

The montgomery bus boycott



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The Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Montgomery bus boycott changed the way people lived and reacted to each other. The American civil rights movement began a long time ago, as early as the seventeenth century, with blacks and whites all protesting slavery together. The peak of the civil rights movement came in the 1950's starting with the successful bus boycott in Montgomery Alabama. The civil rights movement was lead by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who preached nonviolence and love for your enemy.

“ Love your enemies, we do not mean to love them as a friend or intimate.

We

mean what the Greeks called agape-a disinterested love for all mankind. This

love is our regulating ideal and beloved community our ultimate goal. As we

struggle here in Montgomery, we are cognizant that we have cosmic companionship

and that the universe bends toward justice. We are moving from the black night

of segregation to the bright daybreak of joy, from the midnight of Egyptian

captivity to the glittering light of Canaan freedom”

explained Dr. King.

In the Cradle of the Confederacy, life for the white and the colored citizens was completely segregated. Segregated schools, restaurants, public water fountains, amusement parks, and city buses were part of everyday life in

Montgomery, Alabama.

Every person operating a bus line should provide equal accommodations...in such a manner as to separate the white people from Negroes.”

On Montgomery’s buses, black passengers were required by city law to sit in the

back of the segregated bus. Negroes were required to pay their fare at the front of the bus, then get off and reboard from the rear of the bus. The front row seats were reserved for white people, which left the back of the bus or no

man’s land for the black’s. There was no sign declaring the seating arrangements of the buses, but everyone knew them.

The Montgomery bus boycott started one of the greatest fights for civil

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rights in the history of America. Here in the old capital of the Confederacy, inspired by one women's courage; mobilized and organized by scores of grass-

roots leaders in churches, community organizations, and political clubs; called

to new visions of their best possibilities by a young black preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr., a people was reawakening to its destiny.

In 1953, the black community of Baton Rouge, Louisiana successfully petitioned their city council to end segregated seating on public buses. The new ordinance allowed the city buses to be seated on a first-come, first-served

basis, with the blacks still beginning their seating at the rear of the bus.

The bus drivers, who were all white, ignored the new ordinance and continued to

save seats in front of the bus for white passengers. In an effort to demand that the city follow the new ordinance, the black community staged a one-day

boycott of Baton Rouge's buses. By the end of the day, Louisiana's attorney general decided that the new ordinance was illegal and ruled that the bus

drivers did not have to change the seating arrangements on the buses.

Three months later a second bus boycott was started by Reverend T. J.

Jemison. The new boycott lasted about one week, and yet it forced the city officials to compromise. The compromise was to change the seating on the buses

to first-come, first-served seating with two side seats up front reserved for whites, and one long seat in the back for the blacks.

The bus boycott in Baton Rouge was one of the first times a community of blacks had organized direct action against segregation and won. The victory in

Baton Rouge was a small one in comparison to other civil right battles and victories. The hard work of Reverend Jemison and other organizers of the boycott, had far reaching implications on a movement that was just starting to

take root in America. In 1954 the landmark case of Brown vs. Board of Education

of Topeka decision by the Supreme Court overshadowed Baton Rouge, but the ideas

and lessons were not forgotten. They were soon used 400 miles away in

Montgomery, Alabama, where the most important boycott of the civil rights movement was about to begin.

The idea of separate but equal started in 1896 with a case called Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U. S. 537 (1896). On June 2, 1896 Homer Adolph Plessy, who was

one-eighth Negro and appeared to be white, boarded and took a vacant seat in a

coach reserved for white people on the East Louisiana railroad in New Orleans

bound for Covington, Louisiana. The conductor ordered Plessy to move to a coach

reserved for colored people, but Plessy refused. With the aid of a police

officer , Plessy was forcibly ejected from the train, locked up in the New

Orleans jail, and was taken before Judge Ferguson on the charge of violating

Louisiana's state segregation laws. In affirming Plessy's conviction, the

Supreme Court of Louisiana upheld the state law. Plessy then took the case to

the Supreme Court of America on a writ of error (an older form of appeal that

was abolished in 1929) saying that Louisiana's segregation law was unconstitutional as a denial of the Thirteenth Amendment and equal protection

clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Plessy v. Ferguson case decision stated that separate but equal was fine as long as the accommodations were equal in standard.

Case after case the separate but equal doctrine was followed but not reexamined. The equal part of the doctrine had no real meaning, because the

Supreme Court refused to look beyond any lower court holdings to find if the segregated facilities for Negroes were equal to those for whites. Many Negro accommodations were said to be equal when in fact they were definitely inferior.

