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Trailblazing Librarian in the Golden State:
A Look at the Life and Career of Miriam Matthews

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master
of Library and Information Science

by

Claudia Maureen Horning

2012

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2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Trailblazing Librarian in the Golden State:
A Look at the Life and Career of Miriam Matthews

by

Claudia Horning

Master of Library and Information Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Mary Niles Maack, Chair

This thesis is a look at the life and career of Miriam Matthews. In 1927, Miriam Matthews became the first credentialed African American librarian in California, and the first to be hired by the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL). After realizing how few resources LAPL held on black history, she began collecting books, clippings, and other materials on the subject. Later, Matthews was also active within the California Library Association (CLA) and American Library Association (ALA). She served as both a member and the chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committees within CLA, helping to organize CLA's fight against censorship in California. From 1949 until her retirement in 1960, Matthews acted as regional librarian for LAPL, supervising twelve branch libraries in LAPL's South Central region. After her retirement, she led efforts to document the black experience in the West. Matthews was an important trailblazer for black librarians in California, and an effective advocate for all users of public libraries in the state and nationally.

The thesis of Claudia Maureen Horning is approved.

Cynthia L. Mediavilla

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Mary Niles Maack, Committee Chair

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2012

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I would never have heard about Miriam Matthews if it were not for Susan D. Anderson, Collecting Los Angeles Curator at UCLA Library Special Collections, and I appreciate her ongoing advice and encouragement. Also, I must acknowledge Matthews' nephew, Charles H. Matthews, Jr., who was generous in sharing some of his personal memories of his aunt with me. His careful stewardship of his aunt's legacy is commendable; this research would not have been possible if he had not realized the importance of his aunt's contributions to librarianship and historical research, preserving her papers and other collections. Additionally, I am grateful to both Mr. Matthews and to the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection for giving me their permission to reproduce photographs of Miriam Matthews.

I would also like to thank my department head, John Riemer, for encouraging me to go to graduate school, and all of my wonderful colleagues at the UCLA Library for providing me with patient support as I juggled the demands of work and school.

Finally, I want to extend thanks to my family and friends for their love, friendship, and encouragement. I could not have done this without you.



Miriam Matthews, 1934
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

v

LIST OF FIGURES

ix

INTRODUCTION

1

CHAPTER 1

Coming of Age in California

16

CHAPTER 2

Los Angeles Public Library

31

CHAPTER 3

World War II and Post-War Experience at LAPL

42

CHAPTER 4

Overview of Work on Intellectual Freedom

54

CHAPTER 5

Building Research Collections on African Americans

vii

58

CHAPTER 6

Analysis and Conclusions

62

EPILOGUE

69

APPENDIX A

Chronology

74

BIBLIOGRAPHY

76

LIST OF FIGURES

Miriam Matthews, 1934

v

Miriam Matthews, 1920

26

Miriam Matthews, at party for the Haitian Olympic Team, 1932

38

Miriam Matthews on lawn of the Watts Library, 1943

42

Miriam Matthews and friends, 1946

50

Miriam Matthews with plaque honoring the founders of Los Angeles, May 16, 1982

66

INTRODUCTION

This thesis had its origins in a paper that I wrote for a research methodology class in the Fall of 2010. During the previous Summer, the UCLA Library received a photograph collection donated by Walter L. Gordon, Jr. and William C. Beverly, Jr. Mr. Gordon, an African American lawyer born in Santa Monica, California in 1908, had amassed a collection of approximately 800 photographs documenting the African American experience in Los Angeles, primarily during the 1930s and 1940s. The Library's Cataloging & Metadata Center was tasked with describing the individual photographs, so that they could be made digitized and made available online¹.

Three colleagues and I from the Center met with Mr. Gordon weekly so that he could help us to identify the people in the photographs and provide other contextual information about them. Miriam Matthews appeared in several photos, and Mr. Gordon (who was three years her junior and knew the Matthews family well) spoke of her with great admiration. He told us that she was the first African American librarian to work at the Los Angeles Public Library, and that his own interest in documenting the African American experience in Los Angeles through photographs was at least partially inspired by her own work collecting photographs and other resources on the African American experience. When I later found out that her family had donated her papers to the UCLA Library, and that her nephew was in the process of donating her photograph collection, my interest was piqued. However, I could not have imagined at that time the extent to which Matthews

¹ Most of the collection is available online:
<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002311rn>

would capture my imagination and earn my admiration over the course of the next two years.

This thesis will explore the role played by Miriam Matthews in promoting research on and access to the history of African Americans in California (particularly during the 1930s and 1940s). I will also examine the context of the time period in which she operated, including the history of African Americans in Los Angeles as well as the broader context relevant to Matthews' work and life. Miriam Matthews was the first credentialed African American librarian in California, working as a librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) from 1927 to 1960. At the time she retired, she was a regional librarian, supervising twelve branch libraries. During this same period, she was also active in both the American Library Association (ALA) and the California Library Association (CLA), focusing on promoting intellectual freedom and opposing censorship. In addition, Matthews was herself a historian of both African American history and California history. Although she was never able to publish her own historical work as she had planned, her research efforts supported the work of many other historians.

The focus of this thesis is specifically on her work in the Los Angeles Public Library during the 1930s and 1940s promoting resources relating to African American history and culture. In addition, I will also discuss her work in the ALA and CLA Committees on Intellectual Freedom. It should be noted that in both areas of work, she promoted freedom and access to information, and fought against unreasonable restrictions on individual freedom.

The following research questions are addressed:

- What in Matthew's background or experience led her to librarianship as a career, and prepared her to make a unique contribution to the profession?
- What was her experience as a "pioneer" (i.e. the first African American librarian in the Los Angeles Public Library)? What role, if any, did she play in encouraging the inclusion and full participation of African Americans and/or other underrepresented groups in the information professions?
- What was the context in which she worked? What was going on in California and the nation in the 1930s and 1940s that would have influenced her work? To what extent did her efforts have a broader influence on Los Angeles, the state, her profession, etc.?
- What motivated Matthews to take an active role in preserving and promoting the documentation of African American history and culture? What similarities and/or differences are there between Matthews and other notable collectors, such as Arthur Schomburg and Jean Blackwell Hutson in New York, or Vivian G. Harsh and Charlemae Hill Rollins in Chicago?
- What were the connections between Matthews' work documenting the African American experience and her work in the California Library Association (CLA) and American Library Association (ALA) promoting intellectual freedom and fighting censorship?
- What were the tensions, if any, between her role as a public librarian providing general information services and her role as an advocate for the interests of a particular user group? What were the obstacles and challenges she faced, and with what strategies did she face them?

There was a wealth of primary source material to work with. An archival collection of Miriam Matthews' papers (Collection Number 1804) was available to me at the UCLA Library Department of Special Collections. Within this collection, which consists of 21 archival boxes (9.5 linear feet), Matthews' LAPL annual reports, bibliographies, and other notes were very helpful in illustrating her day-to-day work and organizational approach. I was also pleased to find her penciled annotations on several documents, both because they helped to give a sense of her as a person and because they indicated her interest in issues of the day, such as the fight against housing discrimination. I had hoped that her files of clippings on African American history would be more useful than they proved to be, but unfortunately their deteriorated condition made them nearly unusable. Original newsprint clippings (now housed in protective folders) were so fragile as to render them nearly illegible. Other clippings had been copied, and the non-archival quality paper that was used had darkened considerably.

Matthews' papers do not have much in the way of personal correspondence or other personal papers. Out of a total of 21 boxes, only folder 8 in box 5 consists of "Correspondence and personal papers, 1927-1977." The correspondence in this folder consists mainly of thank you notes and birthday cards; I found no record of correspondence between Matthews and other librarians or researchers who did similar work.

In addition to her papers, Matthews was interviewed for two separate oral histories. The first was conducted in 1977 as part of Radcliffe College's Black Women Oral History Project, and the second was conducted during 1985-1986 by the UCLA Library's Center for Oral History Research. Both of these resources were

invaluable as evidence of Matthews' formative experiences, professional work, and personality and character. However, Matthews does not discuss her family in detail in either oral history.

Other published primary sources were also helpful in my research. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* have been digitized and are available online to subscribing institutions. The *California Eagle*, a well-known African American newspaper in Los Angeles has also been digitized and is freely available via the Internet Archive. Unfortunately, it was digitized in a way that makes it very difficult to use, because it is nearly impossible either to browse the issues chronologically or easily find issues from a specific date (or date range). Also, it is not full-text searchable, unlike the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*.

For secondary resources, *Bound for freedom* by Douglas Flamming and *L.A. City Limits* by Josh Sides were very helpful in painting a clear picture of what life was like for African American Angelenos during the relevant time period, illustrating well both the daily realities of racial prejudice and the many strategies used to combat it. Both of those books, as well as *The great black way* by R. J. Smith, were also very readable and I would not hesitate to recommend them to anyone interested in this period of Los Angeles history. There has not been a great deal of scholarly research published about other African American librarians, either during Matthews' time or preceding her, which may point to an area in which much more research is needed. Scholarly works on the history of the Los Angeles Public Library were also elusive; Soter's *The light of learning* is well illustrated and very informative, but its lack of footnotes and references undermines its reliability as a source.

Predecessors and Contemporaries

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of in-depth scholarly studies on pioneering African American librarians and collectors of research materials. However, works relevant to those trailblazing black librarians and collectors who built important research collections documenting the African American experience will be discussed below.

Perhaps the most well-documented black collector and bibliophile in the United States was Arthur Alfonso Schomburg (1874-1938). Originally from Puerto Rico, Schomburg sought to document the global experience and contributions of people of African descent as a response to the racism he experienced both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Schomburg spent many years researching this topic, and in the process he built up a valuable personal library. His collections eventually formed the basis for the well-known Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. In her book about Schomburg, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, black bibliophile & collector: a biography*, Elinor Des Verney Sinnette provides a definitive biography of a man whose accomplishments left an enduring legacy, with a focus on telling the as-yet-untold stories about an important and influential black scholar and collector². She examines the life of her subject primarily in the public sphere, without delving extensively into his personal life or relationships. She constructs her biography using a rich variety of primary and secondary sources, successfully placing Schomburg's accomplishments in their historical context.

² Based on Sinnette's dissertation written while at Columbia University.

Schomburg's personal experiences in his childhood and youth informed his decision to document the accomplishments of black people. In his fifth-grade classroom in San Juan, Puerto Rico, a teacher told him that blacks had "no history, no heroes, no great moments."³ In reaction to this, Schomburg developed a need to discover those heroes and great moments, which fostered a lifelong interest in historical research. Although his primary contribution was as a collector, he also made his own scholarly contributions. In 1915, Schomburg compiled his *Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry*, a 57-page bibliography recording the works of black poets from the United States, Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica.⁴

In the early years of the 20th century, Schomburg was part of a group of African Americans, both scholars and lay persons, who set out to document the contributions made by blacks, in the United States and beyond. They conducted their work at a time when mainstream attitudes reflected a belief in the inferiority of the black race.⁵ Describing Schomburg's work as a collector, Sinnette also provides brief biographies of other African American bibliophiles, such as David Ruggles, Robert Mara Adger, William Carl Bolivar, Henry Proctor Slaughter, Edward Moorland, Arthur Spingarn, and others, and delineates the links between these men and Schomburg himself.⁶

Sinnette's book makes extensive use of primary source materials, using the Schomburg Papers at the Schomburg Center, as well as the personal archival collections of his friends and fellow bibliophiles. As many of Schomburg's papers

³ Sinnette, 1989, p. 13.

⁴ Sinnette, 1989, p. 32.

⁵ Sinnette, 1989, p. 1.

⁶ Sinnette, 1989, p. 76-85.

were destroyed after his death, Sinnette also conducted her own interviews with persons who knew and worked with Schomburg.⁷ Her work is extensively footnoted, and her "selective bibliography" includes many primary and secondary sources.

