

# THE HISTORY OF BLACK FIREFIGHTERS IN LOS ANGELES

<u>Year:</u>	<u>Event:</u>
1781	City of Los Angeles is founded.
1850	Los Angeles is incorporated as a city. California receives statehood The County of Los Angeles is incorporated
1857	U.S. Supreme court rules in Dred Scott vs. Sandford. “A black man has no rights that a White man is bound to respect because blacks are not citizens”.
1886	Los Angeles Fire Department is organized as a paid Department.
1888	Sam Haskins, born a slave in 1840 from Virginia is listed in the census as an employed Fireman for the City of Los Angeles and assigned to Engine Company #4.
1892	Sam Haskins is appointed as a Call Man and assigned to Engine 2, making him the first Black man hired by the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD).
1895	Sam Haskins is fatally injured on November 19, while responding down First Street to a fire call. When the steamer he was riding on, hit a bump in the road, Haskins lost his balance and fell between the steamer’s boiler and the wheel. It took firemen and citizens ten minutes to remove the wheel. He was carried back to Engine 2’s quarters where he died that night.
1896	U.S. Supreme Court rules in <i>Plessy vs. Ferguson</i> that “Separate But Equal” is the law of the land, as long as the equal protection clause of the constitution is not violated.
1897	George Bright is hired as the second Black fireman in the LAFD.
1900	William Glenn is hired as the third Black fireman in the LAFD.
1902	George Bright obtains the endorsement of the Second Baptist Church and is promoted to Lieutenant. This makes him the first Black officer in the Department. All Black firemen are segregated into Hose Company #4 on Loma Drive near Beverly Blvd.

William Glenn leaves the Fire Department and transfers to the Police Department making him the third Black Policeman in Los Angeles.

- 1903 The Civil Service system is created in the City of Los Angeles.
- 1906 Fireman Ben Anderson is credited for responding to a major chemical fire alone while the others were away from the station on break. The Los Angeles Times writes a hero's story for him.
- 1907 Fireman Ben Anderson retires on a disability pension when he is critically injured from an accident he sustained while responding to a fire.
- 1909 William Hall is appointed to the Los Angeles Fire Department and he is assigned to Hose Company 2.
- 1910 As more Black firemen are hired, they are assigned to Hose Company #2 under the command of Lieutenant Frank Leiva, a Mexican-American.
- 1911 The City of Los Angeles adopts the Fire and Police Retirement Pension System.
- 1912 The Los Angeles Fire Department adopts the two shift system (day shift-night shift). Firemen from Hose Company #2 and Hose Company #4 combine.

The Los Angeles Fire Department goes automotive with selective stations receiving automotive fire apparatus.

The County of Los Angeles organizes the Forester and Fire Warden Office protecting the county areas of Los Angeles.

- 1916 William Hall promotes to Lieutenant and becomes the first Black officer under Civil Service. He is assigned to command the other shift of Hose Company #4 opposite George Bright.

- 1918 Fireman Ben Anderson of Hose Company #4 dies from the injuries he sustained from an accident that disabled him in 1907. There were no provisions for widows and orphans at the time of his death. Anderson's death prompted city officials to create benefits for family members of all deceased LAFD Firefighters.

Hose Company #4 gets an automotive fire engine eliminating their horses.

- 1923 Lt. William Hall promotes to Captain.
- The Los Angeles County Fire Department organizes the Fire Protection Districts to protect unincorporated county areas.
- 1924 Hose Company # 4 becomes Engine 58 with a triple combination pumper.
- Belmont High School is built across the street from Hose Company #4 / Engine 58, causing the Los Angeles Fire Department to move the Black firemen to Engine #30 and Truck #11 at 1401 Central Avenue. The outgoing firemen from Station #30 trash the kitchen in protest of being moved out of their station. The Fire Chief orders all of the outgoing men back to clean up their mess and gives them a stern lecture.
- Additional Black firemen are hired to staff Truck Company # 11.
- 1927 LAFD eliminates the rank of Lieutenant and makes all station officers Captains.
- LAFD creates the rescue ambulance service.
- 1931 Captain Hall passes the Battalion Chief's exam. He is told the following, "It's a shame you are not a white man, but there is no place nor plan for a colored Battalion Chief". Captain Hall retired at the end of this year.
- 1932 LAFD eliminates the separate designations of its Truck Companies and renames them after the Engine Companies they are housed with. Truck #11 becomes Truck #30.
- 1936 Engine #14 at 3401 Central Avenue is open to Black firemen creating two additional captain and engineer positions along with ten additional firemen positions.
- 1940 Black firemen no longer replacing each other on a one for one basis. Arnett Hartsfield is hired and reports to Station #30 without going through the Fire Academy. The Fire Academy started training recruits on a 24-hour schedule; it was ruled unacceptable to have a Black recruit stay overnight with the others.
- 1947 The "A" shift members of Stations #30 and #14 start the annual holiday party at Wince King's home. This gathering has never ceased and the annual gathering continues to this day.

