



The Clerk's Black History Series

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Safe Bus Company

(1926 to 1972)



“Historic Black-Owned Transportation Service”



Safe Bus, INC. began in 1926, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. On April 24, 1926, Clarence T. Woodland, John M. Adams, Elliot A. Davis, George I. Dillahunt, Jefferson H. Hairston, Elijah T. Miller, Joseph Miller, Harvey F. Morgan, Ralph R. Morgan, Charlie R. Peebles, and George Ragsdale met to address the dire need for transportation services from the underserved and segregated black communities where public transportation did not reach. Because the city of Winston-Salem's trolley

service, Southern Public Utilities Company, did not service black neighborhoods, black workers struggled to make it to jobs in the city. Streetcar service went only into white neighborhoods.



At the time, the only real transportation available to black workers were jitneys - small, privately owned ride sharing mini-vans or busses - that serviced specific areas, for very low fares, usually a nickel. The problem with jitneys was that schedules were sometimes unreliable and the vehicles were often crowded. Jitney owners sometimes crossed into each other's "territory" creating tension and instability.



After the April 24th meeting, the Safe Bus Company was formed, offering transportation and economic opportunities for black people in Winston-Salem. The company name signified their promise to provide safe and professional transportation to the black community. Safe Bus Company stocks were sold and \$100,000 dollars was raised; fares were set at five cents a ride, and the service began one month later. On June 1, 1926, the Safe Bus Company picked up its first rider, beginning a successful black-owned business that would last for the next 46 years. Its first offices were located in the Atlantic Building at East Third and North Church Streets, and the first garage was opened at the corner of East Third Street and Patterson Avenue.

The company employed more than 80 drivers and served 8,000 passengers a day. Employees of the company also included schedulers, mechanics, and customer service agents. The company was so successful that it exceeded that of the white-only streetcar city system. In 1966, The Safe Bus Company hired Pricilla Stephens (pictured left), the first woman bus driver for the company. By 1968, the Safe Bus Company had become the sole provider of transportation for Winston-Salem's black community, making it the largest black-owned and operated transportation business in the world. Riders were able to enjoy clean, safe rides into the city. The drivers were friendly and professional and they could sit anywhere they wanted on this bus service.

Because black workers were using the Safe Bus Company for their transportation needs, the city's official bus carrier ended their service and left town. The city asked the Safe Bus Company to fill in the routes, providing transportation to all residents. Forced to cover the entire city, including non-productive routes and competing with automobile ownership, the Safe Bus Company struggled.

In 1972, the Winston-Salem Transit Authority purchased the assets of the Safe Bus Company, incorporating it into the city-run transportation system.

The Safe Bus Company historic marker is located at 100 W. Fifth Street.