Sinnette's introduction would seem to call into question whether or not her work was objective, as she describes the book as "an unabashed tribute to a man who ... emerges as a lonely visionary of indomitable spirit".⁸ Still, on further review her book is a well-balanced portrait. Her description of Schomburg in her chapter about his work with research societies is a good example. She describes his work with the American Negro Academy as "a combination of opposites...:"

"At times he was resolute and at others he was indecisive. He displayed remarkable vision in certain instances, yet in other situations his judgment was flawed. Although he made numerous contributions to the organization's success, history records that he presided over its failure."⁹

In sum, Sinnette's biography of Schomburg is admiring but not hagiographic, and gives readers a clear picture of the man himself, his work, and his motivations; at the same time, she clearly places Schomburg in his historical, cultural, political and economic context. Her book is one of the few examples of in-depth historical research on the life and contributions of a black researcher and book collector.

Regina Anderson Andrews was born in Chicago in 1901, and moved to New York City in 1923. She had worked as a clerk in the Chicago Public Library, and anticipated no problem in being hired to work in the New York Public Library. (In

⁷ Sinnette, 1989, p. 4.

⁸ Sinnette, 1989, p. 1.

⁹ Sinnette, 1989, p. 71.

fact, although the African American population in Chicago was smaller than New York's, the Chicago Public Library provided employment for more African American library staff.)¹⁰ On her NYPL application, when asked her race Andrews' answer was that she was an American. She was asked to return to discuss her answer to this question. When Andrews, whose father was Swedish and Native American and whose mother had ancestors from India and Madagascar, again answered that she was an American, she was told "You're not an American. You're not white."¹¹ Despite this reception, Andrews was offered a junior clerk position at the 135th Street Branch in Harlem, and she accepted. Her supervisor was Ernestine Rose, a white librarian known as an advocate for African American library users. Andrews was an enthusiastic supporter of Rose's community outreach efforts, which included organizing the North Harlem Community Forum, in which W. E. B. Du Bois participated. Andrews also participated in other activities which grew out of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of black artists and writers that began in the 1920s. With Rose's permission, Andrews used the library's basement for a theater group founded by Du Bois that eventually became the Harlem Experimental Theatre. (Andrews herself wrote three one-act plays.)¹² While Andrews attended classes at the Columbia University School of Library Service, she never completed her degree. She felt that she was being denied promotional opportunities, and not being fairly compensated for her work, and she enlisted the support of Du Bois and the NAACP to intervene with the NYPL administration on her behalf. Du Bois wrote letters to various administrators, including Rose, noting that only one or two of

¹⁰ Whitmire, 2007, p. 410.

¹¹ Whitmire, 2007, p. 409.

¹² Whitmire, 2007, p. 410-411.

NYPL's forty-two branches employed any African American staff, thus unfairly limiting their opportunities for advancement. Other NAACP members also wrote letters in support of Andrews, and not long after this, in 1930, Anderson was transferred to the Rivington Street Branch and promoted to assistant branch librarian.¹³ She proved herself to be a hard worker and a very capable administrator, earning the confidence of those who appointed her. Later, in 1938, she was appointed acting supervising librarian of the 115th Street Branch – the first time an African American had been placed in charge of any NYPL branch. In 1940, she was transferred to the Washington Heights Branch, also as acting supervising librarian; in 1946 the adjective “acting” was dropped from the title, and she remained the supervising librarian of the branch until her retirement in 1967.¹⁴

NYPL's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture eventually became the location for the work of another gifted African American librarian, Jean Blackwell Hutson. Hutson was born in Florida in 1914, and as a child moved to Baltimore, MD. Academically gifted, she earned a partial academic scholarship to attend the University of Michigan, where her undergraduate major was pre-medicine. In her senior year, she transferred to Barnard College in New York City. The stock market crash of 1929 and the Depression that followed meant that Hutson had no financial support to fund four years of medical school. As she surveyed her options, she realized that teaching or librarianship were the only professions open to her; remembering her enjoyment of libraries during her childhood and beyond, she choose to attend the Columbia School of Library Science in 1935, graduating in 1936 with a Master's Degree in Library Service. When she first applied for work at

¹³ Whitmire, 207, p. 414-415.

¹⁴ Whitmire, 2007, p. 415-416.

the New York Public Library (NYPL), she was told they already had their quota of “Negroes,” since the only branch that employed African American librarians (the 135th Street Branch) was fully staffed. Later, Hutson received a job offer to replace a librarian at that branch who was going on maternity leave. Between 1936 and 1948, she worked at a variety of positions in NYPL and in New Jersey, before finally returning to the 135th Street Branch as Acting Curator of the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints.¹⁵

NYPL sent Hutson to the 135th Street Branch with marching orders to “keep the Negroes quiet” after a tumultuous period during which a previous curator had accused NYPL of neglecting and underfunding the collection; Hutson found these orders to be “insulting, objectionable, and infuriating.”¹⁶ To the contrary, she prioritized building a positive working relationship with the African American community, which she saw as the key base of support for the collection. Hutson ended up working with the collection for 32 years, and was the person most responsible for creating the administrative backbone of the Center, raising the funds to construct the physical facility that currently houses the collection, and implementing an archival preservation program within the Center.¹⁷

Vivian G. Harsh (1890-1960) was hired in 1924 as the first African American librarian in the Chicago Public Library System.¹⁸ In 1932, she became the head of the George Cleveland Hall branch. Subsequently, she began building what she named the Special Collection on the History and Literature of the Negro “as a means of providing service to the black community in Chicago. Her goal was to

¹⁵ Johnson-Cooper, 1996, pp. 30-34.

¹⁶ Johnson-Cooper, 1996, p. 38.

¹⁷ Johnson-Cooper, 1996, p. 28.

¹⁸ Burt, 2009, p. 234.

build a collection that would showcase works by African American writers, as well as other works documenting the African American experience.¹⁹ In 1988, Donald Franklin Joyce wrote an article for *The Library Quarterly* detailing the history of the Collection.²⁰ Joyce describes Harsh as being regarded as a “blue blood” within Chicago’s African American community during the 1920s, with parents who were among the earliest graduates of Fisk University.

The first significant addition to the Special Negro Collection was a collection of monographs from the private library of Charles Bentley, a prominent African American dentist and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In order to supplement that collection, Harsh obtained a \$500 grant from the Rosenwald Foundation, which enabled her to travel the United States to purchase books on “Afro-Americana” by both black and white authors.²¹ Harsh retired in 1958, leaving a collection containing approximately 2,000 monographs, as well as many volumes of African American periodicals such as *Negro Digest*, *Journal of Negro History*, *Phylon*, and *Sepia*. The collection also included valuable unpublished works, such as the collection of research notes that resulted from a WPA-funded project on the history of African Americans in Illinois; among the researchers were notable writers such as Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker. The project’s funding was cut before the book was written, leaving seventy boxes containing interview

¹⁹ Guss, 2010, p. 359.

²⁰ At the time the article was published, the collection had been renamed the Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. The collection’s current name is the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

²¹ Joyce, 1988, p. 67-68.

transcripts, organizational histories, government agency reports, biographies, and bibliographies on the subject. Joyce later became the curator of this collection.²²

In 1927, the same year that Matthews went to work at the Los Angeles Public Library, Charlemae Hill Rollins (1897-1979) joined the staff at the Chicago Public Library as a children's librarian at the George Cleveland Hall branch, where she worked under Vivian Harsh.²³ Rollins was "...one of the first [librarians] to stress pride in her black heritage. Her lifelong campaign to end the stereotyped portrayal of blacks in children's books was waged through her library work, her lecturing in children's literature at Roosevelt University, and her writing."²⁴ Rollins was a crusader, both within the Chicago Public Library and in the American Library Association, promoting children's books with a positive image of African Americans.²⁵

I could find no evidence of contact between any of these bibliophiles or librarians and Matthews; however, she certainly seems to have followed a similar path to theirs, whether or not it was because of their influence.

Although I have focused here on Matthews' predecessors and contemporaries, I would be remiss if I did not mention one African American librarian and collector who followed in Matthews' footsteps in Los Angeles: Mayme Clayton. Clayton was born in Arkansas in 1923, and raised by parents who made her aware of the achievements of African Americans such as Mary McLeod Bethune, a child of former slaves who went on to create schools for black students. It was Clayton's early search for books on Bethune that led her to become first a librarian,

²² Joyce, 1988, p. 69-70.

²³ Joyce, 1988, p. 67.

²⁴ *Something about the author*, vol. 26, p. 171.

²⁵ Joyce, 1988, p. 68.

and then a collector. She and her husband, Andrew Lee Clayton, moved to Los Angeles in 1946. Clayton went to work at the University of Southern California library in 1953, and in 1956 she went to work at the Law Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she stayed for 15 years. During that period, she tried to convince UCLA to purchase out-of-print works by notable African American authors for its new Afro American studies library, but was discouraged by the response. In 1972, she left to become the co-owner of a used book store, Universal Books, where she specialized in buying and selling books by black authors such as W.E. B. Du Bois. Clayton received her master's in library science from Goddard College in Vermont in 1975.

In the 1970s, Clayton also founded the nonprofit Western States Black Research Center to promote the preservation of black history; over the next forty years, the Center mounted a number of programs, including film festivals that allowed her to showcase her collections of black talkies and westerns. (Her film archive eventually grew to encompass approximately 1,700 films.) Clayton also collected other materials, including books. Her book collection is particularly notable because so many of them are autographed by the authors. (Particularly rare is a signed copy of the first book published by an African American: Phillis Wheatley's 1773 edition of "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.") Many scholars consider Clayton's collection to be second only to the Schomburg Center's holdings, and in fact it is stronger than Schomburg's in its materials covering the black experience in the West. Clayton often described her mission as preserving history so that "children could know that black people have done great things."²⁶

²⁶ Woo, 2006, A1.

Clayton died on October 13, 2006, just as plans were proceeding to establish the Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum in a former courthouse in Culver City. The institution opened to the public in 2010.

The goal of this thesis is to document the work of a pioneering librarian in Los Angeles, and to place her work in its proper context; my hope is that it will contribute both to library history, and to the history of African Americans in Los Angeles. In Chapter 1, I will provide some background on Los Angeles, the city where her family settled in 1907 (when she was only 2 years old), and also describe her early years. Chapter 2 will deal with her first years as a librarian at LAPL, as well as discussing LAPL's history. In Chapter 3, I discuss Matthews' experience at LAPL during World War II and afterwards, as well as her graduate work in Chicago. Chapter 4 will cover Matthews' contributions in support of intellectual freedom, through her work within the California Library Association and the American Library association. Chapter 5 will describe her efforts to build research collections of resources on African Americans. In Chapter 6, I will provide an overview and analysis of the preceding chapters. In the Epilogue, I will cover Matthews' continuing work after her retirement, as well as some of the recognition she earned for her work at LAPL and elsewhere.

CHAPTER ONE: COMING OF AGE IN CALIFORNIA

Early Los Angeles/California History

When the pueblo of Los Angeles was established in 1781, its settlers had multiethnic origins. In fact, the majority of the original settlers were of mixed heritage: African, Native American, and Spanish. Approximately a decade later, in 1792, research has shown that residents who were of African descent made up nearly 40 percent of the population of the pueblo. Although California was admitted to the union in 1850 as a “free state” where slavery was not legal, at that time the majority of white Angelenos had migrated from slave states; most supported slavery and did not welcome black residents.¹ Still, compared to the American South, California was relatively progressive on race relations. For example, California removed restrictions on admitting the testimony of non-whites in court proceedings in 1863, and also outlawed racial segregation in California schools. The state even passed an anti-discrimination law in 1893.²

During this era, the population grew dramatically. In 1876, Los Angeles was finally connected to the rest of the country by the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads. From that point, the black population of Los Angeles climbed steadily (from 2,131 in 1900; to 15,579 in 1920; to 38,898 in 1930). However, the black population never constituted more than 3.14 percent of the total population, due to the rapid parallel growth of the city overall.³ During this early period of settlement,

¹ Flammig, 2005, p. 20-21.

