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### **The Anatomy of a Social Movement: The Least Publicized Aspects of the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott**

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The Anatomy of a Social Movement:  
The Least Publicized Aspects of the Montgomery Alabama Bus  
Boycott

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## Introduction

Though some would deny its existence, in the middle of the twentieth century there was firmly in place in the Southern parts of the United States, Alabama in particular, a pervasive system of racial caste. It was an omnipresent system, all too familiar to those at or near the bottom of its hierarchal scale. Clearly in the South, at its foundation was a deleterious obsession with black submissiveness based on nostalgia for the antebellum South. In addition to being symptomatic of a stifling tradition of bigotry and social injustice throughout the South, it was a caste system intent on keeping Black citizens throughout the nation in a “social, political, and economic cellar” (Williams and Greenhaw 125). An important facet of the system, an indispensable tool of the white power structure, were the Jim Crow laws of segregation that permeated every-day life in the American South from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. Jim Crow laws represented state-sanctioned racial discrimination and were the backbone of institutional racism in the American South from 1874-1975. The express purposes of the laws were to promote the idea of racial superiority, preserve segregation of the races, and to maintain the dictated social order based on race distinctions. Perhaps the most ignominious of these laws were those that governed the seating practices on public transportation below the Mason Dixon Line.

Racial segregation and unfair seating practices on municipal buses, and other forms of public transportation, had long been a source of aggravation, discomfiture, embarrassment, and disputation among black residents throughout the South. Conversely, on December 1, 1955 a courageous African-American woman named Mrs. Rosa L. Parks, unbeknownst to her at the time and in defiance of local law and custom, set into motion a historical chain of events that successfully challenged the social injustice. This challenge lead to the eradication of at least one particularly glaring aspect

of the racial caste system, which was Jim Crow seating on the municipal buses of Montgomery, Alabama. The social and historical significance of Mrs. Parks' refusal to give up her seat, move to the back of the bus, and stand when ordered to do so by the driver was profound. The ensuing year-long clash over unfair seating practices and egregious treatment by bus drivers in Montgomery was, in many ways, the first major battle of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States; it was the first direct-action protest of its kind. However, it is important to note that by no stretch of the imagination was Rosa Parks the first, or the last, to defy and contest Jim Crow laws as they pertained to segregation on public transportation. It was not even the first time Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat. Given the circumstances, it is not surprising to discover that Rosa Parks was not even the first Black woman in Montgomery to refuse to give up her seat on a bus. There were a plethora of earlier incidences on trains and buses in Montgomery, Alabama, and elsewhere throughout the country, that can be said to have set the stage and laid the foundation for the mass protest that was to become the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Of importance too was the fueling stench of the kidnapping and lynching of Emmitt Till, in Mississippi four months prior, that still permeated the air in Black communities throughout the American South. It was an element largely ignored by most authors and historians when discussing the boycott. In Montgomery alone there existed a significant contingent of civil rights advocates who had fought for Black equality in the city for decades. As a secretary and youth leader within the local branch of the NAACP, Rosa Parks as well as her husband Raymond Parks, were active members of this contingent. In addition – a few months preceding the boycott in the summer of 1955 – with the help of one of Montgomery's leading white liberals, Mrs. Virginia Durr, Mrs. Parks secured a seat at a two week interracial gathering of activists at The Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Its founder, Myles Horton, facilitated workshops

and seminars on workers' rights and race relations. The Highlander school was known in civil rights circles as a liberal training center and haven where Black and white southerners, interested in activism, could meet and mingle on equal terms. Yet there is little question of the significance of Rosa Parks' refusal that fateful day to adhere to accepted custom and relinquish her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama to a white male passenger. Earlier campaigns, previous non-compliance with Jim Crow laws, and the subsequent arrests of others, in no way diminish the historic importance of Mrs. Parks' act that day, and its global impact. On that calamitous December day in the *Cradle of the Confederacy*, it was Rosa Parks' quiet defiance of the white power structure of Montgomery, and her arrest and conviction for disorderly conduct that provided a timely impetus for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Mrs. Parks' actions, coupled with the deeds of the multitude of other brave men and women of Montgomery, Alabama, who chose to stand up for their rights, paved the way for the successful legal challenge to Jim Crow seating on the buses. These actions permanently eradicated racial segregation on public transportation in Montgomery and the rest of Alabama.

Many modern chronologies of American history point to December 1955, and the historic flood of local events in Montgomery that followed, as the beginning of the vast and historic social movement in the United States commonly referred to as The Civil Rights Movement. This appears to be the prevailing notion of the collection of authors and tomes referenced for this work. As editor of The Walking City David Garrow went so far as to state that, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 is one the most important events in twentieth century Afro-American history" (Garrow ix). In the forward to The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It he writes that "many scholars view the Montgomery boycott as the first major event in the Black freedom struggle of the 1950's and 1960's" (Robinson ix). In addition, in the preface to Daybreak of Freedom, Stewart Burns suggested that "The Montgomery Bus

Boycott looms as a formative turning point of the twentieth century: harbinger of the African-American freedom movement, which in turn inspired movements for freedom around the globe” (Burns xi). Kenneth M. Hare opened his book with the statement “When Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat so that a white man could sit, on the afternoon of December 1, 1955, it set into motion one of the pivotal civil rights movements in the history of the United States” (Hare 2). These are powerful statements indeed, which in many ways attest to the historical magnitude and social significance, on a global scale, of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. One striking example of the global significance lies in the fact that in the spring of 1956, far removed from the North American continent, thousands boycotted the segregated buses in Cape Town, South Africa in symbolic solidarity with their brethren across the seas in the United States.

During the course of my research, I found that much has been written about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and events both before and after that are directly, or in some cases indirectly, linked to the protest. This would seem to contradict and render moot the statement by Willy S. Leventhal in the introduction to his book The Children Coming On...A Retrospective of the Montgomery Bus Boycott , that “The history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Movement in America is neither broadly studied nor well understood” (Leventhal 23). To substantiate my thesis that there exist many under publicized aspects of the boycott, I have read in detail over two dozen texts and articles that examine the boycott itself and other significant related events from personal, historical, legal, social, and academic perspectives. All of the writers shared perspectives that, in one way or the other, professed to tell the “true story” of the boycott. However, no matter how well written, or how well researched, I find much of the content to be highly subjective. This has resulted in a significant number of contradictions and disparities in the accounts and descriptions of particularly relevant events concerning the boycott. Nevertheless, it is not my intent here to dwell on interpretive or stylistic

differences between the writers, but to instead focus on common themes that I feel will help provide a better understanding of the boycott, the important events that surround it, and some of its least publicized facets. Without completely eschewing contradictions, I expect to cull from the selected compositions and tomes a commonality and collective understanding of what events and persons were the driving forces behind the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Among the collection of readings referenced are a handful of out of print books that I had the good fortune to procure. The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr. written by Jim Bishop and published in 1971, The Walking City, The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1955 edited by David J. Garrow published in 1989, Bus Ride to Justice, by Fred Gray, lawyer for the Montgomery Improvement Association, Stride Toward Freedom, by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Willy S. Leventhal's compilation of oral recollections of the boycott. All of the volumes proved to be invaluable in their contribution to this work. Unique perspectives that could not be found elsewhere are provided in the first hand accounts of King in Stride Toward Freedom, Robert Graetz in A White Preacher's Memoir, and Jo Ann Robinson in The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It. Within The Walking City there are several primary sources as well, such as the personal accounts of the protest by Norman W. Walton, Rev. Thomas R. Thrasher, L. D. Reddick, Preston Valien, Ralph D. Abernathy, and Edgar N. French. In addition, there is Reverend Abernathy's contribution is his 1958 master's thesis that, in his own words "represents an attempt to describe and analyze the character and processes of a social movement- The Montgomery Improvement Association", (Garrow 103). Garrow himself imparted that "Ralph D. Abernathy's never-before published 1958 thesis and memoir of the protest represent an extremely valuable and indeed essential resource for the study and understanding of the Montgomery boycott's importance, and ranks with Mrs.