The separate but equal doctrine is one of the outstanding myths of American history for it is almost always true that while indeed separate, these facilities are far from equal. Throughout the segregated public institutions, Negroes have been denied equal share of tax supported service and facilities stated President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights in 1947.

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In Topeka, Kansas the Brown's, a Negro family, lived only four blocks

from the white Sumner Elementary School. Linda Carol Brown, an eight year old

girl had to attend a segregated school twenty-one blocks from her home because

Kansas's state segregation laws allowed cities to segregate Negro and white students in public elementary schools.

Oliver Brown and twelve other parents of Negro children asked that their children be admitted to the all-white Sumner School, which was much closer to

home. The principle refused them admission, and the parents filed a suit in a federal district court against the Topeka Board of Education. The suit

contended that the refusal to admit the children to the school was a denial of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision of

the principle led to the birth of the most influential and important case of the Twentieth Century, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U. S. 483 (1954).

The federal district court was sympathetic to the Negro cause and agreed that segregation in public schools had a negative effect on Negro children, but

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the court felt binded by the descion in Plessy v. Ferguson, and refused to declare segregation unconstitutional. Mr. Brown then took the case directly to the Supreme Court of the United States.

Other cases involving school segregation were making there way to the Supreme Court from three different states-Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina-and the District of Columbia. All of the cases arrived around the same time as the Brown case. The cases all raised the same issue, and the state consolidated them under Brown v. Board of Education. The equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment is a restriction that applies only to the states, so the case from the District of Columbia was rested on the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment which is applicable to the Federal government. The case was called Bolling v. Sharpe, 349 U. S. 294 (1955), and had the same outcome as the Brown case.

In front of the Supreme Court the arguments against segregation were

presented by Thurgood Marshall, council for the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP is an organization which had

directed five cases through the courts and which had won many legal cases for

American Negroes. The states relied on primarily Plessy v. Ferguson in arguing

for the continuation of segregation in public schools.

The Supreme Court Opinion statement delivered by Mr. Chief Justice

Warren stated that

We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of

separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are

inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others of the

similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the

segregation complained, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed

by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion

whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth

Amendment.

The Brown case was necessary in clearing the way towards full equality

for the Negroes in America. Though the Brown case did not directly overturn the

Plessy case decision, it made it perfectly clear that segregation in areas other than public education could not continue. The Brown case enabled Negroes to

fight peacefully for their freedom through sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts, and the exercise of their voting rights. With the Brown case decision and the end of school segregation came the start of the fall of white supremacy.

On December 1, 1955, the action of Mrs. Rosa Parks gave rise to a form of protest that led the civil rights movement-nonviolent action. Mrs. Parks worked at a Montgomery department store pinning up hems, raising waistlines.

When the store closed, Mrs. Parks boarded a Cleveland Avenue bus, and took a

seat behind the white section in row eleven. The bus was half full when Rosa

Parks boarded, but soon was filled leaving a white man standing.

Y'all better make it light on yourself and let me have those seats,

said the bus driver James Blake as he ordered the black passengers in row eleven

to move. Everyone except Mrs. Parks moved to the rear of the bus. When he saw

me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up, and I said, ' No I'm not.'

recalled Mrs. Rosa Parks. James Blake replied Well, if you don't stand up, I'm

going to call the police and have you arrested, with Rosa Parks bravely

replaying You may do that. Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested for violating the

Municipal code separating the races in Montgomery, Alabama.

Rosa Parks was taken to the city jail in a police car where she was

booked for violating the law banning integration . At the police station she

longed for a drink of water to soothe her dry throat, but they wouldn't permit

me to drink out of the water fountain, it was for whites only. Rosa Parks

was convicted and fined ten dollars plus four dollars in court cost.

The arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 was not the first time Mrs. Parks had

challenged the Jim Crow laws of the South. In 1943, the same bus driver who

arrested her in 1955, James Blake threw her off the bus for violating the segregation laws. During the 1940's the quiet, dignified older lady refused on several different occasions to submit to segregation laws.

My resistance to being mistreated on the buses and anywhere else was just a regular thing with me and not just that day stated Rosa after she was arrested. Mrs. Parks was an active member in organizations that fought for the

equality of races. She was the first secretary for the Alabama State Conference

of NAACP Branches, and she helped organize an NAACP Youth Council chapter in

Montgomery.