- 1948 James Shern from Kansas is hired by the LAFD. He has a degree in chemistry and is later known as an innovator in what becomes known as the Hazardous Materials program
- U.S. Supreme Court rules in *Shelley vs. Kraemer*: The Justices rule that a court may not constitutionally enforce a “restrictive covenant” which prevents people of a certain race from owning or occupying property.
- 1949 New Station #14 is opened next door to old station. Additional apparatus is housed at Station #14, including a Wrecker (Heavy Utility) and a Salvage Unit.
- 1952 The Fire Prevention Bureau and the supply shops are open to Black firemen. Garfield Tucker, James Shern and Earl Young are the first Black Inspectors.
- 1953 Ed Garrison is the last Black fireman hired prior to integration
- James L. Garcia Jr. and Van Davis are hired as (LACoFD) Los Angeles County Fire’s first “Black Firemen”. Garcia comes on the job first in early 1953.
- 1954 U.S. Supreme Court rules on *Brown vs. Board of Education* that “Separate But Equal” is no longer the law of the land.
- The Stentorians are organized at Stations #30 and #14. Fireman Gerald George comes up with the name Stentorians. Having a loud and powerful voice.
- 1955 The Fire Chief is ordered by the Mayor to integrate the Fire Department. Problems occur in the city’s fire stations with Black and White firemen working together. Black firemen are subjected to second class treatment and are ostracized from station activities including:
- Not allowed to eat with the other firefighters
  - Not allowed to drink coffee or read the station newspaper
  - Not allowed to fraternize with the other firefighters
  - Must stand four human spaces away from the other firemen during line ups and inspections
  - Not allowed to use the “little grape” or Grapevine, the station pay phone for personal calls
  - Not allowed to use the station dishware or utensils

Must sleep in the same bed designated for “Blacks Only” usually in the corner near the locker room door  
Locker is usually placed near the toilet  
Subjected to cruel jokes, harsh pranks with safety equipment, in addition to being subjected to verbal and physical harassment  
At times, not allowed to respond to calls or participate in fire prevention activities  
Constantly ignored by the other crew members  
Persistently referred to as the N-word

- 1955 Arnett Hartsfield earns a law degree from U.S.C. and leads the effort to integrate the Fire Department from the Black Firemen’s view. The NAACP lead by Attorney Loren Miller filed suit against Fire Chief Alderson.
- Fireman Reynaldo Lopez takes a picture of the “White Adults” sign placed on the kitchen door of Station #46. This pictured is aired on the Channel 2 News by anchor Bill Stout. This causes an unfavorable light on the Fire Department.
- Ernie Roberts now assigned to Station # 10, lays his head in human excrement, placed as a cruel joke. Fire Chief Alderson orders all Blacks back to Central Avenue. He advises the Fire Commission that he cannot guarantee the safety of the Black firemen in these [*hostile*] stations.
- 1956 The Fire Chief is fired for his lack of commitment to integrate the Department.
- Bradley Garret and Tolbert Young are the first Blacks hired after integration. Both are terminated unfairly during their academy training.
- 1957 Paul Orduna, a fireman from Omaha Nebraska is hired. He is the first Black fireman to pass his probation after integration in the LAFD.
- 1961 Arnett Hartsfield retires as a firefighter with the LAFD.
- James Shern promotes to Captain. He becomes the first Black Captain to be promoted since 1944.
- 1963 Mayor Sam Yorty issues a formal order to the Fire Department to “Act like a grown up Fire Department and start eating together.” The “Organized Mess” rule is placed into effect that states all members shall eat together unless there is a medical condition that states otherwise.

