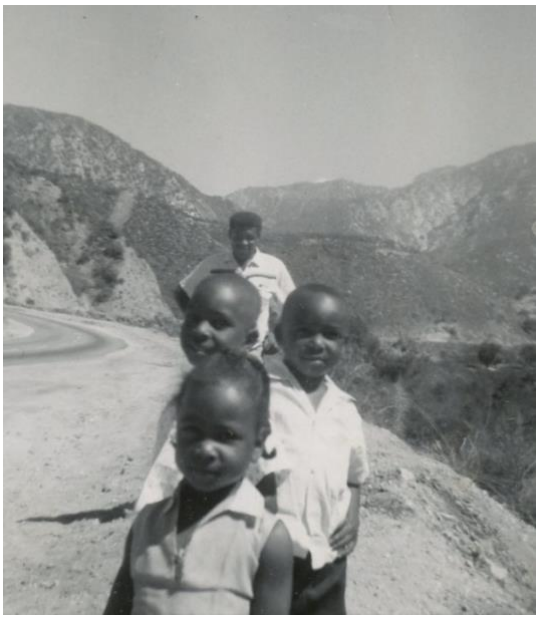
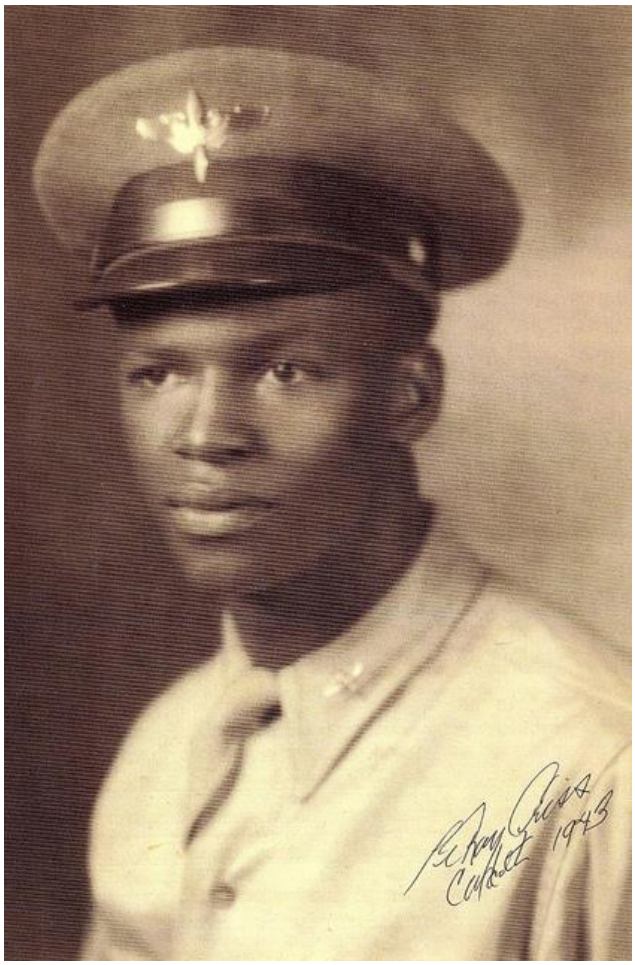
History of African Americans in Monrovia, CA

by Susie Ling, Monrovia Historical Museum

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History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again. - *Maya Angelou*

EARLY PIONEERS AND THEIR LEGACY

Monrovia is unique in that it had a settlement of African Americans by the 1880s in this Los Angeles suburb. This nucleus grew as Monrovia became a destination in America's "Great Migration," where millions of Blacks sought better opportunity away from the South. Although California came into the Union as a "free state," African Americans did deal with segregation and racial discrimination.

John Isaac Wesley Fisher (1857-1940) came to California in 1875 and the Fishers are seven generations in Monrovia. John was a blacksmith in Missouri who came to the attention of E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin. Lucky Baldwin of today's Arcadia had a reputation of loving horse racing. Baldwin saw a winner in John and hired him for life.

