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Trailblazing Black Librarian in the Golden State:
The Legacy and Accomplishments of Miriam Matthews, 1905–2003

By Claudia M. Horning

ABSTRACT: This article traces the career and legacy of California's first accredited Black librarian, Miriam Matthews, who worked at the Los Angeles Public Library 1927–1960. Despite the obstacles of discrimination, she created a career path others have followed, she built collections for and about African Americans, and she built an extensive image collection of Black Los Angeles, now at UCLA Library Special Collections along with her papers. She was also active in the state and national library associations, where she fought for intellectual freedom. The article places her in the contexts of other Black bibliophiles, the racial atmosphere in Los Angeles in her era, and the institutional history of the Los Angeles Public Library.

KEY WORDS: Miriam Matthews; Black librarians; African American archival collections; Los Angeles Public Library; intellectual freedom activism.

INTRODUCTION

Miriam Matthews was remarkable for the 1930s and '40s, as a Black woman who stood up for what she thought was right—and made things happen.¹ Matthews was the first credentialed African American librarian in California; she worked 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 have supported the work of many other historians.

Soon after she was hired by LAPL, Matthews began advocating for the establishment of what was originally called “Negro History Week” in Los Angeles. 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, and thanks largely to her efforts, the city began officially observing Negro History Week in 1931. (Due to the efforts of many supporters nationwide, Negro History Week was eventually expanded, and is observed nationally today as Black 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,

The author wishes to express her deep gratitude to her thesis advisor, Professor Mary Niles Maack, as well as to Susan D. Anderson, History Curator and Program Manager at the California African American Museum, both of whom gave her invaluable advice and encouragement on her research on Miriam Matthews.

¹ This article is based on the author’s MLIS thesis: Claudia Maureen Horning, “Trailblazing Librarian in the Golden State: A Look at the Life and Career of Miriam Matthews,” master’s thesis, UCLA, 2012.

photographs, and other information resources documenting the experience of early African American settlers and residents of California. 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 City Historical Society established an annual Miriam Matthews Award, and in 2004 the Hyde Park branch of the Los Angeles Public Library was renamed for her.² In 2012, she was one of ten librarians inducted into CLA's inaugural California Library Hall of Fame.³

Despite her many achievements, Miriam Matthews has not received as much recognition as she deserves. But in the Summer of 2010, the UCLA Library received a photograph collection donated by Walter L. Gordon Jr. and William C. Beverly Jr.⁴ 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 (now Resource Acquisitions & Metadata Services) was tasked with describing the individual photographs so that they could be digitized and made available online.⁵

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

² D. C. Hines, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1993), 2:757–59.

³ See <https://www.cla-net.org/page/448>.

⁴ Walter L. Gordon Jr./William C. Beverly Jr. Collection (Collection 2270), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁵ Most of the collection is available online: <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002311rn>

his own interest in documenting the African American experience in Los Angeles through photographs was at least partially inspired by her pioneering work collecting photographs and other resources on Black history. 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 in this admirable woman was piqued.

This article will explore the role played by Miriam Matthews in promoting research on and access to the history of African Americans in California (particularly her work promoting resources related to African American history and culture in the context of the time period in which she operated.) In addition, it discusses 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.) Finally, she left a significant collection of resources accessible to researchers: her papers that record her accomplishments,⁶ and the photographs of the Black community in Los Angeles that she collected.⁷ Within the collection of her papers is Matthews's LAPL annual reports, bibliographies, and other notes that are very helpful in illustrating her day-to-day work and organizational approach. Her penciled annotations on several documents provide a sense of her as a person, because they indicate her interest in issues of the day, such as the fight against housing discrimination. The papers collection includes Matthews's files of newspaper clippings on African American history, but unfortunately their deteriorated condition makes them nearly unusable. Original newsprint clippings (now housed in protective folders) are so fragile as to