Robinson's memoir in importance and significance" (Garrow ix). Some of the other more prominent writers that I have enlisted in this endeavor are, in alphabetical order; Taylor Branch, Douglas Brinkley, Stewart Burns, Adam Fairclough, Herbert Kohl, and Aldon D. Morris. With the help of this collection of distinguished authors, editors, and essayists, I anticipate providing a better understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I will reveal many less acclaimed, but closely related events leading up to and stemming from the protest. In that each writer presents their own unique interpretation of events, it is my intention to present a collective understanding of what is historic and monumental about the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In the opening segment; *Montgomery, Alabama: The Cradle of the Confederacy*, I will discuss the contemporary history of Montgomery, Alabama leading up to the protest. In the spirit of this endeavor I will include some lesser known facts about Montgomery and its role as a bastion of much that is considered wrong about the American South. With the help of the aforementioned texts, I will connect this history and the social climate of Montgomery in 1955. As an important part of this opening salvo, I will examine three very specific earlier events that, each in their own way, reflect this social climate. It is somewhat debatable whether the outcomes are directly or indirectly linked to the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In the next section *Pioneers Before Rosa*, I will discuss relatable cases of other African-American women who suffered the indignities associated with segregation on public transportation. These are a collection of women who decided to fight back against unjust Jim Crow laws of segregation on public conveyances. As celebrated as Rosa Parks is in the annals of the Civil Rights Movement, when it comes to non-compliance with Jim Crow laws, there are several other courageous African-American women who deserve mention. Some of these women are famous, and some very nondescript and not well-



known at all. In many ways these women laid the foundation for Mrs. Parks' actions and provided a model for resistance to the miasma of racial caste and segregation. Two such stalwarts in the fight for equal rights for African-Americans are Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth.

This will be followed by, *The Significant Involvement of Other Women in Montgomery*, an all important treatise on other women involved in similar incidences prior to the arrest and conviction of Rosa Parks. Also included in this segment is a discourse regarding the Women's Political Council, and the many other women who were integral components of the protest in Montgomery and important players at the heart of its success. Given the scope of this project, I think it is important to ascertain how these women are treated by the various writers in a historical context. In tandem with the literature in subsequent sections of the paper, I will probe the motivation and decision to boycott. I will also, with the assistance of the writers, discuss the long-term historical implications of the boycott on both a local and national level.

In a fourth segment, *The Other Boycotts*, I will lay bare the facts surrounding other twentieth-century bus boycotts in New York City, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Tallahassee, Florida. I hope to uncover the significant relationship between these lesser-known challenges to segregation and the more celebrated Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In the epilogue, I will provide a summary of the boycott itself and review the most significant and least publicized circumstances.

### **Montgomery, Alabama: The Cradle of the Confederacy**

The city of Montgomery is the third largest city in the state of Alabama, in addition to being the state capital and the seat of Montgomery County. Montgomery became the state capital in 1847, and its capital building was erected in 1857. It is often

referred to as *The Cradle of the Confederacy*, expressly because it was at a convention, in 1861, that the Confederate States of America came into fruition. Jefferson Davis was inaugurated president of the Confederacy on the capitol steps, and Montgomery served as the Confederate capital from February 4, 1861 until May 29 of the same year when Richmond, Virginia was named the new capital. Consequently, it was also home to the first White House of the Confederacy. Thus, it is highly ironic that under this backdrop, almost one hundred years later, the same city that was once the bastion of a slaveocracy gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. It is noteworthy that, “serving as a reminder of its history were two ominous large rocks, one on the eastern edge of town, next to the highway to Atlanta, and another on the southwestern end, next to the road to Selma. On each were the words Cradle of the Confederacy”, (Williams and Greenhaw 1). The rocks would seem to imply that Montgomery remains shackled to the bonds of an earlier epoch.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, blacks in twenty-seven deep South cities, including Montgomery, boycott segregated streetcars. On Montgomery’s streetcars among the many indignities suffered by black riders, was being forced to enter the streetcars from the rear and to stay there. In August of 1900, African-American ministers in Montgomery urged their respective congregations to walk rather than ride the streetcars to protest the unfair treatment of its black paying customers. After five successive weeks of protest and the refusal of most Blacks to ride the segregated trolleys, the economics of the situation forced the company operating the streetcars to acquiesce. Streetcar segregation was ended in the city, but the victory was short-lived, for by the 1920’s Jim Crow seating was once again the order of the day in Montgomery. Under the weight of custom and ceaseless intimidation, the fight against segregated seating collapsed. In addition, there was the ever- present threat of violence from police or lynch mobs to contend with. Jim Crow seating on public transportation in the South became

just another aspect of a systematic social division of the races. This system included, but was not limited to, banking, dining, schools, churches, and hospitals.

By the 1950's the white population of Montgomery, and other municipalities throughout the South, had established a comprehensive system of domination over its Black citizenry. A system of domination that protected the privileges of white society and preserved the economic, social, and political control they exercised over the Black population of these areas. Throughout this period in Montgomery 63% of African-American females were domestic workers and 48% of African-American males were domestics or laborers. The median income for whites was \$1,730 annually compared to \$970 for Blacks. No African-Americans were allowed to hold public office, and because of restrictive county laws, in 1954 out of 30,000 potential Black voters only 2,000 were registered to vote ([www.encyclopediaofalabama.org](http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org)). Because of this suffocating atmosphere, Montgomery, Alabama had long been known as one of the most notoriously segregated cities in the country. It was so pervasive that, to a large extent, segregation was largely accepted by both Blacks and whites as an inescapable part of everyday life. For example, "Before December 5, 1955, thousands of Black citizens gave every impression of being willing to go on enduring discrimination on buses, suffering humiliation and embarrassment, for the sake of peace" (Robinson 8). Blacks who lived and worked in Montgomery faced legal segregation in places such as parks, schools, public restrooms, theaters, and of course, public transportation. There were also separate entrances, toilets, and drinking fountains for Blacks and whites in public places such as bus and train stations. Segregation was so ingrained that African-Americans were even forced to ride in a separate cab system than whites, since it was illegal for Blacks and whites to ride in cabs together. Despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Montgomery schools were still segregated during this time.

However, there seemed to be a consensus among the writers that the legal racial segregation on the buses was the primary source of distress and consternation within the Black community. As evidenced by the comment by editor Stewart Burns that; “By the early 1950’s ill treatment on city buses had emerged as the most common and acute black community problem , since so many thousands, especially working women and school children, depended on the bus for daily transport” (Burns 7).

In the late 1940’s and early 1950’s most African-Americans in Montgomery did not own an automobile and the primary means of transportation were the public buses. All of the bus drivers were white and discourteous treatment at the hands of these drivers was more the rule than the exception. Since early in the century on streetcars there had been segregation on public transportation in Montgomery, but by the late 1940’s Blacks were fed up with the embarrassment, indignity, and humiliation of riding segregated conveyances and being treated abusively. Although Blacks were the majority of the clientele, accounting for at least sixty percent of the riders, they were more often than not treated abusively and forced to adhere to oppressive conditions and unjust rules and regulations predicated on race alone. Virtually every African-American person in Montgomery had some negative experience on the buses at the hands of one of the white drivers. If they did not have a personal experience, you can be assured that they knew someone who had.