² Sides, 2003, p. 15.

³ Sides, 2003, p. 13-15.

residential neighborhoods in the city were relatively diverse, with African Americans living alongside ethnic Mexicans, Japanese, Italians, and Armenians. This lack of enforced racial segregation, along with the city's size and overall low population density, tended to "diffuse the racial animosity usually reserved exclusively for blacks in other cities."⁴

Matthews' Childhood and Youth

Miriam Matthews was born in Pensacola, Florida in 1905, and two years later her parents decided to move to Los Angeles because they wanted greater opportunities for their children than could be found in the South. (Matthews had an older sister, Ella Shaw Matthews, and a younger brother, Charles Hearde Matthews.) It is likely that they chose to move to Los Angeles because Mr. Matthews had a godfather (A. Dunbar) who lived in the city. Matthews' father, Reuben Hearde Matthews, Jr., was a skilled painter, who eventually went into business for himself; her mother, Fannie Elijah Matthews, ran the business with him. Fannie Matthews had trained to be a schoolteacher but gave that profession up when she married.⁵

The specific reason the Matthews family had for leaving the South was to avoid the widespread segregation that accompanied them even as they departed on their train ride out of the region. The family travelled on the Santa Fe railroad, which did not have separate "Jim Crow" cars for black passengers, but instead had a curtain that divided passengers by race; the conductors would move it depending

⁴ Sides, 2003, p. 6.

⁵ Shaw, 1996, p. 39.

on the number of passengers in each group. During their trip, the section for black passengers was overcrowded, and Matthews' father approached the conductor and asked him to move it. Reuben Matthews was light-skinned, and the conductor initially took him for a white man and treated him affably. When he arrived at the curtain, and realized that Mr. Matthews wanted the curtain moved "to give the Negroes more room, [the conductor] cursed him and wouldn't move the curtain."⁶

The Matthews family's first homes in Los Angeles were in fairly diverse neighborhoods, consisting of white native-born families, first-generation European immigrants, African Americans, Mexicans and other ethnic groups. In general, Matthews recalls having friendly relations with neighbors, with the exception of one incident that had a profound effect on her. When the movie *The Birth of a Nation* (a film which glorified the Ku Klux Klan) was released in 1915, it was advertised by lurid, racist billboard posters. The children of neighbors who were Armenian immigrants saw these posters with their caricatures of African Americans, and made fun of the Matthews children, comparing them to the offensive stereotypes depicted on the posters. Matthews' mother took Miriam with her to visit the parents of these children, where she politely but firmly insisted that they show proper respect for her children, and not look down on them because of their race.⁷

Confronting her white neighbors would have been much riskier had the Matthews family still lived in the South. In the relative freedom and security of Los Angeles, however, her mother's firm stand against bigotry made a lasting impression on Miriam. Her parents' confident attitudes about racial equality helped to build Matthews' own confidence and self-esteem in the face of racial prejudice

⁶ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

⁷ Radcliffe, p. 4-5.

and other challenges, in ways that helped her later to succeed as a professional and community leader.⁸

It was around this time that racial segregation in housing patterns began to increase. Beginning around 1910, African Americans were increasingly excluded by restrictive racial covenants from nearly all housing west of Main Street (the area originally called the "Westside"). Neighborhood associations were created to pressure white home owners to voluntarily adhere to these covenants, which prohibited them from selling or leasing their property to African Americans, Mexicans, Asians, and Jews. Housing developers added these covenants to new housing before selling it, and used the "whites only" restriction as a selling point. In some cases, they included clauses that provided that if a white homeowner were to later sell to a non-Caucasian buyer, that buyer would forfeit the property and revert to the original developer.⁹

Whereas previously the city had been relatively open and fluid in its residential patterns, these new difficult to surmount real estate restrictions began to have the effect of concentrating Los Angeles' African American population in certain neighborhoods.¹⁰ Within these neighborhoods, however, Los Angeles was distinguished from other large American cities by the relatively high level of African American home ownership. For example, in 1910, nearly 40 percent of African Americans in Los Angeles owned their homes, as compared to only 2.4 percent in New York and 8 percent in Chicago. This was likely because the geographic extent

⁸ Shaw, 1996, p. 29.

⁹ Flamming, 2005, p. 69.

¹⁰ Flamming, 2005, p. 66.

of the city lowered population density and helped keep the price of property relatively low.¹¹

Ironically, however, the pre-World War II patterns of residential segregation may have helped foster a kind of racial solidarity that would later help African Americans build power. Although on the "Eastside" African Americans continued to live alongside whites, Mexicans, Asians and other nationalities and ethnicities, they gradually began building a kind of cohesive community that allowed them "to wield a political and social influence that far exceeded their proportion of the Eastside population."¹² And there was a need for cohesiveness, since racism was a constant factor in the life of black Angelenos. During the pre-World War II period, open discrimination emerged in other arenas in addition to housing. Restaurants refused to serve African Americans; businesses as varied as bowling alleys, ice rinks, and even pet cemeteries were segregated. The police and sheriff's departments were openly racist, and often brutal in their treatment of the city's African American population.¹³

During this entire period, African Americans actively resisted the discrimination and segregation they encountered in Los Angeles, using a variety of methods; their actions ultimately had an important influence on urban policy and decision-making in the city. To some extent, they resisted by merely "making everyday choices about where to work, where to live, where to send their children to school, and where to relax at the end of the day."¹⁴ By their daily actions and decisions, they created space for themselves in the city. They also issued explicit

¹¹ Sides, 2003, p. 16.

¹² Flamming, 2005, p. 25.

¹³ Smith, 2006, p. 41.

¹⁴ Sides, 2003, p. 8.

challenges to “discriminatory employers, racist police, insensitive city councils and mayors, and obstinate white co-workers and neighbors through pickets, boycotts, protests, and organized electoral political activity.”¹⁵ They founded numerous self-help organizations, such as The Forum and the Sojourner Truth Industrial Club. By the time of World War I, chapters of the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had appeared, the latter of which scored an early victory by forcing the county to desegregate its nursing school. Faced with white-owned hotels that would not rent rooms to African Americans, they took an entrepreneurial approach, building black-owned establishments such as the Hotel Somerville (later re-named the Hotel Dunbar).¹⁶

Although the Los Angeles Times was considered by most African Americans to be relatively progressive on racial matters, African Americans also had three local newspapers: the *Los Angeles New Age*, the *Liberator*, and the *California Eagle*. Over the space of just two months in 1926, the *California Eagle* documented a number of incidents of racial bias. In October, the newspaper took on the issue of police discrimination, noting a recent incident in which two African American men were eating in a public restaurant, when Vice Squad officers entered and told the white proprietor that “unless he kept the d----- ‘niggers’ out of there they were going to close the place up.”¹⁷ The paper also reported that the police in Los Angeles were targeting the black population, such that “one-twentieth of the population furnish[es] 75 per cent of the offenders.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Sides, 2003, p. 9.

¹⁶ Sides, 2003, p. 8-9.

¹⁷ *California Eagle*, October 1, 1926, p. 6.

¹⁸ *California Eagle*, October 1, 1926, p. 6

Later that same month, the paper ran a story about an African American schoolgirl, Dorothy Turner, who had attended a religious school for several terms, when she was suddenly told there was no room for her and she should “go elsewhere with her own kind.”¹⁹ It took the intervention of a number of religious leaders to reverse the action and lift the “color bar” at this school. A month later, the paper ran a story about a decision by management at the Majestic Theatre to institute a policy of segregating patrons because “white patrons would rather that arrangement and besides the colored patrons would not or could not pay the higher prices” (in spite of the fact that other theaters did not limit African American patrons to the cheaper, inferior seats).²⁰ A few weeks later, the paper documented “Jim Crow” policies at the Starr Piano Company, which had begun requiring black customers to pay a 10% down payment, whereas white customers only had to pay 5%. This change in practice at the company led to the resignation of Louis Michel, a Jewish salesman for the company, who later alerted the newspaper to the company’s discriminatory policy.²¹

The African American community also organized politically, with some notable early success. In 1918, African American attorney Frederick M. Roberts was elected to the California State Assembly representing Los Angeles.²² Ultimately, in dealing with racial prejudice, African American Angelenos used “whatever tools ... were at hand,” including by demonstrating their own “exemplary” behavior.²³ They even used humor. Eddie Anderson came to Los Angeles in the 1930s from Oakland,

¹⁹ *California Eagle*, October 8, 1926, p. 4.

²⁰ *California Eagle*, November 5, 1926, p. 7.

²¹ *California Eagle*, November 19, 1926, p. 1.

²² Sides, 2003, p. 16-17.

²³ Flamming, 2005, p. 12.

hoping for work in Hollywood. What was supposed to be a one-off appearance on Jack Benny's radio show turned into a recurring character (Rochester Van Jones) as Benny's manservant. The character of Rochester in some ways embodied racial stereotypes, but also subtly undermined them. He freely mocked his boss, as in the following exchange:

Rochester: Say Boss, if you win the Academy Award, will you give me a raise?

Benny: I certainly will—you'll get a nice, substantial increase.

Rochester: Man, I sure wish you was a better actor.²⁴

The very act of migrating to Los Angeles was a form of resistance to racism. During the period from 1917 to 1970, approximately six million African Americans left the south and spread out to nearly every other region of the United States, in a process that historians now refer to as the Great Migration.²⁵ This population shift dwarfed both the California Gold Rush of the 1850s, in which about one hundred thousand people participated, and the Dust Bowl migration of approximately three hundred thousand people from Oklahoma and Arkansas in the 1930s. It was "the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free."²⁶ Those black southerners who came to Los Angeles joined a relatively small black population there, some of whom had lived there since the city's founding in 1781. Others arrived when slaveholders moved west and brought their slaves with them.²⁷

²⁴ Smith, 2006, p. 16-18.

²⁵ Wilkerson, p. 9.

²⁶ Wilkerson, p. 10.

²⁷ Wilkerson, p. 233.

In spite of its problems, in Los Angeles African Americans could avoid the most debilitating aspects of Southern-style racism “including ceaseless humiliation, gratuitous racial violence, poverty and spiraling debt, political powerlessness, and patently unequal educational opportunities.”²⁸ Meanwhile, in comparable northern cities, the black population was much more socially and geographically isolated, and those cities experienced waves of violent race riots between 1900 and 1919. In contrast, anti-black violence in Los Angeles was quite limited.²⁹ Most African Americans in Los Angeles were migrants from the American South, “where Jim Crow had black people by the throat.”³⁰ What they found in Los Angeles was not a city free from racial prejudice, but instead a kind of “half-free” city where patterns of everyday racism coexisted alongside increased opportunities for economic and social advancement.³¹ Their experience with the more virulent racism of the American South made African Americans in Los Angeles “*bound and determined* to keep Jim Crow out of their new home and to make Los Angeles and the West a shining example of what American might yet become.”³²

During this period, the black migrants to Los Angeles were largely middle class, although at the lower end of the financial spectrum. They certainly considered themselves middle class, in terms of their values, lifestyle and aspirations. As a group, they stressed the importance of home, family and church; they valued self-discipline and education very highly. While they recognized the reality of racism, ultimately they had great faith in the possibility of upward mobility

²⁸ Sides, 2003, p. 12-13.

²⁹ Sides, 2003, p. 12-13.

³⁰ Flamming, 2005, p. 2.

³¹ Flamming, 2005, p. 2.