At some time, John went to Denver to marry Annie and their son, Julian, was born there. The family returned to the Baldwin Ranch when Julian was four. John's blacksmithing skills were in great demand and he started a shop on 111 E. Orange (now Colorado) in 1903 and bought more land on White Oak Avenue (now Foothill), near Shamrock, in 1908.

Julian Fisher (1896-1976) is the first African American male to graduate from Monrovia High School in 1914. He played the violin for the school's orchestra and at his mother's Bethel AME Church. He played baseball semi-professionally. His grandson, Timothy Fisher, remembers, "Julian was crazy about baseball. When we were kids, we knew that if you wanted to find him in the summer, he would be at Recreation Park if there was a game. If the Monrovia Merchants were winning, you could get a dime out of him for ice cream. If the Merchants were losing, stay away from him (laughs)."

Julian married Gladys Hall and had eleven children. Julian worked many jobs around Monrovia, but is best known as the first African American peace officer by the 1940s. Timothy Fisher added "He knew everyone and had grown up in the community. And he liked to talk to people; he was very personable. My father and uncles were the same way; they loved to talk for hours." Julian's sons, Robert and Jack, also served as auxiliary officers. Many Latinos remember Julian as "El Pescador".

Robert, Gladys, and Jack Fisher

Lucky Baldwin sent his trusted blacksmith, John Fisher, to recruit a group of African American artisans from the Carolinas. An 1886 *Los Angeles Herald* snippet reads, "E.J. Baldwin has sixty Negroes en route from North [sic] Carolina to work on his great ranchos." The 1900 census (as there is no 1890 census) shows seven Black men from various states living on the Baldwin Ranch in Arcadia. The 1900 Monrovia Township census shows 57 African Americans with 20 born in North and South Carolinas. 24 are children born in California after 1886. This 1900 census includes McCoys, Morris, Grahams, McQueens, Moores, Hollins, and Adams. Some of Baldwin's recruits lived in Duarte.

John B. Adams was born a slave in South Carolina or Mississippi near 1860. His name had been Hicks Bundy but he wanted a "stronger" name. He kept the "B" for Bundy as a middle initial. He came West with his wife, Adeline, and two children, Elliot and Sarah or Sally. In Monrovia, the couple would have four more: Phillip, Madie, Celia, and Frank. Celia is the mother of one of Monrovia's favorite sons, Leroy Criss, a Tuskeegee Airman in World War

II. Leroy learned to fly at the Foothill Flying Field in Monrovia.

John B. Adams was a skilled agricultural innovator. His grandchildren said, “Grandfather would bud and graft different plants. We had a tree in our backyard in Monrovia that produced oranges and grapefruits.” John purchased land lots starting in 1892 near Charlotte (now, Canyon) and Falling Leaf (now Huntington). The first lot was given to found the Shiloh AME Zion Church with Reverend Henry Hollins presiding.

Shiloh AME Zion Church still stands at 1023 S. Canyon. The current sanctuary dates to 1915. Catty Morris, Reverend Hollin’s sister and the mother of Adeline Adams, did much of the initial fundraising for Shiloh.

Jack Hollins Fulks was born at Monrovia Hospital in 1942, and is the son of Lonnie and Anna Mae Hollins Fulks, the grandson of William and Lucy McQueen Hollins, and the great-grandson of Reverend Henry and Mary Hollins.

Mrs. Marugg identified Jack’s aptitude for music in kindergarten at Huntington Elementary, a school designated for African and Mexican American children. Principal Almera Romney assigned Jack to play the clarinet for Huntington’s orchestra. Jack eventually graduated from USC in music and became a professional tenor saxophonist. Every Sunday, Jack plays the saxophone at Shiloh AME, although he now lives 25 miles away. The two palm trees in front of the church were planted by his mother. He said, “I can still hear Mom’s alto voice coming down the aisle at church… This is the legacy that was handed to me.”

COMMUNITY LIFE SOUTH OF THE TRACKS

It was in the 1910s that the African Americans and Mexican Americans of Monrovia became segregated south of the tracks. Housing was restricted between Myrtle and Shamrock, and south of the Pacific Electric tracks (built 1903) on Olive Avenue. “Blacks and Mexicans were like brothers and sisters,” said Julius Parker.

