

## TWO MEN HONOR THE MEMORY OF A LONG-AGO FALLEN COMRADE, AND CARRY ON HIS LEGACY BY FIGHTING FOR RACIAL EQUALITY IN THE FIRE SERVICE.

By Joe Shalmoni

Late 19th century Los Angeles was different than the city we know today. For one trailblazing man, it was a fledgling metropolis to which he dedicated himself, and bravely gave his life.

November 19, 2010 marked the one hundred and fifteen year anniversary of the death of the City of Los Angeles' first firefighter killed in the line of duty. This man was Mr. Sam Haskins, an African American. Haskins' sacrifice was forgotten for over a century, and not included in the list of line-of-duty deaths by the LAFD until 2002, when the details resurfaced. The Haskins story was reported in the Los Angeles Times by long time author and columnist Cecilia Rasmussen in November of 2002. As the 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Haskins' death is a tremendous milestone, it is truly fitting to tell this moving story again.

Sam Haskins was a former slave. He was born in Virginia in February of 1846. In 1880, fifteen years after the civil war, as a free man, Haskins made the cross-country trek to Los Angeles. According to the Los Angeles Times, Haskins was joined by his good friend George Warner. The two men were formerly enslaved together in Virginia. Both came to Los Angeles in search of a new life. Fifteen years later, in 1895, Mr. Haskins made the ultimate sacrifice while protecting his beloved new home, the City of Los Angeles.

After Sam Haskins was killed in 1895, his story was forgotten for over a century. Though buried in full regalia by a cortege of the LAFD and dignitaries of the day (as described by the newspapers of the time), there was eventually no marker placed on his grave. In 1895, no line-of-duty death list was kept by the LAFD. As the years went by, and Haskins' contemporaries passed on, his story was almost lost to history.

Over a hundred years later, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Crime Analyst Joe Walker was in the County Registrar Recorder's Office in Norwalk, California researching an unrelated case. Walker accidentally found recorded evidence and pieced together the tragic story of Sam Haskins' death, and the location of Haskins' grave.

Seeking justice for Haskins' memory and sacrifice, Walker contacted Arnett Hartsfield. Hartsfield has been the African American Firefighters' Historian in Los Angeles for nearly seven decades. Hartsfield, now 92, is a seasoned veteran of the LAFD. He served as a LA City Firefighter from 1940 to 1961. He also had a career as a lawyer (USC Law, 1955), as a Professor of Ethnic Studies at Cal State Long Beach, as a Civil Service Commissioner under Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, and is best known for his dedicated work as an integration pioneer in the LAFD. Currently, he is retired, and is the volunteer Historian at the African American Firefighter Museum. The museum is housed in historic former LA City Fire Station No. 30. Station 30 is at Central Avenue and 14<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown L.A. Three times a week, Hartsfield greets visitors to the museum. He tells them, in great detail of the fight for integration in the LAFD. While humbly sitting in the station's former dormitory, he shares archival photographs and stories with all who will listen. This is the very place Hartsfield came on duty with the

LAFD, seventy years ago. Hartsfield was the subject of a recent article in the Los Angeles Times by reporter Bob Pool.

A man of detail and precision, Hartsfield (back in 2002), took to the material Walker had uncovered about Sam Haskins, and went over it with a fine-toothed comb. Once all the details were confirmed, Hartsfield realized that Walker had brought a number of critically significant issues to light. Haskins was confirmed as the first African American Firefighter of the Los Angeles Fire Department. He preceded George Washington Bright who was, until 2002, thought to have been the first. Bright actually came on board in 1897, two years after Haskins' death. Haskins was also the first person of any race to die in the line of duty as a firefighter for the LAFD.

Haskins served with devotion, and was committed to the service of all peoples of Los Angeles. Born a slave in Virginia, Haskins must have suffered terribly. Still, he was a man ahead of his time. He lived a credo of racial equality and demonstrated tolerance to all, regardless of their race or ethnic background. Haskins felt a deep connection to others. He had substantial numbers of friends from all races. In covering his death and funeral, The Los Angeles Times described his extreme dedication, to answering alarms as a firefighter. They wrote of him as a well-known and committed resident, a "Colored Politician."