³² Flamming, 2005, p. 14.

for their children, if not for themselves.³³ In many ways, Matthews' family personified these characteristics. Her family arrived in Los Angeles from Pensacola Florida on July 29, 1907, and all three children (Ella, Miriam, and Charles) graduated from Los Angeles High School. Ella went on to attend a business college, where as her sister proudly noted,

she picked the exact thing that was right for her and was at the top of her class. You know, when I say the top, I mean she wasn't in the middle, she was in the upper echelon there.³⁴

Ella went on to become a successful businesswoman; Charles Matthews became a well-respected lawyer.³⁵

Matthews' parents stressed the importance of education for their children, and were willing to resist efforts by teachers or school administrators to hold their children back. While Matthews was in the first grade at San Pedro Street School, she was reading at above-grade level. Her mother grew concerned that she would become bored with her classroom work, and wrote a note to the teacher asking that Miriam be moved into the second grade. When the teacher ignored that note, Mrs. Matthews went directly to the principal, and successfully convinced him to advance her daughter to the next grade. While Matthews recalls that she was a "great reader" who visited the library frequently, she had no childhood dreams of going into librarianship, or any particular profession, though even as a child she did know that she wanted to go to college.³⁶

³³ Flamming, 2005, p. 8.

³⁴ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

³⁵ Flamming, 2005, p. 266-267.

³⁶ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

High School & College Years

Although they lived outside its district, Matthews' parents also went to some lengths to make sure their children could attend Los Angeles High School, considered the best public high school in the city. During this period, Los Angeles' public schools were not segregated by law; however the growing use of restrictive real estate covenants in the city had the effect of concentrating African American students in certain school districts, and school administrators refused to take any steps to mitigate this de facto segregation.³⁷ Since Matthews' grandmother and uncle did live in the district, her parents registered all three children at their address so that they would be eligible.³⁸

Matthews' teachers at Los Angeles High School were all white. Matthews remembered most of her them as being "kind and unbiased," and she was encouraged by counselors to take college preparatory classes. However, she suspected her English teacher of harboring racial prejudice, particularly when she learned that he had notified all of the other students who were eligible for senior honors, except Matthews herself. Matthews acquired a copy of her transcript, and presented him with it, asking why he had not notified her that she was eligible for senior honors. He did not give her an explanation, but did acknowledge she was eligible. Looking back on that incident, Matthews expressed surprise that she had been bold enough to approach this teacher without even consulting her parents in advance, but it appears to have been the beginning of a pattern which she carried over into her career. As she put it, "later on in work, even though I wasn't what I'd

³⁷ Ruiz, 2003, p. 22.

³⁸ Radcliffe, p. 8.

call a brash, forward-type person, I always quietly said my piece when I thought something was not right.”³⁹



Miriam Matthews, 1920
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

During her early school years, Matthews observed that other students and teachers seemed to view her as someone who was always “expect[ed] to be perfect with everything,”⁴⁰ such that they always assumed she did well on all of her tests and assignments. Even when she did misbehave, her reputation was such that her teachers would refuse to believe she could be guilty of anything. In one incident in Sunday School, this worked to Matthews’ advantage:

³⁹ Radcliffe, p. 11.

⁴⁰ COHR,

I remember one time the girl in front of me, I knocked her head a little bit, I didn't knock it off, and she told the teacher. And when she told the teacher, the teacher didn't believe her. I couldn't do a thing like that. And [the teacher] didn't even ask me.⁴¹

When Matthews was a sophomore in high school, she developed a friendship with Ralph Bunche, who later became a well-known diplomat and Nobel Prize winner.⁴² Matthews herself is somewhat circumspect about the nature of the relationship, but it appears that they dated for a time. Matthews notes that on one occasion, when she was unavailable, Bunche was seen out on a date with Matthews' sister, Ella, but said that Ella was "just looking out for [Miriam]." Matthews certainly refers to Bunche with admiration, saying he was a brilliant student with a "wonderful personality."⁴³ The relationship between the two is confirmed by Matthews' brother, Charles, who noted that Bunche "used to take [Miriam] out occasionally when we were young around here."⁴⁴

After graduation, Matthews attended the University of California, Southern Branch (later renamed University of California, Los Angeles), when it was still located on Vermont Avenue. During this period, there were very few black students on that campus.⁴⁵ After two years there, she transferred to Berkeley because she wanted the independence of living on her own.⁴⁶ Her parents gave her enough money to last the whole school year, and she was required to budget carefully to make sure she did not run out. Matthews felt that was a good experience for her, in

⁴¹ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1 side 1.

⁴² COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

⁴³ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

⁴⁴ *COHRCHM*, May 13, 1973.

⁴⁵ *COHRCHM*, May 13, 1973.

⁴⁶ Radcliffe, p. 14.

terms of managing her money and making decisions on her own behalf. Matthews remembered only one negative experience that she attributed to racial prejudice while she was at Berkeley. In a Spanish class, the original instructor left in the middle of the semester, and was replaced by a substitute. The substitute professor gave her an A in the course, but the original instructor overruled him and gave her a lower grade. Matthews did not bother to protest, since she was already in the Honors Society. Other than that incident, and occasionally hearing from other black students that she should avoid certain instructors because they were suspected of prejudice, she considered her time at Berkeley to be a pleasant experience.⁴⁷ She received her Bachelor of Arts degree when she was twenty years old, in 1926. A short item in the "Social Intelligence" section of the *California Eagle* commemorates her return to the city: "Miss Ella Matthews entertained Saturday afternoon at the Morosco Theater with a matinee party and luncheon honoring her sister, Miss Miriam Matthews, U. C. '26 graduate."⁴⁸

Matthews' decision to become a librarian was not based on a lifelong aspiration, but seems to have been made almost on a whim. Before she got her Bachelor's degree, she was walking with a friend on campus, and this friend mentioned that she was either going to be a teacher or a librarian. Many people had encouraged Matthews to consider a career as a teacher, since teaching jobs were available for African American women, but Matthews knew she did not want to teach. On hearing of her friend's idea, Matthews said, "Oh, librarian, that's a nice idea." Her family tried to discourage her from this path, fearing that she would not be able to find work as a librarian, but she was determined. She spent a year in the

⁴⁷ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1 side 1.

⁴⁸ *California Eagle*, August 6, 1926, p. 10.

library school at Berkeley and graduated with a certificate in librarianship from the University of California in May of 1927. Later she found out that there was also a library school at the Los Angeles Public Library, but it didn't accept African Americans or Jews. She said later that she wished she had applied there, "and let them reject me so I could make a fuss about it."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

CHAPTER TWO: LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY

LAPL History to 1927

After Miriam Matthews graduated from the Berkeley program, she made the decision to return to Los Angeles and seek work as a librarian in the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL). She encountered an institution with a history nearly as old as the city itself. A scholarly history of LAPL has yet to be written. However, a brief history can be pieced together from biographies of LAPL administrators, annual reports, and other sources. Bernadette Dominique Soter's *The light of learning* is the most comprehensive source; although she does not provide footnotes or endnotes within the text, her acknowledgements page indicates that the work is based on several types of sources: Faith Holmes Hyers' 1936 overview of LAPL as presented to the Library Board; a series on the city librarians by John D. Bruckman published in 1973; primary sources in the library's Public Relations office and Special Collections unit; and interviews with librarians.¹

In 1844, an association called Los Amigos del Pais received a grant from the *ayuntamiento* (town council) to create a reading room, at a time when Los Angeles was still a Mexican pueblo in Alta California. Funding ran out quickly, and it was not until after California had become part of the United States, in 1856, that there was another attempt to create a reading room in the Mechanic's Institute at North Spring and Court. This reading room lasted two years, and was followed by another opened in 1859 by the Library Association. Unfortunately, the Civil War and its

¹ Soter, p. 7.

political conflicts doomed that reading room. In late 1872, the Los Angeles Library Association was formed, consisting of leading citizens, and appointed journalist John Littlefield as the first librarian of what would eventually become LAPL. Reading rooms opened in 1872 in a building on Temple between Spring and Main.²

In 1891, during the term of librarian Tessa L. Kelso, the library abolished subscription fees for usage of the collection, and also moved to the new City Hall building on Broadway between Second and Third. Kelso advocated for open shelves, and instituted a program to systematically train library employees. During the six years she was librarian, the size of the collection increased from 6,000 to 42,000; circulation increased from 12,000 to 329,000; and the number of library cards issued grew from 132 to 20,000.³

Appointed in 1900, Mary L. Jones was the first city librarian who had graduated from a library school, the New York State Library School. In order to deal with a crisis of overcrowding, Jones established a series of neighborhood reading rooms, in partnership with community groups. The first such reading room was established in 1900 in a Boyle Heights drug store, eventually becoming a full-fledged branch library (known at present as the Benjamin Franklin Branch Library). By 1904, there were eight branches and reading rooms in existence, the largest of which was the Central Avenue Branch.⁴ In 1904, annual circulation rose to 751,000, giving the LAPL twelfth rank among all American public libraries. Jones was particularly successful in attracting women users; during her tenure, twice as many

² Soter, p. 17-20.

³ Soter, p. 22-23.

⁴ Soter, p. 26-28.

women as men applied for new library cards.⁵ However, her relationship with the library board was not a smooth one. In 1903, Nora Miller, second assistant librarian and a protégé of board member Isidore Dockweiler, filed a complaint against Jones which resulted in an investigation. She was eventually exonerated, but the board increasingly seemed convinced that women librarians were prone to petty jealousies and spats. By 1905, board members began lobbying for her dismissal and replacement by Charles Fletcher Lummis. Although Jones initially refused Chairman Trueworthy's request for her resignation, organizing the support of the general public, women's organizations, and the American Library Association, her dismissal was ultimately upheld by the City Council.⁶

Jones was replaced by Lummis, a "booster, scholar and eccentric"⁷ who had made his way to Los Angeles by journeying cross-country on foot from Cincinnati. Despite his lack of library training or experience, during his tenure the library continued its impressive growth. He oversaw the move from City Hall to better quarters at Third and Hill; and then later to even larger quarters in the Hamburger Building at Eighth and Broadway. Perhaps most importantly, he created a Department of Western History Material, which amassed a wealth of materials documenting the history of California.⁸

From 1911 to 1933, the city librarian was Everett Robbins Perry, who established the basic structure of LAPL that continues to the present: a Central Library composed of specialized departments, and well-stocked branch libraries providing services to the widespread communities of the city. Perry was a graduate

⁵ Hansen, p. 332.

⁶ Hansen, p. 335-338.

⁷ Soter, p.29.

⁸ Soter, p. 29-35.

of the New York State Library School in Albany, and he had served as the Head of the Reference Department and Secretary of the Board of the New York Public Library. After Perry arrived in 1911, he oversaw the construction of six new branch libraries, including the Vermont Square Library. (The previous city librarian had secured a promise of \$210,000 from the Carnegie Foundation for their construction.) By the end of his term, there were more than forty branch libraries serving the communities of Los Angeles.⁹ In 1926, Perry hired Althea Warren, formerly of the San Diego Public Library, as his first assistant librarian and head of branches.¹⁰

Learning Librarianship at LAPL

In 1927, Matthews moved back to Los Angeles to find work. At the time, options for employment for African Americans in Los Angeles were quite restricted, particularly for women. Although jobs were plentiful, they were also limited—"jobs combining higher pay with cleaner, safer conditions and greater personal autonomy almost never went to dark-skinned people."¹¹ Across the country, even the most well educated African Americans found their job options severely restricted. In the rural South, black men and women worked primarily as sharecroppers and farm tenants. In the North, black workers had wider opportunities, although most men worked as unskilled laborers in the lowest-paid, most unstable, and most dangerous industrial jobs, and as service workers in restaurants, hotels, hospitals,

⁹ Soter, p. 35-36.

¹⁰ Boaz, p. 63-64.