⁶ The archival collection of Miriam Matthews Papers (Collection Number 1804) is available at the UCLA Library Special Collections. Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁷ Miriam Matthews Photograph Collection (Collection 1889). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California Los Angeles. This Open Access collection is available online here: <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/z1418fnd>

render them nearly illegible. Other clippings had been copied, and the non-archival quality paper that was used had darkened considerably. The photograph collection that Matthews assembled consists of over 1,500 images, primarily black and white photographs, documenting African American history in Southern California, covering the period from the late eighteenth century to the 1980s. Of particular interest are the photographs documenting the founding of Los Angeles, African American stagecoach drivers (and other professions), African American churches and charitable organizations, and Black entertainers, politicians, and business owners. Both of these resources are invaluable as evidence of Matthews's formative experiences, professional work, and personality and character. In addition to her papers and the photograph collection, 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.⁸

Other helpful sources on Black Angeleno history and on Miriam Matthews specifically include the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, both of which 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.⁹ Unfortunately, it was digitized in a way that makes it very difficult to either browse the issues chronologically or to 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*.

⁸ Interviews with Miriam Matthews, Black Women Oral History Project, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, 1977–1981 (hereafter abbreviated as Radcliffe); Interviews with Miriam Matthews, conducted 1985–1986. UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 2004. Available from <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/Browse.do?descCvPk=29329>. (Hereafter abbreviated as COHR).

⁹ Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/caleagle>.

As for secondary resources, *Bound for Freedom* by Douglas Flamming and *L.A. City Limits* by Josh Sides paint a clear picture of what life was like for African American Angelenos during the relevant time period, illustrating 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, are very readable and highly recommended to anyone interested in this period of Los Angeles history.¹⁰ Scholarly works on the history of the Los Angeles Public Library are also elusive: B. D. Soter's *The Light of Learning* is very informative, but its lack of footnotes and references undermines its reliability as a source. A 2017 article by Debra Gold Hansen explores the professionalization of public librarianship during the Progressive Era (1890–1910) and her use of LAPL as a case study provides an interesting view of changes in the library profession pre-dating the period of Matthews's career.¹¹

PREDECESSORS AND CONTEMPORARIES

Miriam Matthews's work as a collector of material on African American history should take its place with other, better-known Black bibliophiles in the United States.

Perhaps the most well-documented Black collector and bibliophile in the United States was Arthur Alfonso Schomburg (1874–1938). In response to his fifth-grade teacher's declaration that Blacks had “no history, no heroes, no great moments,” and to the racism he experienced

¹⁰ Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); R. J. Smith, *The Great Black Way: L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African-American Renaissance* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

¹¹ Bernadette Dominique Soter, *The Light of Learning: An Illustrated History of the Los Angeles Public Library* (Los Angeles: Library Foundation of Los Angeles, 1993); Debra Gold Hansen, *Library Wars: The Making of Librarianship at the Los Angeles Public Library, 1890–1910*, at: *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society* 1 March 2017: 1 (1): 97–125. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5325/libraries.1.1.0097>, A more recent work on LAPL's history, Susan Orlean, *The Library Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), focuses on the two arsonists at Central Library, but also traces administrative changes over the years.

personally, Schomburg spent many years researching and documenting the global experience and contributions of people of African descent, building up a valuable personal library that eventually formed the basis for the well-known Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City.¹² In addition to his collecting work, 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.¹³

Other African Americans, both scholars and lay persons, followed, setting out to document the contributions made by Black people, in the United States and beyond.¹⁴ They experienced discrimination first-hand and had to press against racial barriers to advance their careers, but they left a legacy.

Regina Anderson Andrews wrote “American” as her race on her job application at the New York Public Library, only to be told by her interviewer, “You’re not an American. You’re not white.” Despite this reception, Andrews was offered a junior clerk position at the 135th Street Branch in Harlem, where she supported community outreach efforts and organized cultural activities.¹⁵ Her career advancement as a librarian, however, required the intervention of W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP.¹⁶ In 1938, Andrews was appointed acting supervising librarian of the 115th Street Branch—the first time an African American librarian had been placed in charge of any NYPL branch. She retired in 1967.¹⁷

¹² Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile & Collector* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 13.

¹³ Sinnette, 32.

¹⁴ Sinnette, 1, 76–85.

¹⁵ Ethelene Whitmire, “Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews and the New York Public Library” *O* 42, no. 4 (2007): 409–11..

¹⁶ Whitmire, 414–16.

¹⁷ Whitmire, 415–16.