As it had been for many years the custom for getting on the bus for Black persons in Montgomery in the 1950’s was to pay at the front door, get off the bus, and then re-enter through the back door. It was this humiliating practice – even by the standards of the 1950’s in rigidly segregated Alabama – that led to one of the most egregious and tragic violations of an individual’s human rights in the history of the United States. This practice was in league with lynchings, arbitrary arrests of men leading to forced labor,

and other tragically distressing abuses. Versions of the exact circumstances surrounding the incident slightly vary, but nonetheless somehow in August of 1950 Thomas E. Brooks, a Black uniformed soldier in the United States Army, paid with his young life for an altercation on one of Montgomery's infamous municipal buses. It appears that only a handful of writers, who were aware of the incident, found its connection to the 1955 protest relevant enough to be mentioned in their respective writings. It seems that Brooks boarded a Montgomery bus through the front door, paid his fare, and then refused to exit the bus and re-enter through the back door when ordered to do so by the bus driver. Greenhaw and Williams provided the most thorough account told through the eyes of two African-American women who happened to be on the bus as the tragedy unfolded. The writers also chronicled the testimony of Thomas Brooks' widow as she recounted the story for the court at the trial of Martin Luther King, Jr. six years later. According to the women on the bus Brooks, a Korean War veteran, entered the bus in his "neatly pressed khaki army uniform" dropped his dime into the slot and completely eschewing protocol continued down the aisle toward the back of the bus (Greenhaw and Williams 10). The young soldier ignored the bus driver's command that he return to the front, exit the bus, and re-enter through the back door. The driver then angrily demanded that Brooks get off the bus. The young man intimated to the driver that he had no problem doing so as long as his dime was refunded. This only increased the anger of the driver who found the suggestion of a refund absurd and threatened to call the cops if Brooks didn't get off the bus immediately. He then flagged down a uniformed police officer and shouted out to him "I got a *nigger* on here who won't act right. I need your help" (Greenhaw and Williams 11). The white police officer entered the bus and immediately growled toward Brooks, "Get down here, *nigger*". The young soldier did not move, and the first command of the officer was followed by; "Get your black ass off the bus, now!"

(Greenhaw and Williams 12). Here is where the story takes its tragic turn. The policeman confronted Brooks in the center aisle, repeatedly struck him in the head with a billy club, and with the assistance of the driver pulled him down that same aisle to the front door of the bus. According to those very same witnesses, “Brooks shook free, shoved the two white men aside, pulled himself upright, and bolted out the door” (Greenhaw and Williams 12). Quoting witnesses, both black and white, the authors tell us “the officer shouted stop and drew his revolver firing his gun and striking Brooks in the back as he leaped from the front door” (Greenhaw and Williams 13). When questioned about the incident the police department’s official response was that “Brooks was killed by a law enforcement officer who was protecting himself in the line of duty” (Greenhaw and Williams 14). Thus a young soldier’s life was snuffed out for standing up for his rights at home; for the very same rights that his country had asked him to defend abroad; the same rights that five years hence an entire community of people decided to stand up for.

In his biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., entitled Stride Toward Freedom, Jim Bishop and Dr. King himself, made reference to the Brooks incident as told via the testimony of Mrs. Stella Brooks, the young soldier’s wife. This testimony was given at Dr. King’s trial in 1956, when he faced charges for organizing an illegal boycott. All of the scribes mentioned Dr. King’s trial and conviction, but only The Thunder of Angels, Daybreak of Freedom and Let My People Go, along with the Bishop and King volumes, detail Mrs. Brooks’ testimony about the murder of her husband. Stella Brooks was called along with several other black women as a witness for the defense of Dr. King. Their collective testimonies helped illustrate for the court the debasement endured on a regular basis by the Black riders of Montgomery’s municipal buses at the hands of the white bus drivers. As for Mrs. Brooks, she calmly testified that she stopped riding the buses in 1950 when they killed her husband. When asked for what reason she answered, “because the

bus driver was the cause of my husband's death" (Burns 67). When asked to share with the court what happened to her husband, she recounted the story as told to her six years earlier by witnesses on the bus. "He just got on before the bus driver told him, the bus was crowded, he asked for his dime back and he wouldn't give him his dime back. The police killed him. The bus driver called the police and the police came up and shot him" (Burns 67). Since Mrs. Brooks was lacking in verbal sophistication, in Stride Toward Freedom, Dr. King, his collaborators, and the other authors as well, felt the need to present more articulate versions of Mrs. Brook's testimony when recounting the same story. The following is the version as presented by King in his memoir:

"After paying his fare he was ordered by the driver to get off and re-board by the back door. He looked through the crowded bus and seeing that there was no room in the back he said that he would get off and walk if the driver would return his dime. The driver refused; an argument ensued; and the driver called the police. The policeman arrived, abusing Brooks, who still refused to leave the bus unless his dime was returned. The policeman shot him. It happened so suddenly that everybody was dazed. Brooks died of his wounds" (King 148).

Apparently there was a second similar brutal episode in 1952 that also resulted in the loss of the life of a young black man. Ironically both men share the same surname Brooks, and the second Brooks was also a soldier. According to Stewart Burns, like his counterpart Thomas two years earlier, Hilliard Brooks was also in uniform when he was shot and killed by a Montgomery police officer. The circumstances however that surround the killing of Hilliard Brooks are less clear and the incident is mentioned in less than a handful of the books referenced here. The three writers that do give an account of the incident are in agreement that there was some sort of argument between the young black army veteran and the white bus driver over a dime fare. In To the Mountaintop, Stewart Burns affords the incident one sentence; informing us only that the day after his discharge from the army Mr. Brooks was "shot dead by a cop after arguing with the bus driver over his dime fare" (Burns 19). Jo Ann Robinson and Robert Walker, the two other

authors who recounted this story do offer a little more detail than Mr. Burns. They both disclosed that Brooks had been drinking prior to the encounter on the bus. According to witnesses he very well may have been drunk. The driver accused the young soldier of not paying his fare, and he in turn insisted that he did. One thing led to another, the police are called, and before you knew it another young Black life laid wasted, dead on the streets of *The Cradle of the Confederacy*. According to Robinson, and very simply put, “when the police came they shot and killed Brooks as he got off the bus” (Robinson 21). The Black citizens of Montgomery were left tragically to wonder once again “if any man, drunk or sober, had to be killed because of one dime, one bus fare” (Robinson 22).

Another specific compelling example of the abusive treatment that Black riders were subjected to before the protest involved Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson. As gripping as Mrs. Robinson’s story was, it is worthy to note that it was mentioned in only about half of the books read for this paper. Remarkably, neither Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. nor Reverend Robert Graetz deemed the incident significant enough to mention in their memoirs of the boycott. The authors Taylor Branch (*Parting the Waters*), Adam Fairclough (*Better Day Coming*), and Aldon D. Morris (*The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*), also fail to include it. One of the two King biographers David Garrow mentions it several times while the other, Jim Bishop, fails to mention it at all. Keep in mind the unpleasant incident occurred a full six years before the boycott. However, the effect on Mrs. Robinson never waned and definitely influenced her actions from that day on right up until December 1955. The particular encounter was, by no stretch of the imagination, the worse incident to occur on the buses but instead gains what notoriety it does because of who it involved. In December 1949, Mrs. Robinson who was an active member of the Women’s Political Council, had a vexing and traumatic experience. The significance of the experience in direct correlation to the Montgomery Bus Boycott was



best summed up in Bus Ride to Justice. In it author Fred Gray divulged that “this was the beginning of Mrs. Robinson’s determination to end racial discrimination on the city buses in Montgomery” (Gray 39). By no coincidence, six years later Mrs. Robinson and other members of the organization became the primary organizers of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The experience was retold by her in her memoir of the boycott The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started. It was an alarming and distressing occurrence that had an immeasurable and lasting impact on Ms. Robinson. So much so, that when recalling the terrible episode thirty-five years later to historian David J. Garrow, Mrs. Robinson still became “emotional with tears welling up in her eyes” (Robinson xiii). The incident occurred as Mrs. Robinson prepared to leave Montgomery in 1949 to visit relatives in Cleveland, Ohio for the holidays. The account below served as the prologue to her memoir and is as follows:

I had boarded an almost empty city bus, dropped my coins into the proper place, and observed the passengers aboard, only two, a white woman who sat in the third row from the front, and a black man in a seat near the back. I took the fifth row seat from the front and sat down, immediately closing my eyes and envisioning, in my mind’s eye, the wonderful two weeks vacation I would have with family and friends in Ohio. From the far distance of my reverie I thought I heard a voice, an unpleasant voice, but I was too happy to worry about voices, or any noise for that matter. But the same words were repeated, in a stronger, unsavory tone, and I opened my eyes. Immediately I sat up in that seat. The bus driver had stopped the bus, turned in his seat, and was speaking to me! “If you can sit in the fifth row from the front of other buses in Montgomery, suppose you get off and ride one of them! I heard him, but the message did not register with me. My thoughts were elsewhere. I had not even noticed that the bus had come to a full stop, or I had subconsciously surmised that passengers were getting on or off. Suddenly the driver left his seat and stood over me. His hand was drawn back as if he were going to strike me. “Get up from there!” he yelled. He repeated it, for dazed, I had not moved. “Get up from there!” I leaped to my feet, afraid he would hit me, and ran to the front door to get off the bus. I could have died from the embarrassment (Robinson 15).