- 1965 The Watts community of Los Angeles erupts in violence and fire as the Watts Riots commence. Bob Craig, Cecil McLinn, George Crommel and Bill Cotterell commandeer a reserve fire engine and go into certain hot areas to fight fires.
- Frank Harrison receives the Medal of Valor for saving the life of another firefighter trapped under a block wall. Harrison is the first Black firefighter to receive the Medal of Valor.
- 1966 The LAFD adopts a new concept called the Task Force. A Task Force is a combination of a two piece Engine Company and a Truck Company under the direction of one leader, temporarily assigned together, to accomplish a specific mission.
- 1968 James Shern becomes the first Black to promote to Battalion Chief
- Fireman Robert Gladden Sr. dies of a heart attack while battling a fire in the Pacific Palisades area. His son Robert Gladden Jr. will join the LAFD in 1978.
- 1969 Hershel Clady, Billy Washington and Ed McFaul all join the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- 1970 Truck #30 moves to Station #14 and becomes Truck #14.
- Ed Mcfaul is the first Black Firefighter Paramedic in the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- The International Association of Black Professional Firefighters is organized in Hartford, CT., linking all Black firefighter associations nationwide. David Floyd from the FDNY serves as the first President. Floyd was the first Black fireman assigned to the elite Rescue 1 Squad Company of the FDNY. Captain Cecil McLinn attends this historical event representing the Stentorians, Black firefighters of Los Angeles.
- Fireman Tom Collier is killed in the line of duty when Snorkel 3 tips over at a fire in downtown Los Angeles. He is fatally injured and two other firefighters are critically injured.
- 1972 The television show “Emergency” debuts on NBC. It depicts the lives of two Los Angeles County Firefighter Paramedics. Dispatcher Sam Lanier, known as the “Voice of LA”, is shown each week dispatching Squad 51 to medical calls.
- Actor Richard Roundtree known for his role in the movie “Shaft” portrays fireman Shelly Forsythe in the TV movie “Firehouse”. Filmed in

downtown Los Angeles at old Station # 23, Forsythe is the lone Black fireman in a station where the tension is high because of his presence.

Battalion Chief James Shern retires and becomes the Fire Chief of the Pasadena, CA, Fire Department.

The LAFD adopts the rank of Captain II also known as the Task Force Commander. A Captain II is assigned to the Truck Company and is superior to a Captain I, who is assigned to an Engine Company. The first Blacks to achieve the Captain II rank are:

Grady Bryant, James Parker, Terry Addison Sr., and Willie Patterson.

- 1973 Jackie Evans and Ken Smith are hired as the first Black single function EMT personnel for the LAFD.
- 1974 The City of Los Angeles adopts the consent decree that calls for the hiring of 50% firefighters of color in all entry-level recruit classes.
- 1975 Hershel Clady becomes the first Black fireman to promote to engineer on the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- Chief James Shern is elected as the President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.
- 1977 Hershel Clady promotes to Captain. This makes him the first Black captain in the history of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- 1978 The LAFD hires its first class of Women paramedics. There were 3 in total. Carlesta Johnson (Wells), Suzanne Toussean (Ibers) and Sally Byrne (Finney) are the LAFD's first women to work in the fire stations. Carlesta Johnson (Wells) becomes the first Black Woman paramedic in the LAFD.

All LAFD badges change the wording from FIREMAN to FIREFIGHTER.

- 1980 The Stentorians acquire old Station # 46 at 1409 W. Vernon Ave. as their office and training center. This is the same station that was the center of controversy in 1955 when Fireman Rey Lopez took the picture "White Adults" that was placed on the kitchen door to keep him out.

David Yost becomes the first Black arson investigator in the LAFD.

