

Student and Bus Driver Arnold Ambers

I started attending LCPS when I was 6 and in the first grade. Between 1948 and 1960, I attended Douglass Elementary (formerly known as the Training Center) and graduated from Douglass High. My family lived 5 miles north of Leesburg, near Lucketts on Route 15. I rode a school bus through elementary and high school. I was also a substitute school bus driver my junior and senior year in high school. In fact, my father (Robert Ambers) was one of the first Black school bus drivers in Loudoun County. Truth be told, he was transporting Black students to school before LCPS assigned him an official school bus. He'd mounted benches in the bed of a pickup truck, covered that bed with canvas and drove Black students to school. He was assigned an official school bus and appears in the 1939-40 'Transportation of Pupils' report assigned to bus route #21. In the 1940-41 'Transportation of Pupils' report he was assigned to bus route #24. Both routes were called the 'Lucketts Route', ended in Leesburg and by 1941, may have been to both Douglass Elementary and the newly opened Douglass High. My father was also one of the signees on the deed transferring the land for Douglass High to LCPS. By the time I started at Douglass Elementary, my father was working full time on the John Whitmore farm as a tenant farmer. My first bus driver was Mr. Charles Thornton (route #24). My siblings and I could catch his bus outbound as it rolled north on Route 15 to Furnace Mountain or on its inbound route from Furnace Mountain south on Route 15 through Lucketts and into Leesburg. After the leaves had fallen from the trees you could see the bus coming on Route 15 from our front porch. One of us would be on 'bus watch' and when that person saw it they'd shout, "Bus is coming, time to go!". We'd go out to the end of our driveway and catch the bus. My sister was in the 7th grade when I started school, so between then and the time I graduated, I rode the bus with her and or one or both of my younger brothers. The bus I rode to Douglass Elementary (maybe a Ford), had about 30 students on it. I couldn't say what year the bus was. It wasn't new, but it was in fairly good condition and had heat most of the time. When that bus was in for servicing, we would ride older substitute buses. Some of these probably shouldn't have been on the road. Some had no heat and rusted out holes in the floor. Fumes and smoke would come up into the cabin from under the bus. In one instance the substitute bus had seats running parallel to the sides of the bus, so we students would face one another. I later learned that it was likely one of the earliest forms of motorized school buses called 'hacks'. That bus may have been from the 1930's or earlier. The route up route 15 to Furnace Mountain and back to Leesburg would have been about 40 miles (20 miles each way). The outbound route to Furnace Mountain would leave Route 15 near Lucketts and begin travelling the narrow, bumpy, dirt and gravel roads, picking up Black students. The route turned onto Taylorstown Road (Route 663) and included a stop for students at Wilt Store Road. It would continue on Taylorstown Road and then turn northeast onto Furnace Mountain Road (Route 665) where more students would be picked up in the Furnace Mountain area. The roads were so narrow that when the bus met oncoming traffic, one of the vehicles would have to pull off the road to let the other pass. Fortunately, at that time of day we rarely met any oncoming traffic. The bus route would continue on Furnace Mountain Road and return to Route 15 (and paved road) just south of the Point of Rocks bridge. The route would remain on Route 15 for the inbound part to Leesburg. While the bus was never stuck in mud or snow on those dirt and gravel roads, I do remember it having a flat tire once. We had to wait for quite a while for another bus to find us and bring us in to Douglass Elementary. There were no cell phones or radios on the bus in those days. We had to wait until someone noticed we were overdue at the school. Then, transportation would send out another bus looking for us. I had two bus drivers when I attended

Douglass High, Mr. Henry Reid and one of my Douglass High classmates (Raymond Young). The bus would travel the same 'Lucketts Route' and drop off students at Douglass Elementary and then Douglass High. The 'Lucketts Route' would make about 8 stops, 4 in the Furnace Mountain area and 4 along Route 15. There were two stops for the John Whitmore farm where my family did tenant farming. One stop was on the north side of the farm where the children of another Black tenant family lived. My siblings and I were picked up on the south side of the farm. I had a cousin who was picked up farther down Route 15 at the Rockland farm. Once again, there were about 30 students on the bus. I became a substitute bus driver in my junior year (1958/1959). I remember there being a road test, but no written test. You had to already have a driver's license. The buses weren't new (white drivers had the newer buses, Blacks had the 'hand me downs') but they were in fairly good condition. I believe the bus I drove was a Ford. All the buses had manual transmissions back then. As time passed, the 'hand me down' buses from the white drivers were in better condition. For the next two years I would sub for Reverend Jackson and my Douglass High classmate, Raymond Young. The buses I drove never got stuck, or had any mechanical failures. For the few weeks that I subbed for Reverend Jackson, I would have to rise at 4 AM. It took a while for the bus to warm up. Reverend Jackson lived in Aldie and his route would include Route 50 west passing through Middleburg and then turning north on St Louis Road (Route 611) ending at Banneker. By that time St Louis Road was paved. I picked up Reverend Jackson's bus one evening and kept it all the time I had his route. I would leave my home going south on Route 15, then west on Route 50 where I'd start picking up students around Middleburg, then turn north on Route 611 (St Louis Road) until we arrived at Banneker. I would sub for Raymond Young when he had football practice in the fall. He would make his morning run and I would drive his students home after school. There were about 30 students on this bus. Raymond lived in Gleedsville and in the morning he would leave from home picking up Black students along Gleedsville Road (Route 650) and delivering them to Leesburg. Then he'd continue up Route 15 making the 'Lucketts Route' into Furnace Mountain and back to Leesburg. The Lucketts Route was about 20 miles one way. The Gleedsville part of the route was another 10 miles round trip between Leesburg and Gleedsville. Gleedsville Road was a narrow, bumpy, dirt and gravel road back then. When I subbed for Raymond, I would pass my home on Route 15 multiple times going north to Furnace Mountain and then south to Gleedsville. I would park the bus at Raymond's home and he would drive me home by car. In the winter (after football season) I played basketball and practiced after school, so our schedules didn't conflict. Naturally, all of my 'away' basketball games to schools like Jeannie Dean in Manassas and Parker-Gray in Alexandria had a Black driver and only Black players. All the time I rode or drove a school bus, Blacks and whites did not travel on the same school buses.¹

¹ From September 27, 2021 interview with former LCPS Student and Student Bus Arnold Ambers conducted by Nathan Bailey