In Bearing the Cross and The Walking City David Garrow repeated this story almost verbatim, as does Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw in The Thunder of Angels. As one of two other writers who recalled the story, the other being Robert Walker, Stewart Burns also felt that the episode was important enough to be recounted in To The Mountaintop, his treatise on the life and times of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1984 when she repeated the story in her memoir, Mrs. Robinson added, “I felt like a dog. And I got mad, after this was over, and I realized that I was a human being, and just as intelligent and far more trained than that bus driver was. But I think he wanted to hurt me, and he did...I cried all the way to Cleveland” (Robinson xiii). Both Stewart Burns and Robert Walker hint at Mrs. Robinson’s naivety and relate that at the time she was unfamiliar with the peculiar seating rules of Montgomery, Alabama. From Walker we learn that Mrs. Robinson “had been raised in Culloden, Georgia and had spent the past years in Texas but had not had any encounter with an overt racist public transportation system, especially not the kind that was the law of the city of Montgomery” (Walker 117). Burns however, mistakenly stated that when the incident occurred Mrs. Robinson was on a bus headed for the airport, when in fact she was on the way to a friend’s house so that they could then travel to the airport together. In addition, Walker erroneously asserted that after the incident she walked home although a paragraph earlier he states correctly that Mrs. Robinson began walking back to the college. Although these may seem to be only minor transgressions, if either had referenced Mrs. Robinson’s very own memoir these simple facts appear in the very beginning of her book in the prologue. In their embellishments the two essayists do however correctly relate the long-term implications of Mrs. Robinson’s clash with the iniquitous segregation on the buses of Montgomery and her declaration to do something about the situation on the buses. Walker recounts, “When she returned to Montgomery, she shared her experience on the

city buses with other members of the Women's Political Council. From that point on, Jo Ann had made a personal vow to do whatever she could to destroy the system of segregation in the city of Montgomery. She became president of WPC in 1950" (Walker 118). We learn from Burns that under her leadership "the group focused more on bus treatment and other everyday concerns, such as police brutality and inferior parks and playgrounds" (Burns 7). She vowed to do all in her power to remedy the racial abuse on Montgomery's buses. As the head of The Women's Political Council from 1950 on, Jo Ann Robinson preceded to prepare to stage a boycott of the buses when the time was ripe and the people were ready. We have since learned that the right time came in 1955.

Jo Ann Robinson's disturbing encounter in 1949 and the tragic ends to the lives of Thomas Brooks and Hilliard Brooks in 1950 and 1952 represented extreme examples of what life was like on the Jim Crow buses of Montgomery, Alabama. The fact that persons should die in defiance of the Jim Crow laws that permeated the buses is exceptional indeed. Nonetheless, however extreme their stories may have been this in no way diminished the harrowing daily experiences of thousands of other riders. Almost daily some Black man, woman, or child had an unpleasant experience on the segregated buses. Prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott public transportation in Montgomery was an anathema to the Black citizens of the city who have no choice but to endure the daily humiliation they were subjected to on public conveyances. There was even an episode retold by Jo Ann Robinson that involved the arrest of two young Black children for sitting near the front of a bus in the seats reserved for whites. The two were a ten and twelve year-old sister and brother visiting from New Jersey. They were used riding integrated buses and trains and completely unaware of the rigid and unbending segregation laws that ruled the buses in Montgomery. The only mention of this particular event I found was in [The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It](#).

“They got on the bus and sat down by a white man and a boy. The white youngster told the older Black youth to get up from beside him. The youngster refused. The driver commanded them to move, but the children continued to sit where they were. They were not in the habit of getting up out of their seats on a public vehicle to give them to someone else. The police were called, and the two children were arrested. Relatives paid their fines, sent the children home, and the case became history” (Robinson 21).

After the protest there is some sense of normalcy and black riders can now sit on the buses wherever they like without the threat of arrest, expulsion, and yes even deadly force.

### **Pioneers Before Rosa**

There is no denying that in Alabama, in the 1950's, Mrs. Rosa Parks' behavior on that bus in Montgomery was nothing short of bold, courageous, and daring. However, the reality is that in a historical sense, the manner in which the incident evolved was not particularly extraordinary. In addition, Mrs. Parks' behavior was not as exceptional as we have been led to believe by many who have chronicled the event – including several of the authors referenced in this work. As a matter of fact if Mrs. Parks had not been arrested by the authorities, but merely removed from the bus that fateful day in Montgomery, Alabama, the chances are great that we may never have heard of Mrs. Rosa L. Parks.

Throughout the country, during the Jim Crow era, there were many anonymous individuals who rebelled against segregated seating in public transportation that we never read about. We are reminded by Lynne Olson that, “Throughout the Jim Crow South, riding on public transportation was regarded by African-American women as a particular torment, whether they were pushed to the back of a bus or streetcar or to the smoking car

of a train” (Olson 87). I find that in the literature there is a dearth of information pertaining to those African-American women who long before Rosa Parks stood up for their rights as passengers on public conveyances. This number greatly increased, particularly during and after World War II. By 1955, non-compliance with the myriad of segregation laws that permeated public transportation across the United States became a somewhat common occurrence. It can be safely stated that the roots of the Montgomery protest had been sowed elsewhere, and in many venues, long before 1955 by a nondescript collection of valiant African-American men and women. It is also important to note that problems with Jim Crow seating and racial segregation were not restricted to the American South; neither was the Civil Rights Movement strictly a Southern phenomenon. In the nineteenth century the right of African-Americans to ride public transportation was an issue that was wrestled with in cities up and down the United States’ Eastern seaboard. For example, in African-American circles there was a call to boycott the City of New York’s segregated transportation system as early as 1838.

The following are just a small sampling of some noteworthy episodes involving African-American women who refused to passively submit to the wanton discrimination on public transportation. It must be said that although we are discussing events that were a century or more apart, there are too many parallels to ignore and the recurring and underlying theme was the same – the segregation of races.

Over one-hundred years prior to Mrs. Parks’ confrontation in Alabama, on the streets of New York City in July of 1854 an African-American woman named Elizabeth Jennings had a similar outrageous experience on a segregated public conveyance. At the core of the problem was the fact that at that time in New York City, African-Americans were not welcomed on most of the streetcars, and as a result they rarely if ever used public transportation. Beginning in the late 1840’s, in New York City there were special

public streetcars upon which African-Americans could ride. They had large “*Colored Persons Allowed*” signs on the back or in a side window. However, these large horse drawn carriages ran infrequently, and on many occasions not at all. All other streetcars without the sign were governed by an arbitrary system whereby the drivers, who were all white, determined who could and could not ride. These drivers were not unlike their brethren in Montgomery one-hundred years hence, who arbitrarily decided the seating arrangements on the buses they drove.

