the war effort.

The black population of Los Angeles had more than doubled between 1940 and 1944, from about 60,000 to over 130,000 people.

Los Angeles Railway began feeling the pressure of community and related events happening across the country.

In January of 1943, Los Angeles Railway finally gave its commitment to Rev. Clayton Russell that African Americans would receive motorman job opportunities.

The federal Fair Employment Practices Commission set up by President Roosevelt had previously ordered the nation's transit systems to hire African Americans as streetcar motormen, citing President Roosevelt's wartime Executive Order 8802 which prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color or national origin.

On August 1, 1944, the motormen of the Philadelphia Transit Company went on strike over the issue.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered a military takeover of the transit system and threatened the strikers, via personal telegrams, with being drafted and sent to the front lines if they didn't return to work by the following Monday. They went back to work immediately but federal troops still had to protect Philadelphia's first black motorman, William Barber.

[Sources](#)