News of Mrs. Parks arrest soon reached E. D. Nixon, the man who headed the NAACP when Mrs. Parks was its secretary. Nixon tried to call one of the cities two black lawyers, Fred Gray, but Gray was not at home, so Mr. Nixon called Clifford Durr. Clifford Durr was member of the Federal Communications

Commission, and had recently returned to Montgomery from Washington DC.

About six o' clock that night the telephone rang, and Mr. Nixon said

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that he understood that Mrs. Parks was arrested, and he had called the jail, but

they wouldn't tell him why she had been arrested. So they thought that if Cliff

called, a white lawyer, they might tell him. Cliff called, and they said she's been arrested under the segregation laws...so Mr. Nixon raised the bond and signed the paper and got Mrs. Parks out, recalled Virginia Durr.

Mrs. Parks, with your permission we can break down segregation on the bus with your case, E. D. Nixon asked Rosa Parks. Parks consulted her mother

and husband, and decided to let Mr. Nixon make her case into a cause, stating I'

ll go along with you Mr. Nixon.

Nixon, at home was making a list of black ministers in Montgomery, who would help support their boycott. Lacking the influence he once had in the NAACP, because of his background, Nixon decided that the church would be better

to go through to reach people, because they(the church) had their hands on the

masses. Progressive minister, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, who E. D. Nixon knew

through his work at the NAACP would be the first to receive the call to mobilize

people.

At five A. M. Friday morning, the next day, Nixon called Rev. Abernathy,

who knew most of the other minister and black leaders in Montgomery. After

discussing the situation Nixon called eighteen other ministers and arranged

a

meeting for Friday evening to discuss Parks arrest and the actions they wanted

to take.

Fred Gray called Jo Ann Robinson Thursday night and told her about the

arrest of Rosa Parks. Robinson knew Parks from the Colvin case and believed she

would be the ideal person to go through a test case to challenge segregation.

Robinson then proceeded to call the leaders of the Women's Political Council,

who urged her to start the boycott in support of Rosa Parks starting on Monday,

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Parks' trial date. Jo Ann Robinson made leaflets that described the boycott and

had her students help her hand them out.

This is for Monday, Dec. 5, 1955-Another Negro women has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and

give it to a white person. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin

case that a Negro women has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be

stopped. The women's case will come up Monday. We are therefor asking every

Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trail. Don't ride the buses to work, to schools, or anywhere on Monday...

Thousands of the anonymous leaflets were passed secretly through

Montgomery's black neighborhoods. By the time the ministers and civil rights leaders met on Friday evening, word of the boycott had spread through the city.

Reverend L. Roy Bennett, president of the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance,

headed the meeting. Rev. Bennett wanted to start the boycott on the following

Monday because he feared that there was no time to waste, he also wanted the

ministers to start organizing committees to lead the boycott. Some of the black

leaders objected, calling for a debate on the pros and cons of having a boycott.

Almost half of the leaders left in frustration before a decision was reached, will those remaining agreed to spread the word about the one-day boycott at their Sunday mass meeting.

E. D. Nixon did not attend the meeting on Friday evening that he arranged because he was at work, but before Nixon left he took one of Jo Ann Robinson's

leaflets and called Joe Azbell, a white reporter at the Montgomery Advertiser.

He said, ' I've got a big story for you and I want you to meet me,' now

E. D. doesn't talk in long sentences, he's very short and brusque...He said, ' Can

you meet me?' I said, ' Yeah I can meet you.' So we met down at Union Station

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and he showed me one of these leaflets. And he said, ' I want to tell you what

we are going to do. We're gonna boycott these buses. We're tired of them fooling around with our women-they done it for the last time.' So I said ' Okay',

Nixon said, ' You gonna put this on the front page?' And I said ' yeah I'm gonna

try to. recalled Joe Azbell. The story of the upcoming boycott was on the front page of Sunday's morning edition, spreading the word to all the Negroes in

Montgomery. The piece Azbell ran on the boycott accused the NAACP of planting

that Parks women on the bus to stir things up and cause trouble. The

Montgomery Advertiser said that the Negroes were about to embrace the same

negative solutions as the hated White Citizens Council.

The ministers reinforced the call of the boycott at the pulpit that

Sunday morning, but doubt remained in the minds of the boycott organizers.

Would Montgomery's black community unite for the boycott? Or would they ride

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the buses in fear of white retaliation? The clergymen had barely been able to agree on the one-day boycott, so why would the people follow them? To add to

their worries it looked like it might rain.