Betty Fisher Thomas, granddaughter of Julian Fisher, remembers growing up in the south-side of town in the 1940-50s, “[W]e had everything in our community. We didn’t want for much. You could go to the Lyric Theater and sit with your friends. We had people who were wonderful seamstresses. They even had a Black quilting club. There were the Masons and the Eastern Stars. We were a self-contained community with barbers, construction workers, carpenters.” Thomas remembers that the land lots south of Huntington Drive were large. “Everybody kept livestock. We had chicken, ducks, a pigeon cage, rabbits, and then every now and then, a turkey. The Durams had two cows and four pigs. Everybody had a garden on Cypress and Cherry.” Home ownership was high on Walnut, Almond, Maple, Huntington, and south.

Some African Americans came to Monrovia to escape outright harm in Jim Crow South. Some women came west alone. Bob Bartlett’s grandfather, George Gadbury, was quoted to say, “I’ll return to Mississippi when they pave the streets with gold.”

Jessica Blount Valentine remembers her sharecropping parents during the Depression, “In Mississippi, we didn’t have anything fancy. It makes me cry to remember, but one Christmas, my parents shared a box of raisins amongst us four children. But we were never hungry.” When the Blounts came to Monrovia, Jessica’s father found work in the foundry and her mother became a domestic servant. Within a year, her parents drove back to Mississippi in a brand new Oldsmobile to pick up the children they had

temporarily left in Prentiss. Grandma Candis and Uncle Earl also came West on Route 66.

Julius Parker described change in Monrovia, "To get to Huntington School [in the 1930s], I would cut through orchards of peaches and oranges. I knew all the Blacks in Monrovia then. When I came home from the Army, I didn't know a lot of the Blacks in Monrovia. They had built a lot of houses in vacant lots for G.I.s. I qualified and it only cost $6000."

"Daddy always had two jobs at the same time," remembers Larry Spicer. Bartlett said of construction workers, "Blacks could get into the Hod Carriers and Laborers Union. In those days, the workers would haul loads of cement from the mixer to plaster walls. They would go back and forth with these heavy loads. I don't know how those guys did it all day long. There were also lathers, plasterers, brick masons, and some carpenters."

Men found positions in the automobile, janitorial and aerospace industries, and as entrepreneurs to support their families. Gene Washington Sr. came from Savannah after his military service and was a glass engineer for Aerojet and a professional drummer working in Hollywood. "My uncle had a dry cleaners and Mr. Hollaway opened a barber shop on Huntington Drive," remembers Atlas Bullock. There grew real estate businesses, groceries, restaurants, and service stations.

In Monrovia, many Black women worked as domestic servants for White families north of Foothill Boulevard, and in Bradbury, Arcadia, San Marino, and Sierra Madre.

The African American churches are a critical element in this community history. Shiloh AME Zion Church was founded in 1886; the Second Baptist Church was founded in 1902; and the Bethel AME Church was founded in 1919. There were and are smaller predominantly-Black churches including Gethsemane CME, Seventh Day Adventist, and a Holiness Church. Some African Americans were members of Immaculate Conception, the Catholic Church.

The Second Baptist Church was established on Duarte Avenue (now Royal Oaks) by pioneers including Willy and Pinky Watkins. Monrovia's Second Baptist Church received a generous five hundred dollars from the First Baptist Church of Monrovia. SBC was led by prominent leaders, including Lt. Colonel Allen Allensworth, G. Godfrey Bailey, and Dr. William LaRue Dillard. In turn, SBC helped Bethel AME fundraise.

Pioneers Willy and Pinky Watkins of Second Baptist

African Americans in Monrovia had their own chapters of NAACP, Junior NAACP, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. In the 1910s, a graduate of Oberlin College, Anna H. Jones, started a women's club in Monrovia. The Anna H. Jones Club still encourages educational achievement as does the Monrovia-Duarte Black Alumni Association, incorporated in 1999.

