



For Immediate Release

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## GRTC Celebrates Black History Month: Our Transit Groundbreakers

**RICHMOND, Va. (February 8, 2018)** – In celebration of Black History Month, GRTC pays special tribute to local Black History-Makers in February. This year, GRTC honors the groundbreakers from the Virginia Transit Company (VTC), which later became GRTC in 1973.

During major social movements in the 1960's, including the civil rights movement, VTC began to hire black bus operators. The first black bus operators were hired by VTC in 1962. By the early



1970's, most operators were still white. Retired Operator Marshall Avent recalls, "When African Americans first started driving the buses, white folks used to call the police on them. Said they stole the bus."

Today, of the 250 bus operators, approximately 240 are African-American.

*Bus Operators, April 1965, from the collection of Bruce Korusek at the GRTC Transit Museum. Two of the first black operators, and one of the first female operators, are pictured.*

*Below are just a few of the groundbreakers' stories we are honored to share this Black History Month.*

**Joseph Taylor**, prior to becoming a groundbreaking operator, worked as a mechanic at VTC before African-Americans were allowed to work as bus operators. Taylor became the first black operator hired by VTC in March 1962. Taylor was best known by his co-workers as "Deacon Taylor," providing both workplace mentorship and moral guidance. He retired from GRTC in March 1989 after 27 years driving buses throughout Richmond. Taylor passed away in April 2012. Operator A. C. Morris, Jr., remembers, "Mr. Taylor trained me at GRTC in February 1975. Good man and a gentleman, also a very good trainer. When I drive the bus, I still use some of his skills he taught me. He was the man to teach you the 32E & 32W loop."



**Edward E. Gray, Jr.**, was also one of the first black operators hired. For nearly 40 years, Gray worked as a bus operator, transportation supervisor, and “unofficial ambassador” for the citizens of Richmond and its visitors. Gray also drove one of the bus routes servicing Bon Air, the first black driver to drive a bus in this area, which remains today predominantly white.



**Eldridge F. Coles** started in 1967 at VTC, working “every job here at GRTC from sweeping the floor to CEO.” Coles says his experience was “from the back of the bus to the head of the corporation.” Coles worked as a bus operator for seven years before moving up the career ladder, including hand-writing all the bus schedules for eight years, serving as the Chief Operating Officer and finally reaching the top as the Chief Executive Officer (2010-2013). With a life-long love of transit and, more importantly, the people who make transit happen, Coles continues to serve GRTC today as one of the City of Richmond’s appointed Directors on GRTC’s Board of Directors.



**Dr. Johnny J. Branch** is another first black operator who excelled in leadership roles. He served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Richmond Transit Federal Credit Union, as well as the Recording Secretary of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1220. Outside of his transit career, Dr. Branch is a respected musician, radio personality and worship leader in the Greater Richmond community.



More groundbreaking stories are told in GRTC’s Transit Museum, which is open to the public upon request. GRTC encourages visitors to explore more of the history of transit and the groundbreakers who are a pivotal part of our collective history.

GRTC welcomes submissions now for next year’s local Black History Month honorees, and will save those names for future consideration. Male and female, living and deceased, nominations are accepted. Please email nominations, including a biography, photo and any contact information, to [carrie.rosepace@ridegrtc.com](mailto:carrie.rosepace@ridegrtc.com).

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**GRTC Transit System's mission is to provide clean, safe, and reliable transportation and to improve mobility and access throughout Central Virginia.**