On Monday morning the sky was very dark with huge rain clouds covering the sun. City police were on the watch for black goon squads that would keep

black people off the buses. The police chief even went as far as to have two motorcycle cops follow each bus. By 5: 30 A. M. Monday, a torn off piece of cardboard appeared on a bus shelter at Court Square, one of the main downtown

bus stops. The sign read PEOPLE DON'T RIDE THE BUSES TODAY. DON'T RIDE IT FOR

FREEDOM

In the house of young Dr. Martian Luther King Jr. on Monday, December 4th, Dr. King was making coffee in his kitchen. The Friday night meeting had taken place at his church in Montgomery and he feared that the boycott would

fail. Dr. Reverend King took his coffee and sat down and waited for the first

bus on the South Jackson 10 line to go by his house at 6: 00 A. M. The South Jackson line carried more Negroes than any other line in town; the first bus was usually jammed full with Negro domestics on their way to work. Dr. King was still in the kitchen when his wife Coretta cried Martin, Martin, come quickly! Martin just made it to the window in time to see an empty bus go by. In a state of high excitement, King waited for the next bus to go by. It was empty. So was the third one. With spirits soaring high Dr. King drove over to Abernathy's house in his car and the two of them drove all over town looking at the buses. All over Montgomery the buses were empty of black people. It looked like the boycott would be one hundred percent effective.

There were black students gladly hitchhiking to Alabama State. There were old man and women walking as far as twelve miles to their downtown jobs.

People were riding mules, cows, horses and driving horse-drawn buggies to work.

Not one single person stood at a bus stop that wanted to ride the buses, just

groups of young people who stood there cheering and singing No riders today!

as the buses pulled away from the stop.

Montgomery's eighteen black-owned taxi companies had agreed to transport blacks for the same fare as they would pay on the bus-ten cents-on Monday morning the cabs were crammed with people. In the Alabama Journal a reporter

described that first Monday. Negroes were on almost every street corner in the

downtown area, silent, waiting for rides or moving about to keep warm, but few

got on buses...scores of Negroes were walking, their lunches were in brown paper

sacks under their arms. None spoke to white people. They exchanged little talk

among themselves. It was an almost solemn event.

A local black historian who had watched the days events unfolded stated that the ' old unlearned Negroes' were confused. It seemed they could not figure out if the police (ridding along the buses) would arrest them or protect

them if they attempted to ride the buses...the few Negroes that rode the buses

were more confused. They found it difficult to get off without being embarrassed by other Negroes who waited at the bus stops throughout the city.

Some were even seen ducking in the aisles as the buses passed various stops.

At 3: 00 P. M. that afternoon King and other leaders of the boycott met to set up a permanent organization to run the boycott. At Abernathy's suggestion

they called it the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), to stress the positive, uplift approach of their movement. The meeting was also called to elect officers. Rufus Lewis saw the election as a way to move the well-entrenched Bennett aside in a diplomatic way. Quickly Lewis nominated King as president. Lewis attended King's church and heard him speak often and knew

he was a master speaker, also Dr. King was new in town.

Rev. King was a young man, a very intelligent man. He had not been

here long enough for the city fathers to put their hands on him. Usually they'd

find some young man just come to town...pat him on the back and tell him what a

nice church he got. They'd say ' Reverend, your suit don't look so nice to represent so-and-so Baptist Church'...and they'd get him a suit...you'd have to

watch out for that kind of thingrecalls E. D. Nixon, about how officials in Montgomery treated black leaders.

With Rev. King as the new leader of the boycott, the organizers had to deiced whether or not to have the bus boycott extend beyond Monday. The one-day

boycott had shown a strength that was never seen before in Montgomery. To extend the boycott would be a direct assault by blacks on the Jim Crow system.

A serious and potentially dangerous event.

Several of the ministers were suggesting to leave the boycott as a one-day success, they said the boycott might fall apart if it rained or if the police started to arrest people. No one thought that it would last till the end

of the work week, which was four days away.

E. D. Nixon in a thundering voice said that they should confront the

whites no matter what. The time had come to take a stand!

What is the matter with you people? Here you have been living off the

sweat of these washwomen all these years and you have never done

anything for

them. Now you have a chance to pay them back, and you're to damn scared

to

stand on your feet and be counted! The time has come to be grown man or

scared

boysaid Nixon gesturing his big hands at the group of boycott leaders when

they wanted to quit.

Nixon was mad because his successor at the head of the NAACP in Alabama

had refused to help or support the boycott unless he got approval from the

national office. The man who was the President of the NAACP, said at that

time,

' Brother Nixon, I'll have to wait until I talk to New York (NAACP

headquarters)

to find out what they think of it.' I said ' Man we ain't got time for that.'