On Sunday morning July 16, 1854 the aforementioned Miss Elizabeth Jennings, a twenty-four year old African-American schoolteacher, while on her way to church boarded a streetcar without one of the “*Colored Persons Allowed*” signs. The conductor first attempted to get Miss Jennings off the vehicle by alleging that it is full. When this was not successful, he claimed that the other passengers were displeased with her presence. However, Miss Jennings was insistent about her right to ride what was purported to be public transportation. With this the conductor and the young teacher exchanged words. Miss Jennings reportedly questioned his origins and informed him, and anyone else who would listen, that she was a respectable person born and raised in New York. At this the conductor and the driver then attempted in vain to physically remove the young woman from the conveyance as she (like Miss Colvin in Alabama in 1955) fiercely resisted. The streetcar briefly continued on its route until the driver spotted a policeman and enlisted his aid in forcibly removing Miss Jennings from the car, physically injuring her in the process. This very well might have been the end of the episode had it not been for the fact that Miss Jennings was the daughter of Thomas L. Jennings, a well-connected and important businessman and community leader. Analogous to Montgomery the African-American community in Manhattan was infuriated and the following day there was a huge spirited gathering at the Jennings’

church. Miss Jennings was unable to attend because of her injuries, but her written account of the unpleasant incident was read to the crowd. The church notified Frederick Douglass' paper and the New York Tribune, and both papers promptly ran reprints of Jennings' written version of events. Elizabeth Jennings and her father then made a decision to take the operators of the streetcar, The Third Avenue Railway Company to court, and hired the law firm of Culver, Parker, and Arthur. They were represented in court by twenty-four year old Chester A. Arthur, who as fate would have it, twenty-seven years later, became the twenty-first president of the United States of America. The Brooklyn Circuit Court ruled in favor of the young Black schoolteacher and she was awarded five hundred dollars' worth of damages. The settlement was later reduced to two-hundred twenty-five dollars plus another twenty-three dollars in court costs. More notable was that the presiding judge William Rockwell stated that "Colored persons if sober well behaved and free from disease had the same rights as others and could neither be excluded by any rules of the Company, nor by force or violence". One day later The Third Avenue Railway Company enjoined all of its conductors and drivers to admit African-Americans on their vehicles, and by 1860 all of public streetcars and rail cars of New York City are integrated.

Also of note in the nineteenth century were two more egregious incidents that involved a couple of the most renowned women in the annals of the African-American struggle for justice and equality in the United States – Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells. That these two legendary giants, in the fight for equal rights for Blacks, were treated the way they were is nothing short of phenomenal. Their treatment in these two cases clearly illustrated the pervasiveness of unjustifiable and often reckless racial discrimination on public transportation in the U.S.

At the wake of the end of the Civil War in 1865, Sojourner Truth added to her list of accomplishments by testing the legality of racial segregation on the streetcars in our nation's capital, Washington, D.C. In the midst of trying to force desegregation on the public conveyances in Washington, D.C., just a few years after Ms. Jennings nightmare in New York, the sixty-eight year old woman was forcibly removed from a streetcar by the conductor causing a serious injury to her arm. In response, an undaunted but enraged Truth secured an audience with the president of the company and demanded the removal of the conductor from his job. Although the streetcars remain segregated, the president of the railroad company agreed to fire the conductor for his behavior. Sojourner Truth then had the audacity to have the conductor arrested for assault and battery, bringing this particular sequence of events to a somewhat justifiable end.

Ida B. Wells' personal encounter with Jim Crow seating began a few years later in September of 1883, when she purchased a ticket for a first-class seat in the ladies car on a train from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennessee. Ms. Wells took her seat but "when the conductor arrives to collect tickets, he took a look at her and barked, you're not allowed in this car. Move to the next one, the smoker, the one set aside for *niggers*" (Olson 33). Much to the conductor's chagrin Ms. Wells promptly informed him that since she had purchased a first-class ticket she intended to stay in the seat she paid for. In what had become a familiar scenario in these cases, the conductor attempted to psychically remove the young woman but was unable to do so by himself. However, with the help of two baggage handlers Ms. Wells was eventually forcibly removed from her seat and dragged down the aisle to the smoking car. Early the next year, Ida B. Wells filed suit against the railroad company in local court, won the case and was awarded two hundred dollars. The court case had the potential to foster a fitting end to the unfortunate episode, but instead the railroad company appealed the verdict and refused to adjust its segregationist policies.



Later the same year Ida B. Wells was once again denied access to the ladies car on the very same railroad line. This time however a confrontation was avoided, as the conductor stopped the train and allowed Ms. Wells to disembark. Once again she filed suit and this time was awarded five-hundred dollars.

In July of 1944 another heroic stance was taken by another young African-American woman named Irene Morgan. Ms. Morgan sparked a firestorm, when in defiance of Jim Crow laws of Virginia, she refused to give up her seat on a Greyhound bus to a white couple when asked to do so by the driver. After much resistance a sheriff and his deputy succeeded in removing the twenty-seven year old mother from the bus and she was jailed for resisting arrest and violating Virginia's segregation laws. Morgan pleaded guilty to the first charge of resisting arrest and paid a fine. She pleaded not guilty to the second, but nonetheless was found guilty of breaking segregation laws and fined. Ms. Morgan and her lawyers appealed the case and it wound up going all the way to the Supreme Court. The subsequent case surrounding the actions of Ms. Morgan provided advocates for desegregation a winning strategy for fighting racial segregation in the courts, and resulted in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in interstate travel. In June of 1946, ten years before the Montgomery case of Browder v. Gayle, in *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* the United States Supreme Court ruled by a vote of 6-1 that segregation in interstate travel was unconstitutional as an undue burden on commerce.

On June 22, 1954, a year before the stirrings in Montgomery, another young black woman, Sarah Mae Flemming was forcibly prevented by a bus driver from taking a seat in the front of a segregated city bus in Columbia, South Carolina. Encouraged by local civil rights activists in the capital city, the twenty-year-old Ms. Flemming attempted to bring suit against the bus operators, South Carolina Electric and Gas Company. However,

the federal court in Columbia refused to accommodate her and it is not until the following year that the case is eventually heard by the United States Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. In July of 1955 the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that segregated seating in Ms. Flemming's case was unconstitutional. It was a decision that would make front-page headlines in the Montgomery Advertiser. Ominously, for the white power structure throughout the South, when coupled with the landmark Supreme Court Morgan ruling, the Flemming case was a strong indication of the profound social changes on the horizon.

Between Ms. Morgan's arrest in Virginia in 1944 and the Supreme Court ruling in 1946, there were two other notable clashes on public transportation that were eerily similar to Irene Morgan's experience. Though similar there was one significant difference, these particular incidents involved Jim Crow seating on the railroad and not on buses. Another important detail was that both episodes involved travelers whose journeys began in New York City. These confrontations involved African-American women from the South who had migrated to the North. The incidents occurred on return visits to the South by these women, and at issue was their refusal to change their seats upon crossing the Mason-Dixon Line. They were to join the long line of proud Black women who went to court to claim the right as paying customers to sit wherever they pleased on public transportation of any type. The two astonishing incidents were chronicled in the volume To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City by Martha Biondi.

Ms. Biondi related that in 1945 New Yorker Nina Beltran and her five-year-old son uneventfully boarded a train at Penn Station in New York for a trip south, only to encounter trouble once out of the confines of the North. When the train arrived in North Carolina a conductor told all the Black passengers that they must give up their seats and

move to the Jim Crow car. Trying to navigate her way to the car with her baggage and son in tow proved to be a difficult task for the young woman. By the time she was successful, there were no seats left in the Jim Crow car for her or her son. Reasoning that she had bought the same ticket as everyone else, white or black, to the chagrin of the conductor Ms. Beltran returned to her original seat. At the next stop the conductor summoned a police officer who then forcibly removed the young woman and her son to the overcrowded *colored* car. The two of them completed their trip south under these deplorable conditions but once back in New York Ms. Beltran successfully sued the railway company for three-thousand dollars.