¹¹ Flamming, 2005, p. 70.

and train stations. Virtually all employed African American women before World War II worked as housekeepers.¹² The situation was similarly restrictive for African American women in Los Angeles. Between 1900 and 1920, approximately 70 percent of female African American wage earners were domestic workers employed by private families or hotels. Approximately 5 percent were employed by commercial laundries, and another 5 percent were seamstresses, often working out of their own homes. A smaller percentage worked as hairdressers.¹³

This was the context when, in May of 1927, Matthews went to see assistant city librarian Althea Warren to discuss being hired as a librarian at LAPL. Warren seemed quite cordial and encouraging, and described the different library departments. However, Warren's subsequent actions seem to indicate that, at the very least, she was guilty of providing Matthews with misinformation about the employment application process. In Matthews' own words:

... [W]hen I was about to leave she asked me if I planned to take the Civil Service Exam. And I said, "Oh yes." She said it's usually given in June, gave me a post card to address to myself, and said it would save me going over to the branch to look... She said that would save me, so they would notify me as soon as the announcements were out. Well, the reason she was doing it that way was because the announcements were already out and she didn't want me to go to the branch and discover that it was almost time for the filing to close. And I'm sure it wasn't more than a week,

¹² Sides, 2003, p. 22.

¹³ Flamming, 2005, p. 71.

might even have been shorter than a week, I was going downtown ... to shop in the morning, have my lunch, and go to a movie in the afternoon, so I would have been gone all day. Naturally, my mother wouldn't have known where I was and certainly wouldn't have been able to contact me by telephone. And just five minutes before I left the house, our family physician called and asked my mother—she happened to answer the phone—if I had planned to take the Civil Service [Exam] for the public library. And she said, "Yes, but it's not given until June." He said, "I'm reading my morning paper, and this is the last day to file." ... So I went downtown to Civil Service and filled out the application form.¹⁴

Ironically, if Warren was trying to make Matthews miss the deadline for the Exam so that she would not be hired, her actions may have backfired. If Warren or other officials had expected her to have taken the examination, Matthews believed that they would have alerted the person interviewing her on the oral portion of the exam and advised her to give Matthews a low grade. Instead, after passing the written exam, she did well on her oral interview.¹⁵ Matthews approached that interview with a great deal of self-confidence, as she herself described:

The girls who were sitting ... outside in the waiting room, were all just trembling and nervous and so afraid. And finally when I got in, the woman—they only had one person; later they had three people on the oral boards—she said, "You're not afraid of me, are you?" And I said, "No, should I be?" And she said, "Well, all the others have come in

¹⁴ COHR, Tape number II, side 1, October 11, 1985.

¹⁵ Radcliffe, p. 18-19.

here in fear and trembling." And so, I guess that might have been a point to my credit too. And, you know, it's surprising, when I think back about the way I responded in certain situations when I was younger, even though I was kind of a retiring person all through my childhood and even partly through college, I just was very matter-of-fact.¹⁶

Subsequently, Matthews noted that after a library school was opened at the University of Southern California, its African American graduates routinely failed to do well on the Civil Service examination because they were given low marks on the oral examination, while white students who had ranked below them in class work managed to get better scores. Matthews believed that this was a deliberately discriminatory strategy within LAPL at the time, and the main reason she was the only African American librarian in LAPL for the first twenty years of her career; two more African American librarians were finally appointed by Althea Warren in 1947, just before Warren retired as city librarian.¹⁷

This was not the only barrier to employment that Matthews faced and overcame. While awaiting the scores from her examination, she went to see the second assistant city librarian to apply for summer work as a substitute, and was told that they intended to appoint the twenty-six graduates of the Los Angeles Public Library's own library school before they would appoint Matthews. Matthews responded, "I understood this was a city Civil Service examination, and I expect to be appointed where I appear on the list."¹⁸ This same administrator also suggested

¹⁶ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 2, side 1.

¹⁷ Radcliffe, p. 35.

¹⁸ Radcliffe, p. 20.

that Matthews “go South to do some ‘pioneer work for [her] people,”¹⁹ rather than working as a librarian in Los Angeles. Matthews politely pointed out that she would need to have some experience first, and there was no better place to get it than right here at home. Her firmness once again stood her in good stead, and on October 1, 1927, she received her permanent appointment as assistant librarian at the Robert Louis Stevenson branch, which served a predominantly white population.

The branch librarian, Reba Dwight, was both friendly and supportive, and Matthews proved to be popular with many of the white patrons, some of whom would not let any other librarian assist them when they had reference questions. One of these patrons went to meet with Althea Warren to say that Matthews was too fine a librarian not to have a branch of her own, which may or not have prompted administrators to transfer her to the Helen Hunt Jackson branch as librarian in charge in 1929. She instituted a successful book club, and the library had the highest circulation in its history during the five years she spent there.²⁰ At the time, LAPL had a public relations unit that arranged to provide librarians to do book reviews on local radio stations. Matthews was selected as one of the librarians to do this work, and reviewed books on the radio for about five years. At the time, her branch only had a small collection of works by or about African Americans, but Matthews made a point of including those works in her reviews. She describes this period as her introduction to African American history.²¹

¹⁹ COHR, Tape number II, side 1, October 11, 1985.

²⁰ Radcliffe, p. 21-22.

²¹ COHR, TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 11, 1985



Miriam Matthews, seated far right (at party for Haitian Olympic Team), 1932
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

In 1934, Matthews became the branch librarian at the Vernon Branch. According to a 1934 survey, approximately thirty-five percent of patrons registered at this branch were African American. She began organizing exhibitions by both black and white artists on a regular basis, and also displayed some of the books from the collection of William Henry Payne, who was a collector of rare books about African Americans. Matthews personally engaged in outreach to the schools, the YWCA, and other organizations.²²

In her Annual Report on the Vernon Branch for 1937-1938, Matthews reports on "co-operation ... from the following papers in the order listed: the *California Eagle*, *News Guardian* and *New Age-Dispatch*" for publication of library events. The *California Eagle* was particularly supportive, providing a regular space on the first page of their "Feature" section for Matthews' book notes. She reports that she was

²² Radcliffe, p. 25-26.

able to hire a Redlands College student to work on the library's "Negro scrap book" during the summer, noting that this would greatly aid reference service by providing "current and local material on the Negro which is not available in book form." Matthews also notes that the city's Board of Education appointed her to "a committee to plan a unit on the American Negro which will be part of the regular social studies courses in all the city high schools."²³ In her UCLA oral history interview, Matthews noted that she was both the only African American and the only non-teacher on this Committee.²⁴ Matthews saved an article from *The Library Journal* (vol. 64, no. 6, March 15, 1939) on "Some pioneer negro library workers" by Wallace van Jackson. According to this article, "by 1938 over 200 Negro librarians had completed the first year course in library science at accredited library schools in the United States and Canada."²⁵

During the time Matthews was first active in the profession, it reflected the racial segregation of the broader society. In May of 1936, the American Library Association held its conference in Richmond, Virginia, which was a thoroughly segregated state.

Although ALA had arranged with the host hotels that all delegates could use the same entrance, hotel rooms and meals were forbidden to black delegates by Virginia laws. Meetings that were part of meals were not open to black delegates, although they could attend sessions followed by meals, if they did not participate in the meals. Seating in

²³ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

²⁴ COHR, p. 27.

²⁵ UCLASC, Box 7, Folder 8.

the front right hand section of meeting rooms was to be reserved for them.²⁶

After *Library Journal* publicized these issues, the editors received numerous reader comments critical of ALA's decision to hold their meeting in Virginia; in response, ALA formed a Committee on Racial Discrimination, and in December of 1936 ALA accepted their policy recommendation that the future selection of meeting places would be "conditional upon the admission of all members to rooms and halls on terms of full equality."²⁷ Although her behavior while at LAPL had seemed to support racial discrimination, when Althea Warren was President of the American Library Association from 1943-1944, she was in favor of the Committee's sentiment in her written address to the organization as she was stepping down in 1944. Although ALA policy at the time had already been changed, Warren noted critically that even "Northern hotels enforce practically the same restrictions as those in the South," and thus that ALA was failing to "live up to our unattainable principles."²⁸

²⁶ Lipscomb, 2004, p. 299.

²⁷ Lipscomb, 2004, p. 299.

²⁸ Boaz, p. 107.

CHAPTER THREE: WORLD WAR II AND POST-WAR EXPERIENCE AT LAPL

In 1940, Matthews was made branch librarian of the Vernon and Watts branches. At the time, Vernon had just appointed four brand new children's librarians whom Matthews needed to train; having to deal with inexperienced staff while running two branch libraries was a frustrating experience for Matthews, who asked to be transferred but saw her request ignored. At this time, Althea Warren (now the city librarian) came to see Matthews, who reported that she was having a difficult time managing the two libraries while also answering research questions about African Americans from all over the country. Warren informed Matthews that "The Central Library is the research center, and you must refer all such questions there."¹

Continuing her pattern of politely but firmly standing up for herself, Matthews reminded her of what happened when Warren herself had referred a request from the War Department for "pictures and historical data on notable Negroes and events, to be used for murals in the recreation hall at March Field in San Bernardino."² Librarians at the Central Library were only able to find two pictures. Finally, Warren sent the letter to Matthews two days before the War Department's deadline, and Matthews spent her free Saturday working overtime in order to get a much larger collection of materials in the mail to meet the War Department's deadline.³ In order to help other librarians answer questions about African Americans, in 1942 Matthews also compiled and published a LAPL annotated bibliography "Books on the Negro for young people", a 3-page list of titles with their

¹ Radcliffe, p. 30.

² Radcliffe, p. 30.

³ Radcliffe, p. 30.

corresponding Dewey Decimal classifications, including both literature and biographical works about African Americans. The list is headed by a quote from Langston Hughes, which ends, "Beautiful, also are the souls of my people."⁴



Miriam Matthews on lawn of Watts Library, 1943
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

In her Annual Report for 1943-1944, Matthews section on "War Services" observes that "war and changing population trends have been responsible for a greatly increased demand at Vernon Branch for information and materials on various phases of race relations," with "both federal and local governments ... organizing programs designed for greater unity and democracy." She quotes the Detroit City Librarian, Ralph A. Ulveling, on the importance of information about race relations:

⁴ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

“The movement of populations brought on by the expansion of war industries has developed new problems. ... The need for emphasizing intercultural understanding has become particularly acute, especially in certain cities of the West Coast where an influx of Negroes has created urgent need for an aggressive educational program of understanding. ... [I]t is inevitable that libraries must share responsibility for establishing right thinking...”⁵

When the LAPL Sociology Department organized a series on the problems faced by minority groups, Matthews was instrumental in organizing their first meeting on “The Future of the American Negro,” where she spoke on a panel about “The Future of the Negro in the Arts.” She also continued the outreach efforts she had begun earlier, writing publicity materials for local papers, compiling bibliographies and organizing several exhibits by local African American artists such as Calvin Bailey, both at the Vernon Branch and at the Central Library.

