



Berley Roberts, Sr.



A small group of young African American men changed the course of Baltimore history just by sitting in the operator's seat of a streetcar. In 1952, these men were the first to operate transit vehicles for the Baltimore Transit Company (BTC) and they sometimes endured difficult circumstances in this modest step toward equality.

One of that group of brave young men was Berley Roberts Sr. who started with BTC in 1946. He began his career as a Shopman cleaning streetcars and was the first African American to operate a streetcar on the No. 8 Towson-Catonsville route. These men endured racial slurs and demeaning harassment, but Berley and his fellow rookie operators endured. His philosophy was as eloquent as it was direct: "Somebody's got to break it in, so I may as well start."

"Break it in" he did. Berley persevered and won the friendship and respect of his passengers. His kindness and good nature had everyone on the #8 route wanting to ride with him regularly. In 1952, an additional 100 African American men were promoted to operators, thanks to Berley's first brave step. In 1989, after a 43-year career in Baltimore transportation, Berley retired. He passed away in 2001, at the age of 76.

In 2021, Catonsville Rails To Trails was refurbishing the #8 Streetcar Mural painted by a 14 year old Eagle Scout in 1997. They decided to add figures to the mural and began searching for the under-told stories of minorities and woman. After a visit to the Baltimore Streetcar Museum, CRTT found Berley's story and decided to feature him as the driver on the mural.

Attempts to share this with Berley's children were unsuccessful until February 1, 2023, when Berley's daughter, 75 year old Sheila Roberts Lewis contacted Maureen Sweeney Smith, VP of Catonsville Rails To Trails. Shelia's niece saw the mural on the internet and Shelia wanted directions to the mural. Instead, Maureen offered a tour in a motorized vehicle. CRTT's streetcar historian, Dave Ditman, will be on hand to answer question about the streetcar era.



Catonsville Rails To Trails

P.O. Box 3282

Catonsville, Maryland 21228

443-326-5474 sweeneysmith@comcast.net

Family of First Black Streetcar Operator in Baltimore Will View Mural Featuring Their Father

Berley Roberts, Sr. broke color barrier in 1952

For Immediate Release:

February 3, 2023

Maureen Sweeney Smith

443-326-5474

In January, 75-year-old Shelia Roberts Lewis was thrilled to learn of a mural that featured her father, Berley Roberts, Sr., who, in 1952, was the first black streetcar operator in Baltimore. That same year, 100 additional African American men were promoted to operators after Berley broke the color barrier. They endured demeaning harassment, but Berley and his fellow rookie operators endured. His philosophy was as eloquent as it was direct: "Somebody's got to break it in, so I may as well start."

Meanwhile, Maureen Sweeney Smith, Vice President of Catonsville Rails To Trail (CRTT), was searching for Berley's children and used social media in 2021 in an unsuccessful attempt to reach them. When Shelia contacted Maureen on February 1, 2023, and asked for directions to the mural, Maureen insisted on giving the family a full guided tour of the #8 Streetcar Path and the 30' mural on which their father is featured.

Shelia and her sisters, Barbara McGee and Diann Cupid, all in their 70s, will view the mural for the first time on Wednesday, February 8, 2023 at 10 a.m. CRTT's historian, David Ditman will be on hand to answer questions.

During Black History Month, CRTT hopes to share this story of courage. CRTT is raising money to install a permanent wayside exhibit near the mural.

For more information visit www.crtt.org.

####

Berley Roberts Sr., 76, city streetcar, bus driver

By Gary Cohn Baltimore Sun • Feb 12, 2001

Berley Roberts Sr., a World War II veteran and retired streetcar driver, died Thursday of cancer at Joseph Ritchie Hospice. He was 76 and lived in Baltimore. In 1952, Mr. Roberts became one of the first African-American streetcar drivers in Baltimore. He was assigned to the No. 8 streetcar, the well-traveled line that ran from Towson through Baltimore to Catonsville. As one of the few such drivers for the Baltimore Transit Co., he endured racial prejudice and harassment.

"He would come home and tell me incidents that happened," his wife of 54 years, the former Fannie M. Pretty, recalled. "People would spit in his face. People would say, 'What are you doing sitting up here? You're supposed to be sitting in the back of the bus.'" Mr. Roberts endured, telling his family that it was important to help pave the way for other African-Americans. Mrs. Roberts recalled her husband saying, "Somebody's got to break it in, so I might as well start."

From his driver's seat, on streetcars and later on buses, Mr. Roberts witnessed an improvement in racial attitudes over time, said his wife and one of his daughters, Shelia V. Lewis of Baltimore. "After it became more common to have African-Americans drive buses, everyone wanted to ride his bus because he was such a kind person," Mrs. Lewis said.

Mr. Roberts began working for the Baltimore Transit Co. in 1946, cleaning and maintaining streetcars and buses, and was promoted to streetcar driver in 1952. He drove streetcars and buses and did other jobs for the transit company and the state Mass Transit Administration for more than 40 years. He retired in 1988. He was born and raised in Zebulon, N.C. He enlisted in the Army in 1943 during World War II and participated in the Normandy invasion.

In 1946, he received an honorable discharge and moved to Baltimore. He was a member of New Psalmist Baptist Church, where he was a volunteer driver for a church program. He also was a member of William F. Taylor Lodge No. 57, Prince Hall Masons. Mr. Roberts liked watching the History Channel, driving his Ford Crown Victoria, going to flea markets and cooking for his family. "My father was the son of a farmer, so he liked to cook," Mrs. Lewis recalled. "One time he brought home a turtle and made turtle soup. He would bring live oysters home and make oyster stew and soup. That was the farmer side of him." "He was a family man and a very good neighbor," Mrs. Lewis said. "He treated everyone with respect."

In addition to his wife and daughter, Mr. Roberts is survived by two other daughters, Barbara F. McGee and Diann Scott, both of Baltimore; two sons, Berley Roberts Jr. of Powhatan, Va., and Andre S. Roberts of Baltimore; a brother, Carl Roberts of Greensboro, N.C.; 10 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.



The #8 Streetcar Mural was created in 1997 by a 14-year-old Eagle Scout, Clark LeCompte. This 30' mural depicts the #8 Streetcar at the Catonsville Junction in the early 1950s.

In 2021, the mural was refurbished, and figures were added by Catonsville artist, Ella Munoz Gonzalez and Edward Williams of Studio 33. The figures include the first black operator, Berley Roberts, Sr.

Catonsville Rails To Trails is raising money to install a permanent wayside exhibit near the mural detailing the history of transportation in Catonsville. Visit crtt.org for more details.

Let's Install A Permanent Exhibit!



Help CRTT fund a wayside exhibit for Berley Roberts, Sr.

Catonsville Rails To Trails plans to create 10 wayside exhibits along the #8 Streetcar Path and the Short Line Trail that details the rich history of transportation in Catonsville. To this end, we are applying for a Maryland Heritage Area Authority (MHAA) grant for \$20,000. This grant requires us to match that amount, so **CRTT must raise \$20,000** for this project. We are asking the community to pitch in. Go to CRTT.org to donate.

Each wayside exhibit costs \$3,000 and CRTT wants to fund a prototype on the #8 Streetcar Path immediately and feature Berley Roberts, Sr., the first black streetcar operator. Please consider donating to CRTT to help us meet the match and install all 10. For more info. go to crtt.org/donate. CRTT is a 501c3 nonprofit. Questions? Go to crttfolders@comcast.net or 443-326-5474

Yes, I want to donate! Here is my donation for _____

Name: _____

Email _____

Make check payable to CRTT, P.O. Box 3282, Catonsville, MD. 21228