A year later in 1946 another African-American New Yorker, Mrs. Berta Mae Watkins, purchased a reserved seat on a New York train bound for Florida. However, once the train arrived in Jacksonville, Florida Mrs. Watkins was ordered by the train authorities to surrender her reserved seat and move to a segregated car. In a familiar scenario Mrs. Watkins refused, the police were called, and she was forcibly removed. Mrs. Watkins also sued the railroad company and was awarded a judgment of one thousand dollars. On the heels of all this uncertainty and disorder we learn from Ms. Biondi that “the railroad companies wanted to find a way to continue segregation but avoid all of these confrontations and lawsuits. So officials at Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan began to assign southbound Black passengers to Jim Crow cars in New York” (Biondi 85). This was quickly discovered and led to a major showdown between officials at Penn Station and prominent Black New Yorkers forcing the station to retreat from this stance. A Black New York minister was quoted as saying very appropriately, “perhaps we cannot do too much about conditions in Georgia, but there is no reason why anyone boarding a train in New York should be segregated” (Biondi 85).

## **The Significant Involvement of Other Women in Montgomery**

Mrs. Rosa Parks was deeply rooted in the Black protest tradition and it is important to note that she was one of the first women in Montgomery to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As a matter of fact in the book The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement we learn that “in the 1940’s Mrs. Parks had refused several times to comply with segregation rules on the buses” (Morris 51). In 1943 Mrs. Parks was ejected from a Montgomery bus. James Blake, the very same driver who ejected then was the one who has her arrested on December 1, 1955. The author Herbert Kohl points out that, “Everyone in the African American community in Montgomery, Alabama knew Rosa Parks. She was a community leader and people admired her courage” (Kohl 20). Mrs. Parks was the secretary to the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and at the time of her arrest also served as a youth director within the organization. There is no question that the notoriety and acclaim afforded Rosa Parks for her actions on that historic December day in Montgomery, Alabama was well deserved. However, there were other women directly or indirectly involved in the ensuing protest, whose actions, when closely examined, were nothing short of heroic. The boycott could not and would not have been successful without the plethora of ordinary nondescript women, and their courageous and enterprising spirit. Their stories were particularly compelling when one considers that the face of the Civil Rights Movement in general, and the Montgomery movement in particular, was more often than not that of the Black male preacher. To this end, in Parting the Waters, the first book of historian Taylor Branch’s extensive Civil Rights trilogy, Branch talks of how the origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was contested among various modern day civil rights historians. There are those who credit the activist Mr. E.D. Nixon with starting the

boycott and others who unequivocally state that the Women's Political Council was solely responsible. There is no question among the authors I referenced of the importance of Mr. Nixon in taking the first steps to fight the Parks case, including contacting white attorney Clifford Durr and his wife Virginia to secure Mrs. Parks' release after her arrest. However there is ample evidence throughout the volumes I read to support the idea that Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council were the primary catalysts that put the boycott into motion and made it a reality.

It is of no small consequence that prior to December 1, 1955, Mrs. Parks had several times before refused to move and relinquish her seat on the bus to a white person. "In fact, she had been a committed civil rights activist since the 1940's, a staunch member of the NAACP with a history of rebellion against the casual cruelties of white bus drivers" (Olson 13). In addition, it is highly significant that other women had similarly refused to give up their seats on the city buses and had also been arrested. This included two young women earlier the very same year. In March of 1955 a fifteen year old high school student named Claudette Colvin was arrested for challenging segregation on a Montgomery bus, and in October eighteen year old Mary Louise Smith was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. There was much talk of a boycott after the arrest of Miss Colvin and the resentment over the arrest of a mere teenager was widespread throughout the black community. As a matter of fact, the Women's Political Council sprang into action and went so far as to compose a flier calling for a boycott. However, "Colvin was seen as feisty, uncontrollable, profane, and emotional by some community leaders who worried that she was too young and not of the right social standing to organize a broader campaign around" (Theoharis 57). At the time many black leaders, especially women such as Jo Ann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks of the WPC, felt that an opportunity for a constructive protest had been missed.

There was less furor over the Smith incident because Miss Smith, unlike Miss Colvin before her and Mrs. Parks after her, chose to plead guilty and paid a fine.

Nevertheless, in early 1956 both Colvin and Smith joined Aurelia Browder, a Montgomery housewife, and Mrs. Susie McDonald, a Black woman in her seventies, as two of the four plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit (*Browder v. Gayle*) that challenged the constitutionality of city and state bus laws. Jeanetta Reese, a fifth plaintiff, dropped her name from the suit after she and her husband received death threats. Many that have studied the Montgomery Bus Boycott agree that the protest might well have been an exercise in futility, had it not been for the 1956 Supreme Court decision in *Browder v. Gayle*. The decision declared the segregation laws of the city of Montgomery and the state of Alabama unconstitutional, making segregation on public transportation illegal. Still, there is no question that it was Mrs. Parks' courageous act of defiance and her subsequent arrest and conviction that directly resulted in the Black population of Montgomery, Alabama taking the first successful steps towards eliminating the degrading, demeaning, and humiliating treatment on the city buses of Montgomery.

Critical to the narrative of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is the aforementioned Women's Political Council of Montgomery which played a crucial role from the very beginning of the initial one day boycott of the buses. As early as 1949 the WPC, as it is commonly known, was prepared to stage a bus boycott because of how African-Americans in general, and Black women in particular were treated on the buses. In the years preceding the boycott the Women's Political Council was the most active and assertive Black civic group in Montgomery. It was a group of mostly professional black women who lobbied the city and the state on social, political, and economic issues that were of importance to the Black community of Montgomery. In May of 1954 only a few days after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that overturned

the 1896 Plessey v. Ferguson separate but equal doctrine, WPC president Jo Ann Robinson sent a letter to the mayor of Montgomery seeking better treatment for Black passengers on the buses. In an attempt to demonstrate that she was serious, Mrs. Robinson warned the mayor that plans were being made to ride the buses less or to ride them not at all. However her actions proved to be a bit ahead of the times, because the letter was written a full year and a half before the actual protest became a reality.

When the Montgomery Bus Boycott actually came to fruition, leading the charge was WPC President Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson. Mrs. Robinson's own experience on the buses was discussed in a previous segment of this paper, and her memoir of the boycott The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It, published in 1987, is one of the volumes referenced extensively for this work.

The idea of a bus boycott in Montgomery had been floating about for years and when the time came to act the Women's Political Council was prepared to see it come to realization. On the night of December 1, 1955, upon hearing of the arrest of Rosa Parks and receiving a phone call from Fred Gray about the scheduled hearing of Mrs. Parks' arrest on Monday, Mrs. Robinson sprang into action. She telephoned other members of the WPC and they were all in agreement that the time to act is upon them. The members urged Mrs. Robinson to put into action the long standing plan to boycott the municipal buses of Montgomery, starting the following Monday, the day of Mrs. Parks' trial. Throughout the night, with the help of some of her students from Alabama State College, Robinson mimeographed 35,000 flyers announcing the planned boycott of the buses, which read as follows:

This is for Monday Dec. 5, 1955 – Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of here seat on the bus and give it to a white person. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights too., for if Negroes did

not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, your daughter, or mother. The woman's case will come up on Monday. We are therefore asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off all buses Monday (Robinson 46).