In her Annual Report, Matthews also noted that librarians from Camp Haan, Fort Ord, March Field, the Air Base at San Bernardino, and the Naval Base at Corpus Christi, Texas, had sent Matthews requests for purchase lists of books, magazines and newspapers dealing with African Americans and other minorities; in addition, she assembled a large packet of photographs and accompanying biographical notes from her files for the librarian from Camp Haan to use for exhibits at the camp. Matthews paraphrases a statement by Dr. E.W. McDiarmid “on the value of building special branch collections in centers where they will prove

⁵ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

of greatest interest and at the same time serve the needs of the entire city.”⁶ Her notes also make it clear that her goal was to serve the needs of all communities; she assisted a juvenile probation officer in finding materials on preventing delinquency among children of all races. All of these accomplishments were managed in a context of staffing challenges, and what Matthews describes as the “strenuous” task of managing both the Vernon and Watts branch libraries.⁷

During World War II, the African American population of Los Angeles increased dramatically. Drawn by a war-related industrial boom, the black migrants of the 1930s and 1940s were less solidly middle class than those who arrived earlier, and this created some tensions between “old-timers” and newer arrivals. The “veterans” viewed later arrivals as “rowdy, gullible, [and] unskilled” and worried that these qualities would undermine their abilities to fight racial prejudice. With a somewhat patronizing tone, an article in the *California Eagle* encouraged the older migrants to “take an active part in training incoming Negroes from the South in basic rules of culture” and to instill in them “an appreciation for inconspicuous conduct in public places.”⁸ Matthews herself remembers thinking some of these newer African American migrants had “a chip on their shoulders,” and observed that they were often treated badly by clerks in shops (even those who were normally polite to African American shoppers). However for Matthews, the more important point was that the white migrants from the South were the ones who

⁶ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁷ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁸ Smith, 2006, p. 22-23.

stirred up trouble, since they brought their Jim Crow attitudes with them to Los Angeles.⁹

Matthews also had strong personal reactions to two other important events during World War II: the “zoot suit” riots, in which white sailors attacked (mainly) Mexican-American men, and the internment of Japanese Americans. During the zoot suit riots, Matthews was appalled to hear one of the white children’s librarians she supervised finding the situation humorous, and told her “It’s outrageous, and there’s no excuse for it and no reason for it.”¹⁰ Matthews also had patrons at the Vernon Branch who were Japanese, and was particularly affected by the circumstances of a mixed-race couple (where the woman was an American citizen of Japanese descent, and her husband was a non-citizen from Portugal) separated by the internment. Matthews noted that American citizens of Italian and German descent were not interned, and felt that it was a clear matter of racial prejudice.

Despite the population shift caused by the 1940s population migration, the geographic boundaries of black Los Angeles hardly changed, although there was a marked increase in African American resistance to racial segregation. Dozens of law suits were filed in Los Angeles against white neighborhood associations and real estate brokers. These culminated in the “Sugar Hill case” of 1946. Sugar Hill was a well-to-do white neighborhood, surrounded by the West Adams district. Some wealthier African American families were able to buy homes on unrestricted blocks of West Adams as early as 1935. In 1938, wealthy African American families began moving Sugar Hill, and in 1946 the West Adams Heights Improvement Association

⁹ COHR, p. 37-38.

¹⁰ COHR, p. 39-40.

filed a lawsuit, alleging that white Sugar Hill homeowners who sold to blacks had violated racially restrictive covenants. When a judge ruled that those covenants were unenforceable, the homeowners association appealed that decision to the California Supreme Court. The NAACP attorney, Loren Miller, argued and won that case there. Miller later joined with Thurgood Marshall and other attorneys to handle the case when the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear challenges to the 1926 *Corrigan v. Buckley* decision, which upheld enforcement of racially restrictive covenants. In 1948, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, and thereby rendered racially restrictive covenants unenforceable.¹¹ Matthews saved her copy of the American Civil Liberties Union's newsletter *The Open Forum* from May 15, 1948 reporting on the decision, with a personal annotation in pencil reading "Hurrah!"¹²

During this time, Matthews took a research course in library science at the Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Southern California, and in 1944 she published a bibliography for that course entitled "The Negro in California from 1781-1910: an annotated bibliography." In the preface, she again reiterated the problems she faced in answering patron requests for information about African Americans in California:

"Repeated requests from patrons of the Los Angeles Public Library over a period of years for information on the Negro in California indicates the need for a bibliography on this subject. Since this information is difficult to find, this annotated bibliography will make

¹¹ Sides, 2003, p. 98-100.

¹² UCLASC, Box 2, Folder 2.

certain facts on the Negro's role in California history more readily accessible to the interested layman and scholar."¹³

Further Education in Chicago

Matthews attended the Graduate Library School (GLS) at the University of Chicago from 1944 to 1945, in order to earn her Master's degree in library science. The GLS was one of the most influential institutions in library education from the 1920s to the 1950s, and until 1951 was the only U.S. institution that would grant doctoral degrees in library science. Whereas earlier schools had used an apprenticeship model to teach librarianship, the issuance of the Williamship Report by the Carnegie Corporation in 1923 led to a widespread sense that existing schools were not meeting the need for training professionals. In 1926, the Carnegie Corporation provided \$1,385,000 to develop a new type of library school.¹⁴ The goal was to establish library education "on a scientific basis and to create scientific knowledge of libraries."¹⁵ The Carnegie Corporation selected the University of Chicago for a number of reasons; other institutions were rejected for "1) not being associated with a strong university, 2) lacking a professionally-trained librarian as head of the university library, 3) being too far from a major center of population, and 4) not being considered a major center for bibliothecal resources."¹⁶

¹³ Matthews, 1944, p. i..

¹⁴ Richardson, 1978, xii-xiv, 1.

¹⁵ Richardson, 1978, xv.

¹⁶ Richardson, 1978, 44-45.

Matthews attended the GLS during a period that saw the dispersal of most of the School's original faculty due to the effects of World War II.¹⁷ The school's Dean from 1942-1945 was Carleton Joeckel.¹⁸ (Coincidentally, Joeckel had been one of Matthews' instructors when she attended the certificate program at Berkeley, where he taught a class in public administration.¹⁹ Joeckel told Matthews that her race would hurt her ability to earn promotions as a librarian; specifically, when she suggested she might like to work at the Library of Congress, he said, "Well, I know the personnel officer [at the Library of Congress] and he's as good as said that they had a policy [against hiring blacks]."²⁰ Instead, Joeckel suggested that she consider teaching in the South instead, at the Atlanta University library school. Matthews informed him that, not only had she already considered and rejected teaching as an occupation, she was also unwilling to take a job in the South. She recalled telling him, "My parents made a great sacrifice to move to California so that their children would not grow up in the segregated South, so I would be doing them a great disservice to return South to work."²¹ In continuing to try to persuade her to go to the South, Joeckel argued that people like Matthews were needed to educate and prepare the black population so as to be worthy of integration. Matthews responded,

"What about the Okies and the Arkies? What about the Kentucky hillbillies? Are they ready?" I said, "You don't need people to have an education to be ready for integration, you take them where they are."²²

¹⁷ Richardson, 1978, 277.

¹⁸ Richardson, 1978, 282.

¹⁹ COHR, tape IV, side 2, October 26, 1985.

²⁰ COHR, tape IV, side 2, October 26, 1985.

²¹ Radcliffe, p. 31.

²² COHR, tape IV, side 2, October 26, 1985.

Matthews was disappointed that the Chicago program did very little to persuade American institutions such as the Library of Congress or libraries in Europe to consider hiring and promoting well qualified African American librarians. In her thesis on *Library activities in the field of race relations* (1945), she argued that libraries should be institutions that teach individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds to work together, saying that "respect for others grows through personal contact" and fosters better racial and cultural relations more generally.²³

In 1945, Matthews returned from Chicago to the Los Angeles Public Library to work at the Washington Irving Branch. In her Annual Report for 1945-1946, Matthews discussed her efforts to publicize the work she was doing on African American history and culture there by writing articles that were published in the *Los Angeles Tribune*, *California Eagle*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel*. In the Report's summary, she noted "a steady upward swing in circulation and registration since the war's end and the return of so many veterans ... who find the library a welcome place for study, recreation, and for information on the new business they are planning to launch."²⁴ She continued to assist researchers at other institutions, such as with her work helping a program on "The Panorama of the Negro in the Fine Arts," which was organized by the University Religious Conference at UCLA as the first in a series of exhibits designed to improve race relations in Los Angeles.

Matthews' connections to African American scholars and activists were also useful, as when she was contacted by a researcher writing a biography of Booker T.

²³ Radcliffe, p. 33.

²⁴ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

Washington, who was trying to uncover information on what he described as “the Booker T. Washington-W.E.B. DuBois controversy.” Matthews knew that DuBois was in Los Angeles at that very time, and was able to put the researcher in touch with him directly to secure first-hand information about the topic. She also continued to promote the work of other unrepresented ethnic groups, such as when she organized an exhibition of works “by Joseph Chabot, a young Mexican artist.”²⁵



Miriam Matthews (2nd from right) and friends, 1946
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

In 1947, Los Angeles Public Library appointed a new city librarian to succeed Althea Warren, who had recently retired. The new city librarian, Harold L. Hamill,

²⁵ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

had been born and raised in Washington, D.C. and Kansas City, both segregated cities. Because of this, Matthews was initially very doubtful about her prospects for promotion under his administration, assuming that with his background he would harbor racial prejudice against her. She went so far as to enroll at the law school at the University of Southern California so that she would have more options in the event he proved hostile to her because of her race. However, the day before she was to pay her USC tuition, Hamill asked to meet with her. He had created a new regional system for LAPL, dividing the city into six regions with six regional librarians, in order to give the branch libraries better supervision and relieve the assistant city librarian of the impossible task of inspecting more than sixty branch libraries annually. To Matthews' surprise, Hamill offered her the position of regional librarian for the South Central region, with Vermont Square as her regional branch. This made her the supervisor of twelve branch libraries, which was a significant promotion. In light of this, Matthews decided she did not need to get a law degree after all. After her promotion was announced publicly, a committee of white citizens met with Hamill to protest the hiring of an African American librarian in this position, and he informed them that Matthews had been appointed because she was the most qualified individual for the job and that he would not be reconsidering her appointment.²⁶

During the 1940s, Matthews also collected materials documenting efforts in public libraries in other cities to educate users about race relations and minority groups. She preserved copies of annotated bibliographies such as the Chicago

²⁶ Radcliffe, p. 36-37.

Public Library's "The Negro in Books for Young People"²⁷ and the Cleveland's Public Library's "Probe your prejudices: read, think, discuss" as well as a 1943 pamphlet from the Detroit Public Library documenting that the library events of the week of June 20th were entirely devoted to the subject of black-white race relations, and promoting education and racial equality.²⁸

²⁷ It is quite likely that this bibliography was produced by either Charlemae Rollins or Vivian Harsh, but there is no attribution on the piece.

²⁸ UCLASC, Box 12, Folder 1.

CHAPTER FOUR: OVERVIEW OF WORK ON INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

In addition to her work within LAPL and the surrounding community, Matthews was also quite active in professional activities within the California Library Association (CLA) and American Library Association (ALA). She was both a chairperson and an important member of the Intellectual Freedom Committees of both organizations. During the time that Matthews chaired the CLA Committee, she made sure that the CLA membership was informed about issues of intellectual freedom and censorship.¹ CLA's Committee was formed in 1940, with the full name "Committee on Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry," four months after ALA established its committee of the same name. In 1948, during Matthews' tenure as chair of the CLA Committee, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors began requiring all County employees to sign a 4-part loyalty oath, which included: (1) a standard oath promising support of the constitutions of the United States and California; (2) a promise to not advocate or become part of an organization that advocates the overthrow of the American government; (3) a declaration of any aliases used; and (4) disclosure of support for any of the organizations targeted by the Tenney Committee.

The Tenney Committee (officially named the Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California, chaired by State Senator Jack Tenney), which predated United States Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Committee by a decade, was charged with investigating any interference with the National Defense Program in the state, or anything else that in their view made the people

¹ Wilkin, 2006, p. 4-5.

of California less physically, mentally, morally, economically or socially fit.² They soon turned their attention to authors such as Langston Hughes, Carey McWilliams, and Sherwood Anderson, setting aside for special scrutiny any textbooks with which they were associated.³ In 1947, the Tenney Committee introduced SB 1026, which would have altered the social studies curriculum in the public schools to prohibit the use of “propaganda” in the classroom. The Southern and Shasta Districts of CLA, which together made up more than half of the Association’s membership, passed a resolution opposing the bill, which it sent to the Legislature. Although the bill passed in the Senate, it was eventually defeated in the Assembly.⁴

Matthews wrote an article for ALA’s *Library Journal* describing CLA’s fight against censorship in California, where librarians were fighting both SB 1026 and another bill, SB 1027. According to Matthews, the two bills would have “practically eliminate[d] instruction in sex and marriage problems in the public schools and prohibit[ed] instruction in controversial subjects and the use and distribution of propaganda materials.”⁵ The Legislature had singled out While the *Building America* textbook series for particular suspicion, although those books had been widely used in public schools all over the country for years. Organizations such as the California Society of the Sons of the American Revolution labeled both the texts and their publishers “subversive,” and the state Senate investigated the series and the officials responsible for its adoption by the schools. The committee conducting the investigation deadlocked, but the Legislature had already cut off state funds for purchasing the series. Matthews recommended that California librarians pay

² Mediavilla, 1997.