Fire station # 30 closes

- 1983 Jimmy Hill is the number one candidate on the Captain's list for the LAFD.
- 1984 Congressman Augustus "Gus" Hawkins and Political Activist Adam Burton address the city fire department's hiring practices with Mayor Tom Bradley. It was discovered that the fire department was honoring the consent decree by hiring 50% people of color. However, they were terminating 50% of those hired before the academy training or their probation ended.
- Fire Chief Manning was directed to do something about this. The Fire Department changed the training academy program and started a pre-training program for female firefighters that eventually included all firefighters.
- Robert Lee becomes the first Black chief officer when he promotes to Battalion Chief in the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- d'Lisa Davies becomes the first Black Woman firefighter to complete the academy and probation. Bridgette Burke was the first Black woman hired to enter the academy, but she was not successful.
- Michelle Banks becomes the second Black Woman paramedic for the LAFD. d'Lisa Davies and Banks are both assigned to Fire Station #34 in the Jefferson Park & Leimert Park sections of Los Angeles.
- David Westfield becomes the first Black arson investigator in the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- 1985 Fire Station # 30 becomes a Los Angeles Cultural Historic Landmark # 289.
- A devastating fire in the Baldwin Hills area claims the lives of three people and destroys fifty-three homes. One of the fatalities is the mother of Firefighter Robert Gladden Jr.; the same firefighter that lost his father in 1968.
- Brent Burton joins the Los Angeles County Fire Department at the age of 19, after three years with the LAFD's Explorer Program. Burton serves as the President of the African American Firefighter Museum from 2003-2014 and the President of the Stentorians of Los Angeles County from 2000-2010.

- 1987 Captain Floyd Hoffman is placed in command of the Los Angeles County Fire Department's Recruitment Unit. A high number of candidates of color and females are hired during his tenure. Captain Hoffman implemented protocols to ensure diversity among the Recruitment and entry level interview staff.
- 1988 Tonya Burns becomes the first Black Woman hired by the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Veronie Steele-Small is hired in the next class during this same year.
- 1989 The Los Angeles County Fire Department eliminates firefighter dispatchers and hires civilian uniformed employees. Clyde Taylor, Betty Parker, Cheryl Patterson-Simms and Helen Ross are among the first Black dispatchers hired.
- 1990 The Los Angeles County Fire union, Local 1014 accuses the Stentorians of cheating on the entry-level exam. The Fire Chief throws out the exam causing countless candidates to fail the new exam. The allegations were false and the union and the Stentorians have a strained relationship.
- 1991 The Executive Development Institute is created at HBCU Florida A & M University. This program was created by the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters as an alternative to the National Fire Academy. Historically, Black firefighters have not been successful in attending the NFA for various reasons. Later on, EDI was re-named in honor of Dr. Carl Holmes, retired Assistant Chief of the Oklahoma Fire Department. Several members from the LAFD and the LACoFD graduated from the first class of this prestigious program. EDI continues to exist today.
- 1992 Los Angeles erupts in civil unrest as violence and fires erupt through out Los Angeles. Four LAPD officers were acquitted of beating motorist Rodney King. The violence starts in South Los Angeles and travels throughout metropolitan Los Angeles.
- Tensions in certain fire stations are raised between some Black and White firefighters over the situation of the causes and effects of the Los Angeles Riots. A Black firefighter at LAFD Station # 9 alleges that someone placed urine in his Listerine bottle.
- A Black firefighter at LAFD Station #61 nearly has an altercation over insensitive comments by some firefighters about Black people.

- 1995 Two Los Angeles County Chief Officers are the topic of controversy when they order a picture of actor John Wayne down from the wall of the front office at a Carson, CA, fire station. The Captain of the station challenges the order and sparks a divide again between Black and White firefighters.
- Robert Lee becomes Los Angeles County's first Black Deputy Fire Chief
- The Stentorians along with Attorney Melanie Lomax, hold a press conference in front of old Station #30 protesting the racist and sexist practices of the LAFD toward Black and female firefighters.
- A controversial video dubbed "female follies" is discovered and exposes the LAFD to widespread criticism. Fire Chief Don Manning retires amid the controversy.
- 1996 Assistant Chief Jim Hill becomes the first Black to serve as a Deputy Chief in the LAFD.
- Firefighter Glenn Smith becomes the first Black helicopter pilot for the LAFD.
- Battalion Chief William Bamattre is appointed as the LAFD's new Fire Chief.
- 1997 On December 13, the African American Firefighter Museum opens. LAFD Firefighter/Lead Paramedic Michelle Banks is Co-founder and first President. Co-founders also include Arnett Hartsfield, Brent Burton, Christopher Cooper, Kwame Cooper, Daryl Osby, and David Spence.
- On the opening day, in front of a crowd of nearly 1,000 people, Fire Chief Bamattre issues a formal apology to the old Stentorians for enduring a terrible time during the integration of the LAFD during the mid 1950's.
- 2000 Veronie Steele-Small becomes the first Black woman to promote to Captain in the Los Angeles County Fire Department.
- The Inglewood Fire Department is annexed by the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Firefighter Paramedic Crystal Golden-Jefferson becomes Los Angeles County's third Black Woman firefighter.
- The Stentorians honor retired LAFD Fire Inspector Rey Lopez for having the courage to expose the racist practices, in particular the infamous picture that hung on the kitchen door of old station 46 that read "White Adults".