Another gifted African American librarian, Jean Blackwell Hutson, with a 1936 Master's Degree in Library Service, had to start as a substitute librarian at the NYPL because 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 substitute temporarily at that branch. 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. There, she worked with the collections for thirty-two years, largely responsible for creating the administrative backbone of the Schomburg Center, raising the funds to construct the physical facility that currently houses the collection, and implementing an archival preservation program within the center.¹⁸

Vivian G. Harsh (1890–1960) was hired in 1924 as the first African American librarian in the Chicago Public Library System. In 1932, she became the head of the George Cleveland Hall branch. There, she began building what she named the Special Negro Collection "as a means of providing service to the Black community" in Chicago. Her goal was to build a collection that would showcase works by African American writers, as well as other works documenting the African American experience. To supplement the 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. She retired in 1958, leaving a collection containing approximately 2,000 monographs, as well as many volumes of African American

¹⁸ G. Johnson-Cooper, "African-American Historical Continuity: Jean Blackwell Hutson and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture," in *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, ed. S. Hildebrand (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company, 1996), 28, 30–34,

periodicals, valuable unpublished works, interview transcripts, government reports, and work by notable Black writers.¹⁹

I could find no evidence of contact between any of these bibliophiles or librarians in the East and Miriam Matthews. However, she certainly seems to have followed a similar path to theirs, whether or not it was because of their influence, marking her as a pioneer librarian and collector on the West Coast. Here, others followed her lead.

One African American librarian and collector who followed in Matthews's footsteps in Los Angeles was 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, and then a collector. After moving to Los Angeles in 1946, Clayton went to work at the University of Southern California library in 1953; in 1956 she moved on to work at the Law Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she stayed for fifteen 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 library's response. In 1972, she left to become the co-owner of a Los Angeles 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, her center mounted a

¹⁹ D. F. Joyce, "Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library," *Library Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1988): 67–74. The collection's current name is the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

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 rare books. 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."²⁰ The resources she collected formed the basis for the collections in the Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum in Culver City. This facility closed and in July 2020 its collections, now named the Mayme Agnew Clayton Collection of African American History and Culture, were acquired by Cal State Dominguez Hills, where they are currently being re-cataloged.²¹

The goal of the present article is to document the work of Miriam Matthews as 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. The five sections that follow will, first, provide some background on Los Angeles, the city where her family settled in 1907 (when she was only two years old), and also describe her early years. The next will deal with her first years as a librarian at LAPL in the context of that library's history. The third discusses Matthews's experience at LAPL during World War II and afterwards, as well as her graduate work in Chicago. The next covers Matthews's contributions

²⁰ E. Woo, "A Champion of Black History; Librarian Mayme Clayton, Who Scoured Stores, Attics, and Even Dumps to Amass a Prized Collection that She Kept in Her Garage, Has Died," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2006, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times: 1881–1937.

²¹ Press release available here: <https://news.csudh.edu/clayton-collection/>. Editor's Note: Other local Black History archival collections not mentioned in this article include the Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Collections at California State University, Northridge (<https://www.csun.edu/bradley-center>) and the Shades of LA Photo Collection of over 7000 photographs with accompanying oral histories at the Los Angeles Public Library (<https://tessa.lapl.org/pc10>).

in support of intellectual freedom through her work within the California Library Association and the American Library Association. The final section before the Conclusion will describe her efforts to build research collections of resources on African Americans.

COMING OF AGE IN CALIFORNIA

Race and Los Angeles 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, 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 Euro-American settlers from elsewhere in the U.S. 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 the late nineteenth century, Los Angeles was finally connected to the rest of the country by the Southern Pacific (in 1876) and Santa Fe (in 1885) railroads. Between 1900 and 1930, 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 African American population did not constitute more than 3.14 percent of the total population during this period, due to the rapid parallel growth of the city overall.³ During the early period of settlement, residential neighborhoods in the city were relatively diverse, with African Americans living in racially mixed neighborhoods. This lack of enforced racial segregation, along with the city’s size

¹ Flamming, 20–21.

² Sides, 15.

³ Sides, 13-15.

and overall low population density, tended to “diffuse the racial animosity usually reserved exclusively for Blacks in other cities.”⁴ It is in this early period that the Matthews family arrived in Los Angeles.