³ Radcliffe, p. 53.

⁴ Matthews, 1947, pp. 1172-1173.

⁵ Matthews, 1947, pp. 1172-1173

attention to calls to restrict access to particular books, and make a special effort to read and recommend them “to counteract the suppressive trends” she described in the article.⁶

Not long after the defeat of SB 1026 and 1027, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors moved to require all county employees to sign a loyalty oath that included a section requiring the employee disclose support they had provided to any organization targeted by the Tenney Committee. A number of public employees, including members of the county library of Los Angeles, refused to sign the oath on the grounds that this provision violated their right to intellectual freedom. The issue for librarians was particularly fraught, as it was not clear whether or not they could be in violation of the oath for merely including in their collections (and circulating) suspect materials such as communist literature. The Board of Supervisors asserted that the county librarian, John D. Henderson, had advised his staff not to sign the oath. Adding to the concerns of librarians, the Board of Supervisors formed a committee to investigate all of the books that were purchased and circulated by the county library. This committee was viewed as a board of censors by librarians both in California and nationally.⁷

As chair of CLA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee, Matthews testified on Henderson’s behalf at a hearing before the Board of Supervisors.⁸ Working with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), she also organized support among organizations such as the American Library Association, the League of Women Voters, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the Democratic Party, and numerous

⁶ Matthews, 1947, p. 1172-1173.

⁷ Mediavilla, 1997.

⁸ Radcliffe, p. 54.

local newspapers. CLA also passed a resolution at its 50th Annual Meeting criticizing the Board's attempts to interfere with the professional collection development and intellectual freedom responsibilities of librarians. The Board eventually abandoned the idea of the censorship committee, acknowledging that County Librarian Henderson retained the right to select books for the library system. Supervisor William A. Smith said that "even books on Communism will not necessarily be banned," although he drew the line at comic books with criminal themes.⁹ However, the Board continued its support of a loyalty oath for county employees. CLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee continued its opposition to such oaths for librarians, and passed a "Resolution Protesting Loyalty Investigations" which eventually became the model for ALA's own later statement on such loyalty oaths.¹⁰

At around the same time, in her work on the corresponding Committee within ALA, Matthews was also raising the issue of providing support for librarians who were targeted because their collections contained controversial literature. Some librarians had reported being afraid to buy certain books for fear of losing their jobs. As a result of the work of the Intellectual Freedom Committee, ALA formed a foundation that would provide support for those librarians, including helping them find new positions if they did lose their jobs. As Matthews put it, "to think ... you have a big organization behind you, it makes a big difference in how you act and whether you're shy about taking a risk."¹¹ In speaking about the importance of this work, Matthews noted that it was a matter of freedom of choice for both librarians and for the public. For librarians it was about their freedom to develop collections

⁹ No library censorship, protest group assured, 1948, p. 4.

¹⁰ Mediavilla, 1997.

¹¹ COHR, October 26, 1985.

that met the needs of their users; for the public, it meant they could “read all sides of any question and then make up their minds as to whether it should be this way or that way and not have somebody say, ‘This is right.’”¹² Matthews support for intellectual freedom extended to materials that she found personally repugnant. During World War II, people came to the Vernon Branch and argued for the removal of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* from the collection, and Matthews responded that the book belonged in the library, and that those who wanted to combat its ideas should become familiar with them.¹³

¹² COHR, October 26, 1985.

¹³ COHR, October 26, 1985.

CHAPTER FIVE: BUILDING RESEARCH COLLECTIONS ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

While she was at the Vernon Branch Library in the 1930s, Matthews noticed a growing interest in African American history, literature, and race relations, and made a special effort to build the Vernon collection in these areas, often through personal donations of material she purchased with her own money¹. When she acquired the early volumes of the *Journal of Negro history*, she donated them as a gift, along with her personal files of newspaper and magazine clippings on African Americans. Her white staff members at the time later told Matthews that they were “proud of the knowledge they had acquired on Negro history at Vernon because they knew how to look up answers to questions on the subject.”²

Although many of her clippings have deteriorated so as to be unusable today, her files on Titus Alexander provide an interesting glimpse of the kinds of materials she collected, and in some cases created. In an undated essay, Matthews describes Alexander as “an outstanding authority on Negro History and Negro growth of the West.”³ Alexander arrived in Los Angeles in 1897, and became an important figure in the African American community. He was a community leader in fighting discrimination against all minority groups in public institutions. As an example, the file includes an undated petition Alexander organized addressing the United States Senate and House of Representatives, asking them to “prohibit and prevent all forms of racial discrimination in the District of Columbia, to the end that all Foreign

¹ Matthews’reference book collection still exists, as part of the Vernon Branch’s Reference collection.

² Radcliffe, p. 25-26.

³ YRLSC, Box 1, Folder 12, and Box 5, Folder 10.

Governments, our own States and the citizens thereof, will see by the example thus set that our Federal Government does not tolerate, but on the other hand condemns racial discrimination." Alexander was also active in politics, holding a number of important offices on the state and national executive committees of the Democratic Party. He organized the Democratic Luncheon Club, which became one of the largest Democratic organizations in California. He ran for office on the City Council, but was unsuccessful. In addition to Matthews' essay, the folder contains a large number of clippings of newspaper articles detailing Alexander's significant achievements. In a June 13, 1952 clipping from the *Los Angeles Tribune*, Matthews pays tribute to Alexander for his donation of his library collection to the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company (an important African-American-owned business in Los Angeles), which had committed to preserve it and make it publicly available as the Titus Alexander Collection of Negro Life and History.⁴ His work as an historian appears to have been important inspiration to Matthews work as a researcher and collector of reference materials on African Americans.

Matthews and Alexander also collaborated on research. When the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company commissioned the artists Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston to paint two murals depicting the contributions of African Americans to California history, they looked to Matthews and Alexander for guidance. Alston's panel illustrated the period of "Exploration and Colonization" (1527 to 1850); the Woodruff panel depicted "Settlement and Development" (1850 to 1949). Both panels showed the involvement of people of African descent in the state's history. For example, Bidy Mason, a woman born a slave who came with her master to Los

⁴ YRLSC, Box 1, Folder 12, and Box 5, Folder 10.

Angeles in 1851, but later won her freedom through the courts. She was a shrewd investor, who amassed a large fortune through her real estate investments. Her first property purchase was of two lots in the area now bordered by Spring and Broadway, and 3rd and 4th Streets in downtown Los Angeles.⁵

Matthews' work in this area was also valued by future LAPL librarians. Joyce Sumbi was an African American librarian hired by the County of Los Angeles Public Library in 1960 (the year Matthews retired). As a new librarian, she combed through the collection trying to find resources to serve African American children. One of the library users noticed her doing this, and approached her to say, "We see you're interested in black history. Do you know this librarian named Miriam Matthews?" When Sumbi said that she did not, the patron said, "I think you need to talk to her."⁶ Sumbi contacted Matthews, who soon became her mentor and friend. Sumbi confirmed that the Matthews' work assisted a number of researchers, as she herself had met several professors who published books incorporating information from Matthews' collections. She described Matthews' methods of collecting reference materials, saying that in addition to purchasing resources that were for sale, she would also contact African American families after people had passed away, asking them to give her any papers, photographs, or other materials that they were thinking of discarding.

⁵ How Negroes Came to the West, 1959, p. SM3.

⁶ COHRSumbi, May 19, 2009.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

My goal for this thesis has been to provide a balanced look at the life and career of a pioneering librarian in 20th century Los Angeles, and to document her many contributions both to the profession, to the African American community, to the cause of intellectual freedom, and to historical research. I also hoped to understand the context in which she worked – a context of both racial and gender discrimination which could have limited her, but which she was able to transcend through self-confidence, intelligence, and determination. Throughout, I have tried to be as thorough as possible given the information available, yet there are certainly gaps left in the picture which I hope future research (or future researchers) will fill in.

My research started with the question of what led Matthews to become a librarian; during a period when careers for African American women were quite limited, Matthews was attracted to librarianship primarily because it provided her with an alternative to teaching. While her embrace of the profession may have been more matter of fact than passionate, once she became a librarian Matthews acted with hard work and dedication to serving users. Soon after she was hired by LAPL, Matthews began advocating for the establishment of what was originally called “Negro History Week” in Los Angeles, as part of a national campaign to support recognition of black history. She developed public awareness and interest in a number of ways, by writing articles and book reviews about black writers, making radio appearances, and organizing exhibitions of black artists. She achieved rapid success locally, and thanks largely to her efforts, the city began officially observing Negro History Week in 1931. (Due to the efforts of many supporters nationwide,

the campaign for Negro History Week was widely successful, and eventually expanded so that it is observed today as African American History Month.) Matthews also assembled and made available in the branch libraries where she worked collections of resources about African Americans. As a researcher, she assembled a personal collection of books, photographs, and other information resources documenting the experience of early African American settlers and residents of California.

Matthews shared something in common with the white western librarians of the late-nineteenth century, who lived during a time when librarianship had become “an accessible occupation for the educated woman who desired both to improve society and to be self-sufficient.”¹ Like them, she was an educated daughter of a middle class family. Unlike most of them, though, she was African American and a near native of the West, having arrived in Los Angeles when she was a toddler.² These earlier Progressive-Era librarians believed that “libraries had the power to eradicate ignorance, foster good government, and create responsible, intelligent citizens.”³ Similar beliefs seem to have informed Matthews’ work much later in the Los Angeles Public Library. Like them, she was a trailblazer who worked alone and charted her own path through unfamiliar terrain.

By any reasonable standards, Matthews was a consummate professional librarian. When viewed in the context of widespread racial prejudice and limited career opportunities for African American women in particular, her accomplishments during her career are even more exceptional. Like Regina Andrews in NYPL,

¹ Passet, 1994, p. xiii.

² Passet, 1994, p. 17.

³ Passet, 1994, p. 81.

Matthews had to fight for promotional opportunities; once promoted, she eventually earned the respect of most of her patrons (of all races), colleagues, and administrators. As the only black librarian in LAPL for most of her career, Matthews was truly a pioneer; as such, she faced both overt and covert racism repeatedly, without backing down and without ever internalizing any sense of inferiority. Her leadership style could be described as leading by example; she worked hard and got things done, and eventually her accomplishments earned her recognition and promotion.

In 1977, when she was asked to reflect on her most important achievements, Matthews listed them in this order: first, her “leadership in opposing censorship and promoting the cause of intellectual freedom locally and nationally;” second, her research on the history of African Americans in California; and third, her “fight against race prejudice in the Los Angeles Public Library system (and elsewhere).”⁴ She believed that her success “made it easier for those who followed,” including a number of African American principal librarians within LAPL and one managing librarian, Loyce Pleasants.

Like Schomburg, Hutson, Harsh, and Rollins, she identified a need among library users for information about the contributions of African Americans; this motivated her to create collections to support research on and to document the many contributions of people of African descent. Working with a limited budget, she was created such a reference collection while still early in her career, and continued to build on it all the way through to her retirement. As a researcher herself, she documented the hidden history of African Americans in California and Los Angeles;

⁴ Radcliffe, p. 81.

her work also helped other researchers to acknowledge the previously unappreciated contributions of African Americans in the West.

In addition to that, Matthews promoted free speech and intellectual freedom through committee work within both CLA and ALA, at a time when such work was not without risk. The fact that Matthews ranked her impressive accomplishments as a researcher and fighting prejudice in LAPL behind her work opposing censorship and promoting intellectual freedom indicates that Matthews viewed her work in a broader context, in which the most important goal was justice and freedom for all citizens.