There were also a lot of sports through the decades. Starting in the late 1950s, there were some fierce Monrovia versus Duarte tackle football games at Huntington Elementary each Thanksgiving. "We started at eight in the morning and went to sundown," remembers Mikey Montgomery. There were some other tensions between the youth of Monrovia, Duarte and Pasadena.

Monrovia south of the tracks changed rapidly in the 1960-70s. Desegregation began. The redevelopment of Huntington Drive and the construction of the 210 Freeway also displaced much of the African American community. The 210 Freeway cut through the African American communities in Pasadena and Duarte as well.

RESTRICTIONS AND SEGREGATION "WITHOUT SIGNS"

Jessica Blount, who was born in Prentiss, said, "At Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte (MAD) High School in the 1940s, I was selected for the Girls' Glee Club. I was the only Black of the fifteen or so girls. For the Christmas program, the Girls' Glee Club was supposed to be angels for this pageant. But the teacher didn't want a Black angel. So she must have thought about it and she had me sing a solo from the back. She just didn't know how to deal with having a Black angel." Jessica continued, "We could go into a restaurant to take out a sandwich, but we knew we were not welcomed to sit. Nobody told us but we knew. The businesses had no signs – unlike Mississippi. Monrovia Plunge was segregated; we could swim only on Mondays. Later, they allowed us to swim on Thursdays too. There was segregation in Monrovia. But there were no signs. In Mississippi, the signs said 'No Colored.' But in Monrovia, you knew."

Vivian Fisher, born in Monrovia, remembers an earlier time, "You didn't have to go to the South to see "White Trade Only" signs, Monrovia had them. They would be right in the window mostly in the eating places." In 1934, African American George Caldwell ran for City Council on a platform to remove the "White Trade Only" signs. Caldwell cited that such restrictions were against California law. He lost the election.

Bobby Bartlett, also born in Monrovia, tells his story, "When I was in the ninth grade, I had a friend named Keith; Keith was Caucasian. After school one day, Keith said, 'Let's go to Ben's and play pinball.' Ben's was a popular eating place. We went in and had so much fun on that pinball machine. I had never played pinball and I was just delighted. The next day, I said, 'Let's go back to Ben's and play pinball machine again.' And Keith said, 'I'll tell you the truth. They told me never to bring you in there again.' He was hurt. I was humiliated. I didn't do anything wrong. I was just too dark. It was a terrible indignity."

Bartlett continued, "The African American community in Monrovia was very segregated. If you were caught outside this area when it got dark, the police would cruise by and say 'Where are you going, boy? Come over here.' If I got stopped by the police, I would not tell my mom. I didn't understand racial profiling then."

Beverly Price Caldwell, one of eight children, remembers her sister joining a library contest in the early 1960s, "Diane read the most books but they gave the prize to someone else. She was devastated. I remember her coming home crying. She had worked very, very hard and they knew she had won. A lot of the racism was unspoken. You just deal with it in however way you could deal with it."

Most residents of African, Mexican, or Asian American descent can tell similar stories. Housing was red-lined, work opportunities were limited, and schools were segregated then. Even Live Oak Cemetery has a section for Blacks and Mexican Americans.

Lyric Theater and the Plunge had racial restrictions.

And from the early days also were community leaders who fought against social injustice – through legal channels, through proactive civil disobedience, and through other means. Betty Fisher Thomas remembers the popular department store that wouldn't let people of color try on clothes, "A group of Black women got together and asked their employers to boycott McBratney's. McBratney's didn't give in. Lawyer Johnson from Pasadena NAACP came to talk to the folks in Monrovia. People decided it was time to get rid of the racial restrictions in Monrovia. Isaac Epperson was president of the Monrovia NAACP for a long time."

THE STORY OF HUNTINGTON ELEMENTARY

Actually, Monrovia Unified School District was not segregated in its first thirty years. In 1907, Charlotte Avenue School – on the corner of today's Canyon Boulevard and Huntington Drive – was built; the name changed to Huntington Elementary in 1928. It was in the mid-1920s that White children living in that southeast Monrovia neighborhood would successfully transfer to other schools.