Matthews’s Childhood and Youth

Miriam Matthews was born in Pensacola, Florida, in 1905; 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, and a younger brother, Charles.) Matthews’s father, Reuben Hearde Matthews Jr., was a skilled house 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 Their specific reason for leaving the South was to avoid the widespread segregation that accompanied them even on their train ride out of the region. The family traveled 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 on the number of passengers in each group. During their trip, the section for Black passengers was overcrowded, and Mr. Matthews approached the conductor and asked him to move the curtain. 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 Matthews wanted the

⁴ Sides, 6. Editor’s Note: See supporting evidence and analysis in Patty R. Colman, “John Ballard and the African American Community in Los Angeles, 1850–1905,” *Southern California Quarterly* 94, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 161–92.

⁵ S. J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 39.

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 and 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 Miriam. When the movie *The Birth of a Nation* (a film that 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’s 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 her own confidence and self-esteem in the face of racial prejudice 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

⁶ Interview of Miriam Matthews, COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

⁷ Interview with Miriam Matthews, Radcliffe, March 14, 16, 17, 22, 1977, pp. 4–5.

⁸ Shaw, 29.

covenants from nearly all housing west of Main Street (the area originally called the “Westside”). 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’s African American population in certain neighborhoods.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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. 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.¹¹

During this entire period, African Americans actively resisted the discrimination and segregation they encountered in Los Angeles, using a variety of methods. 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.”¹² By their daily actions and decisions, they created space for themselves in the city. They founded numerous self-help

⁹ Flammig, 66.

¹⁰ Sides, 16.

¹¹ Smith, 41.

¹² Sides, 8.

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. 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 renamed the Hotel Dunbar).¹³

Although the *Los Angeles Times* was considered by most African Americans to be relatively progressive on racial matters, African Americans also founded 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.” 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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ 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 [prefer] that

¹³ Sides, 8–9, 16–17.

¹⁴ *California Eagle*, October 1, 1926, 6.

¹⁵ *California Eagle*, October 8, 1926, 4.

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).¹⁶ 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 percent down payment, whereas white customers only had to pay 5 percent. This change in practice at the store led to the resignation of Louis Michel, a Jewish salesman for the company, who later alerted the newspaper to the store’s discriminatory policy.¹⁷

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 a Los Angeles district.¹⁸ Ultimately, in dealing with racial prejudice, African American Angelenos used “whatever tools ... were at hand,” including by demonstrating their own exemplary behavior.¹⁹ They even used humor. Eddie Anderson came to Los Angeles in the 1930s from Oakland, 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.²⁰

¹⁶ *California Eagle*, November 5, 1926, 7.

¹⁷ *California Eagle*, November 19, 1926, 1.

¹⁸ Sides, 17.

¹⁹ Flamming, 12.

²⁰ Quoted in Smith, 16–18.

The very act of migrating to Los Angeles was a form of resistance to racism. In spite of its problems, African American Angelenos 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.”²¹ 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.²² Most African Americans in Los Angeles were migrants from the American South, “where Jim Crow had black people by the throat.”²³ 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.²⁴ 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.”²⁵

During this period, many Black migrants to Los Angeles considered themselves middle class, reflected in their values, lifestyle, and aspirations. 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 for their children, if not for themselves.²⁶ In many ways, the Matthews family personified these characteristics. Miriam’s family arrived in Los Angeles from Florida in 1907, and all three

²¹ Sides, 12–13.

²² Sides, 12–13.

²³ Flamming, 2.

²⁴ Flamming, 2.

²⁵ Flamming, 14.

²⁶ Flamming, 8.

children (Ella, Miriam, and Charles) graduated from Los Angeles High School. As adults, Ella developed into a successful businesswoman; Charles became a lawyer; and Miriam a librarian.²⁷

The 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. When 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.²⁸

High School & College Years

Although they lived outside its district, Matthews’s parents also went to some lengths to make sure their children could attend Los Angeles High School, considered the best 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.²⁹ Since Matthews’s grandmother did live in the Los Angeles High district, her parents registered all three children at that address so that they

²⁷ Flamming, 266–67.

²⁸ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

²⁹ V.L. Ruiz, “We Always Tell Our Children They Are Americans’: *Mendez v. Westminster* and the California Road to *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *College Board Review*, 200 (2003): 22.

would be eligible to attend that school.³⁰ Her 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 call a brash, forward-type person, I always quietly said my piece when I thought something was not right.”³¹

³⁰ Radcliffe, 8.