The last research question I hoped to examine was whether there were any tensions between Matthews' role as a public librarian providing general information services, and her role advocating for the needs of black library users. If there were any tensions, I found no signs of them. Matthews' white patrons were frequently among her most loyal champions, and her white colleagues were proud of the knowledge they gained from her efforts.

Matthews cited as her primary life influence her "parents' training, aid and support at all levels, particularly my mother's encouragement, which gave me confidence in myself."⁵ In reflecting on her career and life, it seems appropriate to allow Matthews to have the last word:

"I greatly appreciate having learned early in life to stand on my own two feet, to form my own opinions, to stick by my principles, and to speak up for what I thought was right."⁶

⁵ Radcliffe, p. 81.

⁶ Radcliffe, p. 81.

Areas for Further Research

Matthews' work on intellectual freedom deserves further study, in part because it was one of her proudest accomplishments, but also because it was part of a broader fight for civil liberties during the 1940s and 1950s. It would likely be rewarding to research how Matthews' involvement in organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) influenced her thinking and priorities in this work. In addition, with some notable exceptions, the challenges faced by African American librarians – and their responses to those challenges – during the period Matthews was active are not well documented in published research. More study is needed on the extent to which they coordinated their work on similar projects.

I have only briefly touched on Matthews' support for the arts and artists; this was a significant part of her life, and she amassed a noteworthy art collection with a focus on works by African American artists. The role of organizations such as the League of Allied Arts in promoting recognition of the work of these artists is worthy of further examination. Expanding on this, it would be interesting to explore the contributions of local African American political, civic, and social organizations – particularly those formed and led by women – as a method for both networking and building power. Another area that deserves further exploration would involve looking at the connections between Matthews and other African American professional women, such as early pioneering educators like Bessie Bruington Burke.

Finally, the Los Angeles Public Library own scholarly history is yet unwritten, looking at both the leadership and the experience of its rank-and-file librarians and

support staff, serving the ever-changing population of one of the nation's largest cities.

EPILOGUE

Post-Retirement Activities

In 1996, Matthews moved to Washington State to be close to her nephew, Charles H. Matthews, Jr., and his family. She died there on June 23, 2003, at the age of 97.¹ Between her retirement in 1960, and her move to Washington, Matthews did not slow down much if at all. A 1975 *Los Angeles Sentinel* article details a partial list of committees and organizations in which Matthews was involved: the Los Angeles County Youth Commission, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Intercollegiate Christian Council, the Los Angeles Negro Art Association, the Community Health Association, the Los Angeles County Tuberculosis Association, the National Youth Administration, the California Citizenship Education Advisory Council, the Los Angeles Community Coordinating Councils, and the Los Angeles Bicentennial Committee's History Team.²

As a member of the Los Angeles Bicentennial Committee, Matthews played a key role in getting the city of Los Angeles to formally acknowledge the multi-ethnic origins of its founding members. At a 1975 event organized by the Black Heritage Team (of which Matthews was co-chair), Matthews told the audience, "It is a sad commentary when the names of these black families – Antonio Mesa, Manuel Carnero, Luis Quintero, Jose Moreno – were omitted from many history books."³ Because of her research and hard work, there is a plaque at El Pueblo de Los

¹ Oliver, 2003.

² Miriam Matthews blazes trail in library profession, 1975, p. C2.

³ Christmas, 1975, p. A2.

Angeles State Historic Park listing all of the original city founders by name, race, sex, and age (26 blacks, 16 Indians, and two whites).⁴



Miriam Matthews with plaque honoring the founders of Los Angeles, May 16, 1982
Credit: Charles H. Matthews, Jr.

County of Los Angeles Public Library librarian Joyce Sumbi also described the breadth of Matthews' activism, including her work on the Bicentennial Committee for the City of Los Angeles.⁵ In addition, Sumbi related how Matthews supported many African American artists by working with an organization called the League of Allied Arts. Among other activities, this group organized to provide a venue for Langston Hughes to present a play when he came to visit Los Angeles. Matthews also supported artists by organizing exhibits, buying their work, and even paying

⁴ Oliver, 2003, retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jul/06/local/me-matthews6>

⁵ COHRSumbi, May 19, 2009.

their bills and buying them art supplies when they could not afford them.⁶ A *Los Angeles Sentinel* article from 1994 described her collection at that time as consisting of more than 500 pieces of art, including sculptures, paintings, drawings, and prints from artists such as Alice Gafford, Herman “Kofi” Bailey, Elizabeth Catlett, and Charles White. Matthews attributed her altruism to early advice from her mother:

“My mother used to tell us that when you stop to help somebody who needs, you’re not losing anything. And even if they just say thank you, you’ve gained something. I’m so happy that I had a mother like that who trained us so well for life.”⁷

After her retirement, Matthews expanded her work collecting historical photographs documenting the experience of African Americans in the West from the 1860s to the 1940s, eventually building a very significant collection. Photographs of African Americans in California from the period before 1900 are particularly rare, since commercial photographers considered them to have little resale value. These photographs were used in exhibitions at the Natural History Museum (1969-1970), the California Museum of Science and Industry (late 1970s), and the California Museum of Science and Industry (1984). The latter show included over 300 photographs from Matthews’ collection, making it the largest public exhibition supported by her collecting efforts.⁸ Earlier in her career, Matthews had noticed during her personal research that institutions like the Bancroft Library in Berkeley and the Huntington Library in Pasadena, which were noted for their photograph

⁶ COHRSumbi, May 19, 2008.

⁷ Mitchell, 1994, p. C5.

⁸ COHR, tape number VI, side 2, November 11, 1985.

collections, had very few photographs of African Americans. After she retired, she first acquired photographs from the Mason-Owens family, an important pioneering African American family in Los Angeles. As she became exposed to more photographs, she realized their significance:

“So I began realizing that pictures ... make a real good history. I mean, a story ... because you can see how they looked and how they dressed and so many things that just describing in words wouldn't do, and it would attract the attention of people who were either young or not the ones who would want to read a lot of text.”⁹

The bulk of Matthews' collected photographs were donated to the UCLA Library by her nephew, Charles H. Matthews, Jr. The collection (Collection 1889) has been processed, though there is no finding aid as yet, and consists of 30 archival boxes.

Awards & Recognition

In 1977, Matthews was appointed to the California Heritage Preservation Commission, where she led efforts to have a number of African American cultural institutions declared historic monuments. In recognition of her work, the Los Angeles Historical Society established an annual *Miriam Matthews Award*.¹⁰ In 1982, Matthews was the only Southern Californian to receive one of ten awards of merit presented by the California Historical Society at its annual meeting. Her citation noted her “distinguished career with the Los Angeles Public Library; ... the role she played in securing a permanent archival program for the city; ... her contributions to the city's bicentennial celebration; ... her efforts through several decades to

⁹ COHR, tape number viii, side one, February 12, 1986.

¹⁰ Hines, v. 2, p. 757-759.

preserve and publicize California's black history and ... her service on the California Heritage Preservation Commission and the California State Historical Records Advisory Board."¹¹ A 1983 *Los Angeles Times* article describes her work documenting California's black pioneers, such as Peter Ranne (a member of the first trailblazing party to cross the Sierra Nevadas into California), the majority of the founding members of the Pueblo de Los Angeles in 1781 who were of black ancestry, and Beulah Woodard, the first black artist to be presented in a one-person show at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1935.¹²

Matthews continued to receive recognition for her contributions posthumously. In 2004, the Hyde Park Branch of the Los Angeles Library was dedicated to Matthews, and renamed the Hyde Park Miriam Matthews Branch Library in her honor.¹³ In 2012, Matthews was honored by the California Library Association, becoming one of the first ten inductees into their California Library Hall of Fame. The Hall of Fame "honors the historical significance and lifetime achievement of the many librarians, library workers and supporters who have helped promote and improve library services in California."¹⁴ Matthews was recognized for her work collecting and making accessible resources on black history, as well as her work promoting intellectual freedom.¹⁵ She joins other California library luminaries such as Zoia Horn, Carma Leigh, and Lawrence Clark Powell.

¹¹ State Historical Society cites retired librarian, 1982, p. F6.

¹² La Ganga, 1983, p. F1.

¹³ Hyde Park dedicates library to Miriam Matthews, 2004, p. A4.

¹⁴ <http://www.cla-net.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=406>

¹⁵ <http://www.cla-net.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=448>

APPENDIX

Chronology

1781: The city of Los Angeles founded by settlers of mixed racial backgrounds

1850: California admitted to the union as a "free state"

1872: Los Angeles Library Association formed

1873: John Littlefield appointed as librarian by Los Angeles Library Association's Board of Trustees; reading room opens to the public

1896: *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalizes "separate but equal" facilities in interstate railroad transportation, paving the way for "Jim Crow" laws and segregation

1905: Matthews born in Pensacola, Florida on August 6

1907: Matthews family moves from Pensacola to Los Angeles

1912: Los Angeles city attorney issues "Shenk rule" supporting the right of business owners to discriminate

1922-1924: Matthews attends University of California, Southern Branch (which later became UCLA)

1926: Matthews earns a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley

1927: Matthews earns a certificate of librarianship from UC Berkeley, passes the Los Angeles Civil Service examination, and is hired as LAPL's first credentialed African American librarian (first at Jefferson Branch, next at Vermont Square Branch, and finally at Robert Louis Stevenson Branch, where she served as librarian from 1927-1929)

1929-1934: Matthews appointed as librarian-in-charge at LAPL's Helen Hunt Jackson branch, and begins advocating for "Negro History Week"

1931: The City of Los Angeles establishes "Negro History Week"; Los Angeles City ordinance limiting African American usage of swimming pools during certain hours is overturned by the Court

1933: Los Angeles City Librarian Everett Robbins Perry dies; former Assistant Librarian Althea Warren succeeds him

1934-1944: Matthews appointed Branch Librarian at Vernon Branch Library

1940: Matthews works for six months as an Exchange Librarian, New York Public Library

1940-1944: Matthews is also made Branch Librarian at Watts Branch Library

1944: Matthews publishes paper for USC on "The Negro in California from 1781-1910: An Annotated Bibliography."

1944-1945: Matthews attends University of Chicago and earns her Master's degree

1945-1949: Matthews serves as Branch Librarian at Washington Irving Branch Library

1946: Matthews joins the CLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (serving as Chair, 1946-1948)

1947: City Librarian Althea Warren resigns; Harold L. Hamill becomes new City Librarian

1947-1951: Matthews serves on ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee

1948: ALA's Library Bill of Rights Revised; U.S. Supreme Court issues *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision, ending judicial enforcement for restrictive racial covenants

1949-1960: Matthews becomes regional librarian for LAPL, supervising twelve branch libraries in LAPL's South Central region

1954: *Brown v. Board of Education* declares separate but equal schools to be unconstitutional, beginning the end of Jim Crow laws

1960: Matthews retires from LAPL

1977: Governor Edmund G. Brown appoints Matthews to California Heritage Preservation Board and the California State Historical Records Advisory Board

1979: Matthews plays a major role in establishing an archive program for the city of Los Angeles

1981: Matthews succeeds in efforts to have a monument erected honoring all of the multiethnic founders of Los Angeles

1988: California State University, Dominguez Hills establishes the annual Miriam Matthews Award, for individuals who make outstanding contributions in the field of African American history and culture

2003: Matthews dies in Mercer Island, Washington

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Abbreviations used in footnotes:

COHR Interview of Miriam Matthews (UCLA Center for Oral History Research)

COHRCHM Interview of Charles Matthews (UCLA Center for Oral History Research)

COHRSumbi Interview of Joyce Sumbi (UCLA Center for Oral History Research)

Radcliffe Interview with Miriam Matthews (Radcliffe College)

UCLASC Miriam Matthews papers (Collection Number 1804). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

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