The education at Huntington Elementary subsequently deteriorated. Mary Gadbury Carr came to semi-rural Monrovia in 1926 and was quoted to say, "Once I got out of Huntington School, I found out we [Blacks] weren't prepared for anything. It just at that time wasn't a very good school. After they took the White kids out, they couldn't care less." Mary graduated from Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte (MAD) High in 1938 along with three other African American students. She also said, "You could be in class with somebody and they wouldn't speak to you. You didn't take part in any school activities."

In 1934-35, Monrovia became the grounds of a significant legal battle in the history of California's segregated education. Julius Parker remembers, "Huntington School was a tall two-story building made of red bricks. The day after the [1933 Long Beach] earthquake, there were bricks that had all shaken out. It couldn't be safe with half the bricks on the ground. I was about nine years old myself. Our parents decided that it was too dangerous. The parents wanted Monrovia to look into it and repair the school. But there were some arguments. So some of our parents wouldn't send us to school. A couple of parents even spent a night or two in jail. It was to show that the Blacks were serious and were willing to do what had to be done. They went to court."

Milton and Estella Smith of Plum Avenue (now Los Angeles Ave) refused to send their four children to the structurally damaged school. He was arrested for their children's truancy and sentenced to five days in jail. Twelve other Black parents joined Smith's civil resistance. Parker continued, "My mother was a fighter. She had been a school teacher [in Oklahoma]. As we couldn't go to Huntington, we went to the various homes of Black women – including my mother – and they were doing the best they could to teach us. We never got any school credit for that. Finally, they let us integrate into other schools while Huntington was being rebuilt. My sister and I went to Santa Fe School."

With Los Angeles NAACP attorney Thomas L. Griffith, Smith, along with Frank and Mary Clark Adams and others, sued the Monrovia school board. Frank was John B. Adam's son. Facing eminent loss, Monrovia turned around and rebuilt Huntington Elementary and thus, prolonged its history of segregation.

In 1949, Almera Romney became principal of Huntington Elementary. Through sheer determination, this woman fought odds and did her best for "her kids" at Huntington Elementary despite second-hand books and equipment. Romney's highest priority was building a strong diverse faculty. Timothy Fisher said, "When we went to Clifton Junior High which was integrated, the Blacks from Huntington did not fall behind academically. I credit Mrs. Romney for that. Mrs. Romney encouraged us even as we moved into high school; she was quite something."

Romney's 5th graders in 1946

Richard Markham was a student in the mid-1950s too, "I went to Huntington Elementary with Blacks and Latinos. I was having fun. I didn't know there was racism."

With race riots at the high school, Monrovia Unified School District finally closed Huntington Elementary in 1970 and bused out all its children – decades after 1946 *Mendez v. Westminster* and 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*. The grounds for Huntington Elementary became subdivided to house the MUSD Administration Building, Canyon Oaks High School, and Julian Fisher Park.

MONROVIA'S BLACK MOVEMENT

By the 1950s and 1960s, international attention on the civil rights movement in the American South heightened Monrovia's awareness of its own racism. "Our teenage son begged us for permission to go to the South and march," said a concerned parent. There were Monrovians who joined the Black Panthers in other cities. Interestingly, it was a Japanese American, Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, who served as an assistant to Martin Luther King and became a gay activist; Kuromiya was in Monrovia's Class of 1961.

Mickey Montgomery graduated in 1961, and he remembers "annual race riots" at the high school. His neighbor, Gene Washington, graduated the following year and said, "There was a wall right outside the administration building. Only seniors could sit on that wall during lunch time or breaks. But Black students never sat on the wall. A couple of other guys and I wanted to sit on that wall one lunch period. The White students were shocked. The principal called us into his office and asked if we were trying to start trouble. We said, 'No, we're seniors. And we have the right to sit on that wall.'" Some of these African American students decided to make an even stronger statement against *de facto* racial segregation. Washington said, "As Black and White students rarely socialized – except in sports, we decided to have an integrated party. It was at my house. Some White parents went beserk and went to the principal." Police patrolled the neighborhood that night. Tim Fisher remembers, "The football coach told all the players that if they went to the party, they wouldn't play next week's game. Some went anyways."