³¹ Radcliffe, 11.



Figure 1: Miriam Matthews, 1920
From *Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection*

During high school, Matthews noticed that other students and teachers seemed to view her as someone who was always “perfect with everything,” and assumed she did perfectly 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. 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. 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 her 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.”³² The relationship between the two is confirmed by Miriam’s brother, Charles, who noted that Bunche “used to take [Miriam] out occasionally when we were young around here.”³³

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.³⁴ After two years there, she transferred to Berkeley because she wanted the independence of living on her own.³⁵ 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 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.³⁶ 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

³² COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1 side 1.

³³ Oral history interview with Charles Matthews, conducted 1973. UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 1984, May 13, 1973. (Hereafter referred to as COHRCM).

³⁴ COHRCM, May 13, 1973.

³⁵ Radcliffe, 14.

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

Matthews entertained Saturday afternoon at the Morosco Theater with a matinee party and luncheon honoring her sister, Miss Miriam Matthews, U. C. '26 graduate.”³⁷

Matthews’s decision to become a librarian was not based on a lifelong aspiration, but seems to have been made almost on a whim. Before she completed 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 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.”³⁸

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.³⁹

³⁷ *California Eagle*, August 6, 1926, 10.

³⁸ COHR, October 11, 1985, tape 1, side 1.

³⁹ Soter, 7.

In 1844, when Los Angeles was still a Mexican pueblo in Alta California, a reading room was established, but it was short-lived. Other reading room attempts followed after California had become part of the United States. In late 1872, the Los Angeles Library Association was formed by leading citizens; it would eventually become LAPL.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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 20,000.⁴²

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.⁴³ In 1904, annual circulation rose to 751,000, giving the LAPL twelfth rank among all American public library systems. Jones was particularly successful in attracting women users; during her tenure, twice as many women as men applied for new library cards.⁴⁴ However, her relationship with the library board was not a smooth one. In 1903, Nora Miller, second assistant librarian and

⁴⁰ Soter, 17–20.

⁴¹ Editor's Note: See "The Historian's Eye," *Southern California Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 256–58.

⁴² Soter, 22–23.

⁴³ Soter, 26–28.

⁴⁴ D.G. Hansen, "At the Pleasure of the Board: Women Librarians and the Los Angeles Public Library, 1880–1905," *Libraries & Culture* 34 no. 4: 311–46.

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, a “booster, scholar and eccentric”⁴⁵ with no library training or experience. 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.⁴⁶

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 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, with the monetary support of the Carnegie Foundation. By the end of his term, there were more than forty branch libraries serving the communities of Los Angeles.⁴⁷ In 1926, Perry hired Althea Warren, formerly of the San Diego Public Library, as his first assistant librarian and head of branches.⁴⁸

Learning Librarianship at LAPL

⁴⁵ Soter, 29.

⁴⁶ Hansen, 335–38.

⁴⁷ Soter, 35–36.

⁴⁸ M. Boaz, *Fervent and Full of Gifts: The Life of Althea Warren* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1961), 63–64.

In 1927, when Matthews moved back to Los Angeles to find work, 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.”⁴⁹ 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 tenant farmers. 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, and train stations. Virtually all employed African American women before World War II worked as housekeepers.⁵⁰ This held true in Los Angeles, as well. 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.⁵¹

This was the context when, in May of 1927, Matthews went to see Althea Warren, the assistant city librarian, 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’s 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

⁴⁹ Flamming, 70.

⁵⁰ Sides, 22.

⁵¹ Flamming, 71.

to look... She said...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, 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.⁵²

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, she was rated highly on her oral interview, and also scored well on the written exam.⁵³ 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

⁵² COHR, Tape number II, side 1, October 11, 1985.

⁵³ Radcliffe, 18–19.

her career. Two more African American librarians were finally appointed by Althea Warren in 1947, just before Warren retired as city librarian.⁵⁴

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."⁵⁵ This same administrator also suggested that Matthews "go South to do some 'pioneer work for [her] people,'"⁵⁶ 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 in 1929 to the Helen Hunt Jackson branch as librarian in charge. She instituted a successful book club, and the library had the highest circulation in its history during the five years she spent there.⁵⁷ At the time, LAPL

⁵⁴ Radcliffe, 35.