Another archival clipping from an unidentified newspaper, called him the "Colored Hercules." Years before his ultimate sacrifice, Haskins had already attained hero status in the community by coming to the defense of a Los Angeles Officer named Valencia, when this man was once attacked.

According to historical detail on the African American Firefighter Museum website, Sam Haskins was listed on the 1888 Los Angeles census as an employed fireman assigned to Engine Company No. 4. By 1892, Haskins had been appointed as a "Colored Call Man."

During his historical lectures at the African American Firefighter Museum, Hartsfield describes the work of Call Firemen of Haskins' day. He tells of how Call Firemen lived within hearing distance of their station. They were responsible for procuring their own uniforms and equipment, and received a small yearly stipend. Paid only for the actual time they fought fires, Call Firemen remained at the ready, essentially as volunteers, and would report whenever an alarm bell was sounded. The single paid firefighter who staffed the station would also, according to Hartsfield, fire a blunderbuss (probably a loud musket), in conjunction with the alarm.

When Haskins heard the alarm and blunderbuss on the evening of Tuesday, November 19, 1895, just before 6 pm, he answered the call. Haskins had no way to know it would be his last emergency response, and his last day on earth. Haskins faithfully prepared himself for duty. Energetic and ready, he started out quickly toward Station No. 4. Haskins saw horse-drawn steam engine No. 2, and the hook and ladder wagon charging his way on North Main Street. As was the tradition of the time, the convoy was likely led by a station dog. The LA Times described the pavement on North Main as rough, and the street car tracks as rougher. Haskins met Engine No. 2 in front of Baker Block. It is reported that he "sprang" aboard Engine 2, ready for action. It is unclear where on Engine 2 Haskins positioned himself during the ensuing the

ride to the fire. Hartsfield believes that joining Engine 2 resulted in Haskins not having his regular, more secure, assigned seat on his usual Engine 4. This put Haskins in a very dangerous position. Hartsfield indicated that this may have sadly contributed to his ultimate fate. As Engine 2 went over a large depression in the road, Haskins lost his balance. He struggled, flailing his arms. Ultimately he fell, becoming lodged between the large left hind wagon wheel of the engine and the steam boiler. The expertly trained horse team came to an immediate halt. A substantial-sized crowd of onlookers gathered quickly. Haskins' beloved brother-firefighters and good-Samaritan passerby's tried desperately to help the severely wounded man. Finally, after ten agonizing minutes, the large wagon wheel was removed and Haskins, his body now broken, was freed. The once proud, herculean Haskins was carried, as life drained out of him, to nearby Station No. 2, located at 2127 East First Street in Boyle Heights.

The Los Angeles Times reported that he was attended to quickly by two physicians, Drs. Choate and McCarthy. The physical damage Haskins sustained was devastating. Choate and McCarthy, despite their best efforts, were unable to resuscitate Haskins. Haskins succumbed to his terrible wounds, while lying in Station No. 2, and left this world shortly afterward. The firefighters of the Los Angeles Fire Department had lost one of their finest, and their hearts were broken.

Accounts of the witnesses to the tragedy were conflicting. One Professor Hutchison claimed that poor Haskins was not only mangled and crushed, but also burned. This was thought to have occurred as Haskins was pinned between the outer casing of the hot boiler and the wagon wheel. Burn injuries were later refuted at a coroner's inquest. Testimony at the inquest described how the boiler was well insulated with wood and reportedly could not substantially heat its external surface from within. The death of Sam Haskins was ruled an accident by the coroner.

On November 21, 1895, Haskins was buried in Evergreen Cemetery in what was then, a segregated section. The Los Angeles Times reported that his funeral was well attended. His pallbearers were both white and African American. George Warner, his life-long friend, and fellow former slave was among them. There were "profuse" floral offerings. The Fire Commission placed a wreath; the police department presented a star. Haskins was lovingly eulogized as a man dedicated to the service of others. The Los Angeles Fire Chief (Chief Engineer), of the time, Walter S. Moore, gave a grave-side address, and 30 full time firefighters as well as members of the police force attended the service.

Still, as described at the opening of this article, Haskins' grave remained unmarked. As the decades passed, the Haskins story was at risk of being lost forever.