Tim Fisher graduated in 1968, "By the time I came along, there were more integrated parties. Still, I had gone to [White] friends' homes after which I was asked to leave by the parents or by a very embarrassed friend. I asked this White girl to the prom and she said yes. But three days later, she told me she couldn't go; her father said no."

March 1969 saw more racial fighting at Monrovia High. The students of the Afro-American Association continued to be frustrated at the lack of social opportunity. Chaos was encouraged by the presence of the White supremacist organization on campus. John Parker, said, "One day, fighting just broke out at lunch. It was tense until 1971. There were certain unwritten rules: Blacks could not be quarterbacks; Blacks could not go north of Foothill Boulevard without being harassed. The Blacks and Whites would hang out at different sections of the school". Larry Spicer added, "There were no Black teachers, no Black bus drivers, no African American history in the curriculum. The issues that were going on all over the country were finally coming to Monrovia."

BSU Executive Committee 1970

Julius Parker exclaimed, “In the 1960s, I had three children at Monrovia High School. In 1969, we had massive race riots and they had to close the school. Afterwards, I was one of the parents who would go to the school and monitor the cafeteria. I would rather miss a day from work than miss a child.”

“Liberation schools” were held in garages. Near 1969, Black teens established an informal social club they called the CRIPs. There was no affiliation with the LA-based gang, but there was a desire to be more. “There were about thirty of us. It was a nice little group. We would plan different things like taking kids to the beach. We did dances. We didn’t have a teen center so we would party in my aunt’s garage. We didn’t know anything about gangs. My parents would never let us join had they suspected any bad behavior. Our group died out after a couple of years. We did have a jean jacket with an emblem. It read ‘Crips, born to raise hell,’” said Larry Spicer.

Students, parents and District officials forged new directions. Black faculty was hired including those who taught African American studies. Rodney Hooks was Senior Class President and Roy Elder was the ASB President in 1968; Joannie Gholar (Yuille) was the first Black female ASB President in 1971-72.

By 1969, a Black Student Union (BSU) was established at Monrovia High. In 1971-72, the students found an effective conduit for change: the BSU Choir. Beverly Price Caldwell remembers, “The Choir was very popular and they won contests. It put Monrovia on the map. They were featured in the newspapers. It was a good thing and a strong thing. The boys wore Afro-centric *daisheikes* and the girls wore outfits made of African cloth. My sister, Diana, played the piano and had the largest Afro hair. Can you imagine? The whole BSU Choir was in my mother’s living room for rehearsals. When they rocked, our house would rock. We, the little kids, thought the house would fall over (laughs).”

Bernice Washington spoke of other change, “I was outspoken. One time, I went down to the bank on Myrtle Avenue to get a loan. A single woman who worked with me had gotten a loan. But I couldn’t get a loan because I had a husband. It was ridiculous. I took all our money out of that bank.” Ms. Washington concluded, “There were more racial problems in California than I saw growing up in Georgia. I could work in department stores in Georgia even though I couldn’t ring the cash registry. I never knew communities that wouldn’t even have Blacks in it - like Arcadia, Sierra Madre, and Alhambra.”

Job Resources and Education Center, established in June 1968, did much to find mainstream job opportunities for Blacks.

African Americans moved into more civic participation. In 1956 and 1958, Michael Cherry, an electrician, ran for City Council and lost narrowly. In 1969, real estate agent, Jack Mix Jr., ran a close race for City Council. In 1972, Mimi Mency of Fig Avenue, became the first elected African American in Monrovia when she joined the school board. Robert Bartlett was the first to be elected to Monrovia City Council in 1974. He served as mayor between 1976-78 and 1988-2001. Clarence Shaw (2009-2013) and Larry Spicer (2013-) have served City Council.