⁵⁵ Radcliffe, 20.

⁵⁶ COHR, Tape number II, side 1, October 11, 1985.

⁵⁷ Radcliffe, 21–22.

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.⁵⁸



Miriam Matthews, seated far right in flowered dress (at party for the 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 35 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, a collector of

⁵⁸ COHR, tape number II, side 1, October 11, 1985.

rare books about African Americans. Matthews personally engaged in outreach to the schools, the YWCA, and other organizations.⁵⁹



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

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’s

⁵⁹ Radcliffe, 25–26.

book notes. She reports that she was 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 in 1938 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."⁶⁰ In her UCLA oral history interview, Matthews noted that she was both the only African American and the only non-teacher on this committee.⁶¹ She saved a 1939 article from *The Library Journal* on "Some Pioneer Negro Library Workers." 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."⁶²

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 the front right hand section of meeting rooms was to be reserved for them.⁶³

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, the organization formed a Committee on Racial Discrimination, and in December of 1936 ALA

⁶⁰ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁶¹ COHR, 27.

⁶² Clipping: Wallace van Jackson, "Some Pioneer Negro Library Workers," *The Library Journal* 64, no. 6 (March 15, 1939), in Miriam Matthews Papers (Collection Number 1804), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA (hereafter, UCLASC), Box 7, Folder 8.

⁶³ C. E. Lipscomb, "Race and Librarianship: Part I," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 92, no. 3 (2004): 299.

accepted its 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.”⁶⁴ Although Althea Warren’s behavior while at LAPL had seemed to support racial discrimination, when she was President of the American Library Association, 1943–1944, she seemed to support 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.”⁶⁵

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. Dealing 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 (then in the position of 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.”⁶⁶ Continuing her pattern of politely but firmly standing up for herself, Matthews reminded her of what happened when Warren herself had referred to Matthews a request from the War

⁶⁴ Lipscomb, 299.

⁶⁵ Boaz, 107.

⁶⁶ Radcliffe, 30.

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.”⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ In 1942, to help other librarians answer questions about African Americans, Matthews also compiled and published a LAPL annotated bibliography, “Books on the Negro for Young People,” which included both literature and biographical works about African Americans.⁶⁹



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

⁶⁷ Radcliffe, 30.

⁶⁸ Radcliffe, 30.

⁶⁹ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

In her Annual Report for 1943–1944, Matthews’s 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:

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...⁷⁰

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 requests to her 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 at Camp Haan to use for exhibits at the camp. Matthews paraphrases a statement by Dr. E.W. McDiarmid “on the value of

⁷⁰ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

building special branch collections in centers where they will prove of greatest interest and at the same time serve the needs of the entire city.”⁷¹ Her notes also make it clear that her goal was to serve the needs of all communities; for example, 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.⁷²

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. 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.”⁷³ 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 stirred up trouble, since they brought their Jim Crow attitudes with them to Los Angeles.⁷⁴

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,

⁷¹ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁷² UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 10.

⁷³ Smith, 2006, 22–23.

⁷⁴ COHR, 37–38.

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."⁷⁵ 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, adjoining 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 to Sugar Hill, and in 1946 the West Adams Heights Improvement Association 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.⁷⁶ 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

⁷⁵ COHR, 39–40.

⁷⁶ *Anderson v. Auset*, L.A. No. 19, 759.

restrictive covenants. In 1948, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, rendering racially restrictive covenants unenforceable.⁷⁷ 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!"⁷⁸

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 certain facts on the Negro's role in California history more readily accessible to the interested layman and scholar.⁷⁹

Further Education in Chicago

Matthews attended the library school at the University of Chicago from 1944 to 1945, in order to earn her Master's degree in library science. The school's dean, Carleton Joeckel, told Matthews that her race would hurt her ability to be promoted, and suggested that she consider teaching 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

⁷⁷ Sides, 2003, 98–100.

⁷⁸ UCLASC, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁷⁹ Miriam Matthews, *The Negro in California from 1781–1910: An Annotated Bibliography* (Los Angeles: [publisher not identified], 1944), i.