These details, as reported to him in 2002, by Crime Analyst Joe Walker, moved Arnett Hartsfield deeply. Hartsfield wanted without delay, to see Haskins' sacrifice properly honored. It was unacceptable to Hartsfield that a fallen firefighter, regardless of that person's race, had been denied his or her place in history. Whether this was due to neglect, no record keeping, or simply the passage of time, it needed to be corrected.

Hartsfield felt intensely connected to Haskins for many reasons. Haskins was a fellow firefighter from another time who had paid the ultimate price in service to his community. Haskins was not properly memorialized and given his place in history. He was also an African American former slave who suffered injustices in his life as a human being. Haskins' very existence and death as an employed firefighter for the LAFD was of tremendous importance. After Haskins passing, the department became segregated to prevent qualified African American employees such as George Washington Bright from commanding whites. Haskins was an African American person who gave his life for a department that ultimately segregated and discriminated against other African Americans, and did so for well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hartsfield reflected on his own experience and those of his African American colleagues in the LAFD during the racist years, prior to integration. Hartsfield had lived the awful Jim Crow laws of segregation formerly practiced in the LAFD. These practices went on well beyond the department's integration order of 1955 that followed the landmark 1954 Brown vs. the Board Of Education decision of the US Supreme Court. As for Hartsfield himself, he knew there were terribly limited opportunities for African Americans in the LAFD while he was on the force between 1940 and 1961. As a result, Hartsfield saw no future in seeking promotion, and today calls himself the eternal "Rookie."

Hartsfield explained that prior to his joining the LAFD, in order for an African American man to get a firefighting job, another African American firefighter had to retire or die. Hartsfield himself was not allowed to participate in drill tower exercises as a trainee, because he was not allowed to sleep in the same quarters with white rookies in an academy class. This was a deep shock for Hartsfield. He was raised in a completely integrated area of Seattle, Washington prior to coming to Los Angeles in 1929 as a boy of eleven.

As a firefighter, Hartsfield initially served in the two segregated Central Avenue fire stations in downtown LA. In accordance with the US Supreme Court's Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of 1896, The Central Avenue Stations were set aside by the LAFD for African American firefighters. Station No. 30 (at 14<sup>th</sup> and Central Avenue), became a segregated station in 1924, and Station No. 14 (at 34<sup>th</sup> and Central Avenue), became a segregated station in 1936. Hartsfield, a Manual Arts High School ROTC graduate and a commissioned US Army Lieutenant, also served in the segregated 93<sup>rd</sup> Division of the US Army during World War II. In the Pacific Theater, he was unfairly relegated to unloading ships instead of being given the opportunity to go into battle and fight for his country. He believes his destiny may have saved his life, as he didn't have to endure live combat. Still, Hartsfield distinguished himself while on Morotai in the Solomon Islands. In 1945, a regiment of the segregated 93<sup>rd</sup> US Army Infantry Division, the 25<sup>th</sup> Buffalo Soldiers, captured the highest ranking Japanese officer taken alive in World War II, Colonel Kisou Ouchi. Immediately after the capture of Ouchi, Army Headquarters sent a second 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry patrol, led by Lt. Hartsfield, to confirm that the Japanese platoon was no longer a threat. In recognition for his bravery in leading this follow-up patrol into dangerous territory, Hartsfield was awarded the US Army Bronze Star.

Hartsfield remembers vividly the point, many years ago, when he felt divinely inspired to temper his anger at the racist system. From then on, he knew that he was part of the process that

would ultimately bring positive change and equality for all. It was just a matter of time. This was a difficult, long, uphill battle. He remembers the sophisticated opposition that former Los Angeles Fire Chief John Alderson put up against forced integration following the Brown vs. the Board Of Education ruling. Though a brilliant Chief, who instituted such novel changes as the drill-tower training concept, Alderson was a segregationist at heart. According to Hartsfield, Alderson would argue such things as, "It is not my job to engage in social experimentation." Alderson would also say that integration would lead to a breakdown of departmental morale, destroy the fine teamwork, and cause a subsequent loss of the LAFD's coveted class 1 insurance rating. Hartsfield knew that Alderson's arguments were just smoke screens, and that Alderson's brand of racist thinker would ultimately be defeated. The question was, when.