After her class the next morning, with the help of several WPC members and two of her male students, Mrs. Robinson went about distributing the notices of the boycott throughout the city. They spent the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon dropping off bundles of notices at schools where both teachers and students alike helped to distribute them further and get the word of the impending plan to boycott the buses to as many people as possible. Flyers were also left at neighborhood stores, barber shops, beauty parlors, factories, and any other business frequented by the Black population during the day. By the end of the day just about every Black adult and child was aware of the plan and was passing the word along to those who were not aware of the protest. This sequence of events was corroborated by all of the authors referenced but was apparently soon forgotten as the story of the boycott unfolded. Nevertheless, Jo Ann Robinson and other members of the Women's Political Council of Montgomery stood at the core of the creation of the successful one day boycott; a boycott that went on to last for the next thirteen months and propelled the entire city into the annals of the history of The Civil Rights Movement. These courageous women of the WPC were visionaries and their actions the night of Rosa Parks' arrest remain central to the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In the midst of research, another woman's name that repeatedly appears and receives varying degrees of coverage, is Juliette Hampton Morgan. Jo Ann Robinson



devoted an entire page to her story. Taylor Branch and Martin Luther King, Jr. only allocated a couple of paragraphs to her plight. Other authors, such as Jim Bishop only assigned a sentence or two. Interestingly, in Bearing the Cross David Garrow decided that Juliette Morgan was worthy of no more than a footnote. In their memoirs, Ralph Abernathy and the attorney Fred Gray failed to mention her at all. Fulfilling a need to find out more about this fascinating woman and her connection to the narrative of the boycott I turned to [encyclopediaofalabama.org](http://encyclopediaofalabama.org) and to her 2006 biography Journey Toward Justice. Juliette Hampton Morgan was a white woman in Montgomery with a privileged background of wealth and status and all of the connections and trappings that accompany such social standing. Jo Ann Robinson describes her as being, “Well informed on local, national, and international events, and a keen student of literature, highly intellectual, even brilliant, yet humanely understanding where ethnic groups were involved” (Robinson 102). There was however one significant difference between Juliette Morgan and her moneyed friends, family, and neighbors. Because of severe anxiety attacks that prevented her from driving Ms. Morgan rode the city buses back and forth to work. On these buses she witnessed the demeaning, insulting, and abusive treatment of Black men and woman riders at the hands of the white bus drivers. In 1939, a full sixteen years before Mrs. Parks’ stand and the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Morgan began writing letters to the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser, Montgomery’s local newspaper. The letters criticized and condemned the verbal and physical abuse she continually witnessed on the city’s buses. As a direct result of the letters she lost her job at a local bookstore. This is the first indication that Ms. Morgan was to receive treatment from the white community that was specifically reserved for those members who ceased to support the status quo of segregation and the debasement

of the Black citizenry of Montgomery. Despite all of this, Morgan managed to secure employment as a librarian at the Carnegie Library in Montgomery.

In 1952 Juliette Morgan wrote another highly publicized letter to the Advertiser correctly prophesying that the Blacks of Montgomery would tire one day of being pushed around and treated in such a horrendous fashion on the buses. Once again she raised the ire of white segregationists in Montgomery. After the Rosa Parks arrest and a week into the boycott, on December 12, 1955 Ms. Morgan “ told her views in a remarkable letter to the Montgomery Advertiser, she compared the boycott to Gandhi’s Salt March in the conflict preceding Indian Independence , and extolled the dignity of the Negro movement in Montgomery” (Garrow 233). In Stride Toward Freedom Martin Luther King, Jr. credited Juliette Morgan with being the first to draw an analogy between the Montgomery boycott and Gandhi’s practice of non-violent civil disobedience (King 85). Immediately after the publication of the letter Morgan was subjected to an increased level of rejection and condemnation at the hands of (former) friends and neighbors in the white community. She was subject to continual threats and harassment, night and day, at home, at work, and in the streets of Montgomery.

In 1957 in the aftermath of the boycott, and after the publication of another of her scathing treatises on the treatment of Blacks and the southern way of life, that appeared in the Tuscaloosa News, Morgan was further ostracized by white society. Overwhelmed by the persecution and the pressure, and suffering further from anxiety and depression, on July 15, 1957 Juliette Hampton Morgan resigned her job at the library. Tragically, no longer able to maintain her personal crusade for justice, and in the face of such horrendous hostility Ms. Morgan committed suicide in her home by overdosing on prescribed medication. Juliette Morgan was no less a tragic victim than those Blacks of Montgomery that died at the hands of racist authorities.

## **The Other Boycotts**

The Montgomery Bus Boycott may very well be the most famous boycott in the history of the United States. As social movements go, there is no denying its impact on a global scale. However, the boycott was neither the first nor the last protest in opposition to segregation on public transportation in the United States. By 1955 black protests against bus segregation in the United States were increasingly common. In that regard, we are reminded by Adam Fairclough in Better Day Coming that “On May 18, 1953 about a thousand blacks in Richmond, Virginia, held a public meeting to protest against a string of bus-related arrests: seven people had been recently jailed for refusing to move back” (Fairclough 228). In the mid twentieth-century there occurred three other major bus boycotts in the United States that were either directly or indirectly linked to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In chronological order they were (Harlem) New York City in 1941, Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1953, and Tallahassee, Florida in 1956. The protests that preceded Montgomery in 1941 and 1953 were much smaller in size and more local in impact than Montgomery and Tallahassee. In spite of this, both events in their own way contributed to the Montgomery Bus Boycott in particular, and the Civil Rights Movement in general. They were undeniably important templates for future protest philosophies and tactics. Although none of the other boycotts approached the exposure and notoriety of the Montgomery protest, they all held a measure of social, political, and historical significance in their own right.

“While much has been written about Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, historians have ignored Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the Harlem Bus Boycott of 1941” (Garrow 303). In 1941 “the Omnibus Cooperation,

which operated the buses in the streets of New York City, had refused to employ any Blacks except as cleaners in the garage” (Powell 66). In response, as head of an organization identified as the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in March of 1941, called for a boycott of the buses by the residents of Harlem. As a result “hundreds of buses were left vacant night after night”. By the fourth week of the strike, Rev. Powell’s committee along with the Harlem Labor Union and the National Negro Congress “began to send thousands of pickets downtown, and the company began to weaken” (Powell 67). Subsequently the boycott was successful and economic reality forced the bus company to rethink its hiring practices. The New York Times reported on April 20, 1941 that an agreement was signed by representatives of the Transport Workers Union, the United Negro Bus Strike Committee, the Fifth Avenue Coach Company and the New York City Omnibus Corporation. According to the agreement the next 100 jobs on the buses were to be given to Blacks and thereafter Blacks were to be hired alternately with white workers. Not so coincidentally this was the same year that the Black union leader A. Philip Randolph planned a march on Washington demanding the end of segregation in the armed forces and an end to racial discrimination in the country’s defense industries. The march was aborted a week before its launch, when under pressure from the Black community, President Franklin Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Commission.

The success of the boycott and other similar grassroots initiatives helped to spur Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. on to a successful career in politics. He became the first Black council representative on the New York City Council and later a member of the United States Congress. In November of 1955 less than a month before the Rosa Parks arrest, at the invitation of E.D Nixon, Congressman Powell had been in Montgomery to speak at a meeting of Mr. Nixon’s Progressive Democratic Association. In his speech to the

organization and in private conversation with Mr. Nixon Congressman Powell talked “passionately about the changes the (New York) boycott had brought about” (Greenhaw and Williams 57). At the time the fiery Baptist preacher and Congressman did not realize the effect his speech would have on the course of history in its influence upon E.D. Nixon, Jo Ann Robinson, Johnnie Carr, and other prominent citizens of Montgomery who would be instrumental in the decision to initiate a boycott of the city buses of Montgomery.

The Baton Rouge, Louisiana boycott occurred before the historic 1954 school desegregation decision won by the NAACP. It also predated the more celebrated 1955-1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 1953 in Baton Rouge, under the leadership of Rev. T. J. Jemison, the Black citizens of the capital city made a collective decision to combat the segregated seating system on city buses. “It was the first evidence that the system of racial segregation could be challenged by mass action” (Morris 25). Although they comprised eighty percent of the total customers in 1953, Black men and women who used public transportation in Baton Rouge were forced to sit or stand in the back of buses while the front ten seats, reserved for whites, often remained empty. The bus boycott began on June 20, 1953 and lasted for eight days but the actual fight over the reserved seating method started well before, in February of the same year. At its February 25th meeting and in response to Rev. T.J. Jemison’s request to end the practice of reserve seating on city buses, the city council voted to amend the city’s seating code. The new seating law allowed Blacks to sit in the front seats of the buses if they did not occupy the same seat as, or sit in front of a white passenger. It abolished reserved seating, but required Black customers to board the buses from back to front and white customers from front to back. After three months of non-compliance to the law by bus drivers, on June 19, 1953 under pressure from the drivers, the state’s attorney general declared the law

unconstitutional because it violated existing Louisiana segregation legislation. Angered and discouraged by the attorney general's decision, the African-American community decided to take action and formed the United Defense League to further their cause in the fight against Jim Crow seating on the buses of Baton Rouge. That same day Jemison went on the radio and announced that a boycott of the bus system would begin the next morning. By the end of the following day no Black passengers could be found riding the buses. Instead, boycott leaders organized car pools that proved to be an unequivocal success. After the eight days of boycotting, the Baton Rouge City Council agreed to a compromise that opened all seats except for the front two rows, which would be for whites, and the back two rows, for Black riders. Mirroring the seating code passed in February, it still required that African-Americans load the buses from back to front and whites from front to back. There still existed a segment of the African-American community that wanted to continue the boycott and push for a complete end to segregated seating, but the compromise was accepted by the majority of people. The Baton Rouge bus boycott was a brave, unified, and peaceful stand against Jim Crow that proved to be a prototype for later similar protests, most notably the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott.