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.”⁸⁰ Matthews was disappointed that the Chicago program did very little to persuade institutions such as the Library of Congress or libraries in Europe to consider hiring African American librarians. In her thesis, 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.⁸¹

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.”⁸² 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’s connections to African American scholars and activists were also useful, as when she was contacted by a researcher writing a biography of Booker T. Washington, who was trying to uncover information on what he described as “the Booker T. Washington-W.E.B.

⁸⁰ Radcliffe, 31.

⁸¹ Quoted in Radcliffe, 33.

⁸² UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

DuBois controversy.” Matthews knew that Du Bois 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.”⁸³



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, had been born and raised in Washington, D.C. and Kansas City, both segregated cities. Because of this, Matthews

⁸³ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 8.

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's 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.⁸⁴

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 Public Library's "The Negro in Books for Young People"⁸⁵ and the Cleveland Public Library's "Probe Your Prejudices: Read, Think, Discuss," as well as a 1943 pamphlet from the Detroit Public Library documenting that the

⁸⁴ Radcliffe, 36–37.

⁸⁵ It is quite likely that this bibliography was produced by either Vivian Harsh or her assistant, but there is no attribution on the piece.

library events of the week of June 20th were entirely devoted to the subjects of Black-white race relations, and promoting education and racial equality.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ 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.

From 1941 to 1949, the state senate's Tenney Committee (officially named the Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California, chaired by State Senator Jack Tenney), was actively investigating any interference with the National Defense Program in the state, or anything else that in their view made the people of California less physically, mentally, morally, economically or socially fit.⁸⁸ 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 these writers were associated.⁸⁹ In 1947, the Tenney Committee introduced SB 1026, which would have altered the social studies curriculum in the public

⁸⁶ UCLASC, Box 12, Folder 1.

⁸⁷ B. T. Wilkin, ed., *African American Librarians in the Far West: Pioneers and Trailblazers* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 4–5.

⁸⁸ C. Mediavilla, "The War on Books and Ideas: The California Library Association and Anti-Communist Censorship," *Library Journal* 46, no. 2 (1997): 331.

⁸⁹ Radcliffe, 53.

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.⁹⁰

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.”⁹¹ The Legislature had singled out 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 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.⁹²

Not long after the defeat of SB 1026 and 1027, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors began requiring all county employees to sign a four-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

⁹⁰ M. Matthews, “C.L.A. and California Librarians Join Censorship Fight,” *Library Journal* 72, no. 15 (1947): 1172–73.

⁹¹ Matthews, “C.L.A. and California Librarians,” 1172–73.

⁹² Matthews, “C.L.A. and California Librarians,” 1172–73.

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. A number of public employees, including twenty librarians of the Los Angeles County Library, 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 that might be deemed 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.⁹³

As chair of CLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, Matthews testified on Henderson's behalf at a hearing before the Board of Supervisors.⁹⁴ 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 local newspapers. CLA also passed a resolution at its 50th Annual Meeting criticizing the supervisors' attempts to interfere with the professional collection development and intellectual freedom responsibilities of librarians. The board eventually abandoned the idea of the censorship committee, but continued its support of a loyalty oath for county employees. CLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee continued to oppose such oaths for

⁹³ Mediavilla, 1997.

⁹⁴ Radcliffe, 54.

librarians and passed a “Resolution Protesting Loyalty Investigations” that eventually became the model for ALA’s own later statement on loyalty oaths.⁹⁵

At around the same time, in her work on the corresponding ALA committee, 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.”⁹⁶ 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 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.’”⁹⁷ Matthews’s 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.⁹⁸

BUILDING RESEARCH COLLECTIONS ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

⁹⁵ Mediavilla.

⁹⁶ COHR, October 26, 1985.

⁹⁷ COHR, October 26, 1985.

⁹⁸ COHR, October 26, 1985.

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 money. 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.”⁹⁹

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.”¹⁰⁰ 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 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

⁹⁹ Radcliffe, 25–26.

¹⁰⁰ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 12, and Box 5, Folder 10.

Council, but was unsuccessful. In addition to Matthews's 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 preserving it and making it publicly available as the Titus Alexander Collection of Negro Life and History.¹⁰¹ His work as an historian appears to have been an important inspiration to Matthews's work as a researcher and collector of reference materials on African Americans.