Hartsfield kept on with his determined quest. During the "ugly integration fight" as he remembers it, his racist opponents called him the "Damn N\*\*\*\*r Agitator." Hartsfield's step-daughter Sharyna Reece turned the acronym "DNA" into a badge of honor for her beloved step-father.

The LAFD was finally integrated. Still, it was Chief Alderson's personal belief that separation of the races didn't violate the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution as long as conditions were equal.

Hartsfield reported for duty at Station No. 45 on Norton and Olympic following the department's integration order of 1955. When Hartsfield arrived, he was met at the door by Station Captain Henry Haggard. Indicating that the orders came down from Chief Alderson, Captain Haggard explained something to Hartsfield. Hartsfield was not to eat in the kitchen when the white firefighters were eating, and to use his own pots and pans.

Despite this indignant request, Hartsfield remembers Haggard as a man who otherwise always treated him decently. Tolerant and reflective, Hartsfield explained that today he doesn't judge people for their roles in these historical events. He considers how people were raised, and the prevailing beliefs and pressures of the time. Hartsfield says there is no way to guarantee you wouldn't have done exactly the same thing in like circumstances if you were in that person's position. You would have to actually "be that person" in order to really know, and this was of course, impossible. Haggard eventually became a close friend of Hartsfield's and attended Hartsfield's retirement party in 1961. Hartsfield tells of how his own retirement party was the first he remembered that was integrated. He sat Captain Haggard at the head table beside him. Hartsfield believes this simple kindness he bestowed on Haggard resulted in Haggard's being passed over for the Battalion Chief's exam. Eventually Haggard did qualify for, and pass the exam.

To protect his dignity as a human being in a hostile work environment, Hartsfield drew inspiration from struggles of the past, and the extreme drama constantly going on around him. He learned of the experience of LAFD African American Captain William Hall, who successfully passed the LAFD's 1931 Battalion Chief's Exam. Hartsfield paraphrased with intense emotion, what the department brass told Captain Hall. "Hall, it's a shame you're not a white man. We have no place nor plan for a colored Battalion Chief."

After such humiliating and shameful treatment, Hall retired. He had given twenty two years of his life protecting the citizens of Los Angeles from fire. He promoted from firefighter to Lieutenant, and became the first African American Captain in the LAFD under civil service. Given the color of his skin, Hall was trapped by the racist practices of the 1930's LAFD administration. His dream of rising to the rank of Battalion Chief was undermined and unjustly stolen from him as he literally marched across the finish line.

Hartsfield also remembered Earnest Roberts, another African American firefighter and dear friend. Roberts was subjected to a horrible indignity while working at Station 10 located at Hill Street and Venice. Roberts had human excrement soiled onto his pillow by racist white firefighters opposed to integration. These men laughed, as Roberts, unaware, tired and seeking rest, retired into his bed at the station. Roberts placed his head on the pillow which had been covered with a blanket as part of the cruel ruse. Sadly, Roberts suffered a nervous breakdown. Immediately following the incident, Roberts (in emotional shock), was taken away in an ambulance that night, over a half century ago in 1955. Roberts did ultimately recover and return to his work at the LAFD, completing a 34-year career. Hartsfield sees this as a bold victory for Roberts, which paved the way for those minority LAFD firefighters who came after him, including Roberts' own son, Winston. As if to defend his father's dignity, in 1977, Winston Roberts came on duty as a probationer at the very same Station No. 10 where his father was so horribly humiliated 22 years before. The younger Roberts rose to the rank of Inspector, retiring in 2007. Still, Hartsfield bemoans the fact that like himself, Earnest Roberts never promoted beyond the rank of firefighter. Hartsfield carries the statistics in his head as living testimony. He explains that for seventeen years, from 1940 to 1957, no additional African American men became captains on the LAFD.

In addition to the more dramatic stories like that of Roberts, racist attitudes lurked everywhere. Hartsfield often remembers those African American firefighters who were not permitted to place their food in the same refrigerator that the white firefighters used. It was as though some sort of contamination might occur to the white firefighter's food if people's lunches and dinners were placed together.