Tallahassee's bus protest began as a student movement after two African-American Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University students were arrested by Tallahassee police on May 26, 1956 because they refused to give up their seats next to a white passenger on a city bus. The two young women, twenty-one year old Carrie Patterson and twenty-six year old Wilhelmina Jakes, were charged with inciting a riot. As a result, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May students at FAMU decided to boycott the city buses for the rest of the school term. Soon after NAACP leaders Robert Saunders and Rev. C.K. Steele pledged their full support of the students and went about creating an organization to include all Black citizens in the boycott and to represent the Black community as a

whole. Thus the Inter Civic Council was created. The stated goal of the Inter Civic Council was the immediate desegregation of the city's bus service. Steele announced that Black customers would no longer accept segregation of any kind on the buses. This was a reflection of "Black's determination not to compromise on the issue of full integration" (Rabby 27).

After years of acquiescence to laws and customs designed to reinforce racial inequality, Blacks in Tallahassee attacked one of the most visible and humiliating symbols of racism in the city, the segregated transportation system. Beginning with a citywide bus boycott (the third to take place in the South and arguably the most successful) Tallahassee's 10,000 Black citizens united in an indigenous, nonviolent protest against segregation and persevered in their demands despite overwhelming opposition from whites. More important the boycott was sustained without the considerable outside financial and moral support that poured into the more famous boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. To civil rights supporters throughout the nation, Tallahassee was proof that Montgomery was not an aberration and that Black demands for full participation in American society would spread across the South, even into small cities (Rabby 3).

The overlaps in time are not the only significant similarities between the Tallahassee and Montgomery boycotts. Not unlike the Montgomery boycott, the Tallahassee protest also served as a successful catalyst for social change and improved race relations. However, it was not until December of 1957 that segregation on the buses of Tallahassee was officially ended. It would not be until May of 1958 that buses were completely integrated in Tallahassee. The timing was a reflection of an aversion to change by white Southerners, and at the same time the determination of Black Southerners to affect change.

### **Epilogue**

The monumental Montgomery Bus Boycott was the direct result of an accumulation of years of social unrest within the Black community of Montgomery, Alabama shaped by ordinary Black folk. "Thousands of unnamed and largely unrecognized men and women who, in 1955 and 1956, showed tremendous courage and personal sacrifice to make the Montgomery Bus Boycott

a success” (Hare viii). It is important to note here also that in Montgomery, Alabama in December of 1955 still fresh in the minds of its citizens was the horrendous and egregious kidnapping and killing of the Black teenager Emmitt Till that past summer in Money, Mississippi, a mere 400 miles away. The protest subsequently led to permanent change in the social landscape of the city of Montgomery, the state of Alabama, and the United States as a whole. Never before in American history had there been such a massive, organized, and prolonged defiance of institutional racism. The Montgomery Bus Boycott served as a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement and grew to be a model for the greatest social revolution in American history. Within a year the non-violent protest inspired forty-two other local protests against Southern segregation.

For years pressure had been mounting in Montgomery to transform a public transportation system that historically treated its African-American customers as second class citizens. To exemplify this second-class status, the law at the time stated that Blacks could not sit at the front of the bus regardless of the circumstances, and this often resulted in Black passengers standing over empty seats. Blacks were expected to enter at the front of the bus to pay their fares and then exit the bus and reenter through the back door. All of the city buses had thirty-six seats, the first ten were always reserved for whites, and the ten seats farthest toward the back for the use of Blacks, provided there were no white passengers standing. If so, Black passengers were expected to surrender their seats to accommodate them. In addition, a history of violence and abuse at the hands of the drivers, who were all white, was the wont of the Black patrons of Montgomery’s municipal transportation. By the late 1940’s Blacks in Montgomery were fed up with the embarrassment, humiliation, and anger that they felt every time they rode the bus.

The decision in Montgomery to collectively protest the deplorable treatment that Black citizens endured and succumbed to for decades laid a foundation for the means and



the ends to effect change. Beginning quite modestly as a planned one-day protest, the boycott gave birth to the Montgomery Improvement Association and propelled the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. into the role of the face of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted from December 5, 1955 to December 21, 1956 – 381 days to be exact. The fifty thousand Blacks of Montgomery stunned their city, the South, and the rest of the country by staying off the buses for over a year. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was clearly shaped by those common “Black folk,” whose often unheralded commitment and valor in the face of a hostile white majority was nothing short of remarkable. The protracted movement marked a watershed in African Americans’ determined fight for social equality, and set the stage for a decade of Black protest. Furthermore, the highly organized and carefully planned social movement that the boycott proved to be, provided a blueprint for the struggle of African Americans everywhere for rights as first-class citizens. As a result of the protest, and the accompanying legal effort, not only could the Black residents of Montgomery ride the city buses on a dignified and equitable basis, but so too could other Black citizens throughout the South.

Historically speaking, the resolve of just plain common folk, the Black political, religious, and social leaders of Montgomery to take a proactive stance, in the wake of Mrs. Parks’ arrest and conviction, is no small matter. This profound social action dramatized to the American public the determination of Blacks in the South to end segregation, and is recognized by many historians, sociologists, and other scholars as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. As a direct result of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans were greatly empowered, and realized the strength, power, and ability to effect change when they unite for a common cause. The many thousands of African American citizens of Montgomery, Alabama who,

throughout 1956, refused to continue to ride the segregated city buses – under the aegis of Jim Crow laws – contributed greatly to overwhelming and irrevocable changes of historical proportions. These changes were most evident in the discourse on race, and the course of race relations on a local, national, and global level. The participants successfully exposed the phenomena of officially sanctioned racial segregation in the American South to an international audience, and exemplified the willingness of African-Americans to challenge social ostracism in a non-violent manner. The success of the boycott emerged as a significant precursor to later individual and collective non-violent strategies and maneuvers within the Civil Rights Movement. It demonstrated for the world the powerful potential of a nonviolent mass protest to successfully challenge racial segregation. The Civil Rights Movement which culminated with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, proved to be one of the most, if not the most, profound and effective social movements that The United States of America had given birth to in its relatively young history.

The cultural, societal, and political enormity of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the social significance of its success, dwarfed the importance of any one community or individual. It is important to see how well this is reflected in the writings. There is no denying the importance of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Movement, and the celebrity afforded each for their role is well deserved. However, the protest in itself produced hundreds, if not thousands of unsung heroes. In addition to the many religious and civic leaders working behind the scenes to organize the protest and to keep it operating daily, were the thousands of steadfast participants. Without their perseverance, sacrifice, and dedication to the cause the protest could not have succeeded. Mrs. Parks had always insisted that there were many, many heroes in Montgomery and throughout the South, who refused to submit to

the terror of forced segregation. Their stories may not been adequately told, but it was only through their combined action and determination that the terror was conquered.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was the impetus for some of the most important and profound changes in American society in the twentieth century. As an unprecedented non-violent social movement it was successful in changing the course of American history. It is my hope that I was able to provide the reader of this particular composition a clearer understanding of the protest and its historical implications. Even having entered the historical epoch of the twenty-first century, the events that unfolded in the middle of the twentieth century remain steadfast in their importance to society as a whole.

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