Matthews and Alexander also collaborated on research. When the Golden State Mutual 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, Biddy Mason, a woman born a slave who came with her master to Los Angeles in 1851 but later won her freedom through the courts, was depicted as 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.¹⁰²

Matthews's work in this area was also valued by future librarians in the region. Joyce Sumbi was an African American librarian hired by the County of Los Angeles Public Library in

¹⁰¹ UCLASC, Box 1, Folder 12, and Box 5, Folder 10.

¹⁰² *How Negroes Came to the West*, 1959, p. SM3. The Biddy Mason Memorial Park, completed in 1990, is located at 333 South Spring Street in Los Angeles, on the south side of the Bradbury Building. For more information, see: <https://www.laconservancy.org/locations/biddy-mason-memorial-park>.

1960 (the year Matthews retired from LAPL). As a new librarian, she combed through the county 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.”¹⁰³ Sumbi contacted Matthews, who soon became her mentor and friend. Sumbi confirmed that Matthews’s hard work assisted a number of researchers, as she herself had met several professors who published books incorporating information from Matthews’s collections. Sumbi described Matthews’s methods of collecting 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 donate any papers, photographs, or other materials that they were thinking of discarding. She also described the breadth of Matthews’s activism, noting that in addition to her work as a librarian, she also served on the 1976 Bicentennial Committee for the City of Los Angeles. Matthews’s personal research formed the basis for a plaque at Olvera Street that identifies the eleven founding families of the city, documenting the fact that twenty-six of the original forty-four city founders were of African descent.¹⁰⁴

Sumbi also described how Matthews supported 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 supported artists by organizing exhibits, buying their work, and even paying their bills

¹⁰³ Interview with Joyce Sumbi, conducted 2008. UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 2009. Available at: <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz0009d4gm>. (hereafter: COHRSumbi), May 19, 2009.

¹⁰⁴ COHRSumbi, May 19, 2009. See also, John Macias, “In the Name of Spanish Colonization: Formulating Race and Identity in a Southern California Mission, 1769–1803,” *Southern California Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 185.

and buying them art supplies when they could not afford them.¹⁰⁵ A *Los Angeles Sentinel* article from 1994 described her collection at the 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.¹⁰⁶

After she retired in 1960, 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 the Matthews collection, making it the largest public exhibition supported by her collecting efforts.¹⁰⁷ 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 collections, had very few photographs of African Americans. After she retired, she first acquired photographs from the Mason-Owens family, an

¹⁰⁵ COHRSumbi, May 19, 2008.

¹⁰⁶ M. Mitchell, “Miriam Matthews Preserves Los Angeles’ Black Art,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (February 10, 1994), C5.

¹⁰⁷ COHR, tape number VI, side 2, November 11, 1985.

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, you know, make a real good history. I mean, a story, you know, 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.¹⁰⁸

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Miriam Matthews shared some commonalities with the pioneering 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.”¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ These earlier Progressive-Era librarians believed that “libraries had the power to eradicate ignorance, foster good government, and create responsible, intelligent citizens.”¹¹¹ Similar beliefs seem to have informed Matthews’s 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

¹⁰⁸ COHR, tape number viii, side one, February 12, 1986.

¹⁰⁹ J. E. Passet, *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), xiii.

¹¹⁰ Passet, 1994, 17.

¹¹¹ Passet, 1994, 81.

exceptional. Although she decided to become a librarian at least in part because she did not want to be a teacher, once she entered the career she performed with such dedication and hard work that she eventually earned the respect of most of her white patrons, colleagues, and administrators. Like Regina Andrews in NYPL, Matthews had to fight for promotional opportunities; once promoted, she eventually earned the respect of library patrons (of all races), her 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).”¹¹² She believed that her success “made it easier for those who followed,” including a number of African American principal librarians within LAPL and one division librarian, Loyce Pleasants.

Like Schomburg, Andrews, Hutson, Harsh, and Clayton, 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 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

¹¹² Radcliffe, 81.

researcher herself, she documented the hidden history of African Americans in California and Los Angeles. Her work also helped other researchers to acknowledge the previously unappreciated contributions of African Americans to and 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. 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.”¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Radcliffe, 81.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Radcliffe, 81.