- 2004 Firefighter Jamie Foster dies in the line of duty from injuries suffered during an unfortunate vehicle accident. She becomes the first woman to die in the line of duty on the LAFD.
- The Stentorians of the City and County host the I.A.B.P.F.F. Convention and the traditional “Memorial March”, makes its way down Crenshaw Blvd., creating a truly historical moment in Los Angeles’ history.
- Deceased Fireman Sam Haskins is finally given an honorable burial when a headstone is placed over his unmarked grave in Evergreen Cemetery. For years, Haskins was buried in an unmarked grave and it was not known that he was the first Black Fireman in Los Angeles until the Los Angeles Times uncovered the story and informed the African American Fire Fighter Museum.
- Firefighter Don Greene becomes the first Black firefighter assigned to the LAFD’s Tractor Company.
- 2005 Los Angeles County Firefighter Paramedic Crystal Golden-Jefferson dies from Lymphoma Cancer. She contracted this disease while serving on the Inglewood Fire Department prior to the Los Angeles County Fire Department annexing Inglewood, California’s Fire Department.
- Captain Kwame Copper is the number one candidate on the Battalion Chief’s list for the LAFD.
- 2006 A Black firefighter alleges racial discrimination for a firehouse prank where his dinner was laced with dog food. The Los Angeles City Council originally agrees to compensate him \$2.7 million. The Mayor vetoes the settlement after more information is revealed about the firefighter and his involvement in hazing incidents.
- 2006 Fire Chief Bamattre retires after more firefighters come forward and make allegations against the fire department’s response to other serious incidents.
- Firefighter Kris Larsen becomes the first Black woman to promote to Captain in the LAFD.
- 2007 Assistant Chief Douglas Barry becomes the interim Fire Chief for the LAFD. Later in that same year, Barry is appointed by the mayor and confirmed unanimously as the permanent Fire Chief for the city of Los Angeles. This is the first time an African American has led one of the largest fire departments in the nation.

Los Angeles was the last of the largest municipal cities in the country to appoint an African American as the Fire Chief. African Americans have served as the Fire Chief or top Commissioner in just about every major Department in the Country. New York, Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco, Atlanta, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Oakland, Seattle, Denver, just to name a few. All have had African Americans as their top leader.

- 2008 LACoFD Deputy Fire Chief Daryl Osby is promoted to the position of Chief Deputy of Emergency Operations. This is the number 2 position in the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Chief Deputy Osby is now the highest ranking Black chief officer in the history of the LACoFD.
- 2009 Fire Chief Douglas Barry retires. Battalion Chief Millage Peaks, an African American and a 33-year veteran of the LAFD becomes the next Fire Chief to serve the City of Los Angeles.
- 2011 Daryl L. Osby, second in command of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, is appointed by the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors as the Fire Chief of the Department. He is the first African American to serve as the Fire Chief in the history of the Department.
- 2011 LAFD Fire Chief Millage Peaks retires and Assistant Chief Brian Cummings, is appointed by the Mayor to the position of Fire Chief. Chief Cummings is the son of the late LAFD Engineer Lou Cummings, who served on Central Avenue during the days of segregation.
- 2012 After physically serving for 15 years as the most dedicated volunteer and story teller of African American Firefighter History at the Museum, Arnett Hartsfield retires. A bronze Bust sculpted by world renowned sculptress Artis Lane was dedicated in his honor on his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday.
- The African American Firefighter Museum celebrates 15 years of service to the Nation and the Los Angeles Community.
- 2014 Noted historian Arnett Hartsfield passes away at the age of 96. He received a full Fire Department Class one memorial service.

*Edited on 4/8/2021 by Brent Burton*