There is also many a silver lining for Hartsfield in the mix of all this pain. He keeps close to his heart a mental list of white firefighters of all ranks who supported the cause of integration. Many, at a great cost to themselves. He shared several stories. He spoke about Charles Cooksee and Marvin LeBlanc. Both white, these two firefighters were sent, as a "punishment" to work at Central Ave Station No. 30. The administrators of the LAFD placed them with the African American firefighters, as a result of Cooksee and LeBlanc's commitment to equality. Hartsfield remembered how both men proudly became part of things at Station No. 30, were completely accepted, and fully supported their African American co-workers' struggle. They were however, ostracized by racist white firefighters. LeBlanc even joined the Stentorians Organization and attended annual picnics.

Hartsfield told the story of Keith Kenworthy. After the LAFD ordered integration within its ranks, Kenworthy was "Acting Captain" at Station No. 46 (at Vernon and Normandie). One day, his superiors came to warn Kenworthy that the N\*\*\*\*rs were coming. Kenworthy refused to sign a petition being circulated to stop integration, and actually made an entry into the station

journal as to what had happened when the brass came to speak to him. Hartsfield said that Kenworthy was rewarded by being charged with falsifying a public record. He was then convicted in an internal LAFD trial of insubordination, and summarily fired.

Deeply affected by adversity, Hartsfield dedicated his life to becoming an integration pioneer. In 1954, he helped found The Stentorians Organization, whose mission it was to fight for racial equality for African Americans and all others in the LAFD.

Hartsfield has over the years joined forces with a Captain of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Brent Burton. The two men have known each other for the better part of three decades. Their relationship began with Burton being mentored by Hartsfield as a young Fire Explorer Scout. Burton told of one memorable evening when Hartsfield took time out of his busy schedule to invite him to the Hartsfield home. Hartsfield presented Burton with a living-room slide show filled with material illustrating historical racial injustices in the LAFD. Captain Burton was deeply moved, and never forgot that night.

Since they met, the two men have carried on the fight for racial equality in the fire service. Burton is now a Los Angeles County Fire Department Truck Captain, serves as President of the African American Firefighter Museum, President of The Los Angeles County Stentorians, and President of The LA Cares Mentoring Movement.

Hartsfield, and Burton, allied with other members of The Stentorians set out to provide Sam Haskins the recognition, that for over a century he had not been given. They spearheaded a project to place a headstone on Haskins' grave eight years ago in 2002.

As a result of their efforts, a ceremony was held at Evergreen Cemetery in 2002, one hundred and seven years after Haskins untimely death. A beautiful stone was placed on Haskins' grave, forever securing his place in history as the first firefighter to fall on the LAFD in the line of duty. This was a dignified tribute to Haskins, a truly deserving hero that had made the ultimate sacrifice. Other organizations involved in the placement of the stone were: The African American Firefighter Museum, The Los Angeles Retired Fire and Police Association, The Los Angeles Fireman's Relief Organization, and the Los Angeles Fire Department Historical Society.

It is fitting to know that a link of dedication and struggle exists between Haskins, Hartsfield and Burton. Hartsfield believes that Haskins presence on the LAFD and his ultimate sacrifice opened the doors for many minority firefighters, both men and women, to follow in Haskins' footsteps. It may have taken long, but their accomplishments in the field of equality for all are truly grand. The LAFD today has been headed by two African American Chiefs, Doug Barry, and currently Millage Peaks. Both men and women of all races now proudly hold the position of company officers. Kristine Larson became the first female African American Captain in the LAFD. Sam Haskins, wherever he is, is most certainly looking on, and beaming with great pride.

- Arnett Hartsfield will be honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award to be presented by Academy Chief Kenneth Mays at the El Camino College Fire Academy, Class No.

129 graduation on Saturday, December 18th, 2010, at 10:00 am. The graduation will take place at the Academy located at 206 West Beech Street in Inglewood. Public Welcome.

- The author of this article, Joe Shalmoni, is a recruit in the El Camino Graduating Class No. 129.

References:

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Material provided by the African American Firefighter Museum, LAFire.com website. Captain Larry Schneider, Webmaster.

Los Angeles Times Article "City's 1<sup>st</sup> African American Firefighter To Get His Due" – by Cecilia Rasmussen published November 22, 2002.

Archival Material.