Robert T. Bartlett

This story does not end. In the 1970s, African Americans moved north of Foothill Blvd. Drugs and gangs took a toll on the community after the 1980s. Young people dispersed following educational and professional opportunities. The 1992 L.A. Riots and the more recent incarceration rates of young Black men remind us that racism remains real. The ethnic dynamics of the San Gabriel Valley has shifted as the populations of Latino and Asian Americans increase. Globalization has significant consequences on local jobs and fiscal stability. But Monrovia knows that their history of working together for their community is their strength and heritage.

AUTHOR'S THANKS 谢谢

In 1968, there was a powerful documentary film entitled *Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed*. Community leader, Betty Fisher Thomas, describes the lost history of Monrovia, "Mrs. Elmira Lang Enge (1896-1981) was a historian. She would go to City Council meetings. She was a very intelligent person. When I was about eighteen, I sat at Mrs. Enge's one Saturday and saw all these news clippings and everything about Monrovia that Mrs. Enge had saved. She was very organized… When Mrs. Enge died, they came in and threw everything away. It all got thrown out… I don't know what happened to [my grandfather Epperson's] files on Monrovia NAACP. We didn't understand how significant they were. There was so much history."

One of the goals of ethnic studies is to reclaim some of this "lost" history. In 2014-15, I was privileged to interview about two dozen African American Monrovians. Their sincere generosity is overwhelming. I am humbled to tell some of their stories.

I'm deeply appreciative of a circle of benevolent colleagues including Steve Baker, Marvin Inouye, Dr. Mary Ellen Romney MacArthur, Roy Nakano, Jimmy O'Balles, Peter Ostrye, Dr. Paul Price, Dr. Leland Saito, and Ralph Walker. Great thanks also to friends with the Monrovia Library, Monrovia Historical Museum, Monrovia Historic Preservation Group, Monrovia Latino Heritage Society, and the Monrovia-Duarte Black Alumni Association. These community activists remind me that we are always indebted to those who came before us and responsible for those who will come after us.

This is our history. To lose an honest understanding of our shared heritage of diversity is not only scientifically illogical, it compromises our courage to build better communities.

Susie Ling, Associate Professor of History and Asian American Studies
Pasadena City College

PHOTOGRAPH CAPTIONS

Cover top: Second Baptist Church was on Duarte Avenue (now, Royal Oaks) between 1904 and 1924. Photo courtesy of Betty Fisher Thomas.
Cover left: From left to right, good friends Dorinda Parker, Jessica Blount, Christine Hall, and Arlene Fisher on Maple Avenue between California and Shamrock near 1942. Photo courtesy of Jessica Blount Valentine.
Cover right: Janet, Sam, Larry with Uncle Tim Spicer going on a fishing trip to Crystal Lake in the San Gabriel Mountains in the mid-1960s. Photo courtesy of Larry Spicer.

Front inside cover top left: Gene Washington was a jazz musician and a glass engineer at Aerojet. Circa late 1950s in a Pasadena club. Photo courtesy of Gene Washington, Jr.
Front inside cover top right: Leroy Criss in 1943. Grandson of pioneer John B. and Adelaine Adams, Leroy Criss (1925-2008) was a Tuskeegee Airman in World War II.
Front inside bottom: Huntington Elementary's first grade circa 1942-43. Photo courtesy of Cecilia Mejia Romero.

Back inside cover top: Beautician's union and friends in late 1960s including Erlene Edwards, Thelma Adams, Lindsay Phillips, and Bernice Washington. Photo courtesy of Bernice Washington.
Back inside cover bottom: Monrovia's 1971-72 Black Student Union Choir. Photo courtesy of Beverly Price Caldwell.

Back cover top: Blacksmith John I.W. Fisher (1857-1940) with son, Julian Fisher (1896-1976) circa 1900s. Photo courtesy of Betty Fisher Thomas.
Back cover bottom: African American youth including many of Julian Fisher's children and their spouses near 1943. Photo courtesy of Betty Fisher Thomas.

A more extensive version of this study – with footnotes and references – is housed at the Monrovia and PCC libraries, as well as the Monrovia and Duarte historical museums.