He believed in doing everything by the book. And the book stated that you had

to notify New York before you take a step like that. recalled E. D. Nixon on how the NAACP responded when he asked them for support.

The group agreed to wait until that night's meeting and let the people decided if the boycott was to continue. The meeting was to be held at the Holt

Street Baptist Church, because it was in a black section of town. They figured that Negroes would probably feel safer if they didn't have to travel through white neighborhoods to get to the meeting.

Newly elected leader of the MIA, Dr. King had about twenty minuets to prepare a speech which he later called one of the most important speeches in his

life. It took Doctor King fifteen minuets to park his car and make his way to the church at 7: 00 P. M. There were no empty seats in the church and people were

spilled into the aisles and through the doorways in the back, the church had been packed since five that afternoon. Outside the church thousands stood to

listen to the speeches and preaching that was going on inside through loudspeakers. The meeting opened with Onward Christian Soldiers, followed by speeches from the boycott leaders.

Joe Azbell again covered the boycott story saying that the Holt Street Baptist Church was probably the most fired up, enthusiastic gathering of human

beings that I've ever seen. I came down the street and I couldn't believe there

were so many cars. I parked many blocks from the church just to get a place for

my car. I went up to the church, and they made way for me because I was the

first white person there...I was two minutes late and they were already

preaching, and that audience was so on fire that the preacher would get up and

say, ' Do you want your freedom?' And they'd say, ' Yeah, I want my freedom!'

The preacher would say, ' Are you for what we are doing?; ' Yeah, go ahead, go

ahead!'...and they were so excited...I've never heard singing like that...they were on fire for freedom. There was a spirit there no one could capture again...it was so powerful. And then King stood up, and most of them didn't know how he was. And yet he was a master speaker...I went back and I wrote a special column, I wrote that this was the beginning of a flame that would go across America.

Doctor King approached the podium with only a mental outline of his speech. If he choked in front of all of these people it would be the end of the boycott, but if he inspired them there was no telling what they could do together.

We're here this evening for serious business. We're here in a general sense because first and foremost, we are American citizens, and we are determined to acquire our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning...There comes a time when people get tired...tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about the brutal feet of oppression. We have no

alternative but to protest. For many years, we have shown amazing patience. We

have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we

were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved, to be saved from

patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.... If

we are wrong then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong

then the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God almighty is wrong.

The crowd roared with ' yeas' and ' right ons', all through Dr. Kings speech. The strongest show of emotion and applause came when Rev. King bravely

noted that If you protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love,

when the history books are written in future generations the historians will pause and say ' There lived a great people-a black people-who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization'...We will not retreat one

inch in our fight to secure and hold our American citizenship. The church roared in approval of Kings speech which was followed with an introduction of

Rosa Parks that received a standing ovation. Then Rev. Abernathy proceeded to

recite the three demands of the boycott.

1)Courteous treatment of passengers on the buses.

2)Change the seating to a first-come, first-served basis with blacks starting at the rear, and whites starting at the front.

3)The hiring of black bus drivers on predominantly black routes.

Rev. Abernathy asked the people attending the meeting to vote and descied whether or not the boycott should continue. Throughout the church people began to stand. At first in ones and twos. Soon every person was standing in the Holt Street Church approving the continuation of the boycott.

The thousands of people standing outside cheered in a resounding YES!

The fear left that had shackled us across the years-all left suddenly when we were in that church togetherrecalled Abernathy on how people left

the church unafraid, but how they were uncertain on how the city's white leaders

would respond to their boycott. The Montgomery police were their main concern.

A white police officer had a few months earlier shot a black man who had refused

a bus driver order to get off the bus and reboard from the rear. The man demanded his dime back, and the police officer suddenly fired his gun, instantly

killing the man. The dreaded Montgomery police were already harassing blacks

who were peacefully waiting for the taxis.

Four days later the MIA, including King and attorney Fred Gray, met with the city commissioners and representatives of the bus company. The MIA presented their three demands, with King making it clear that they were not seeking an end to segregation through the boycott.

The bus company's manger, James H. Bagely and its attorney, Jack

Crenshaw frantically denied that the bus drivers were regularly discourteous to

black passengers. They rejected the idea of hiring black bus drivers and stated

that the proposed seating plan was in violation of the state statute and city code. Attorney Gray responded by showing that the seating plan was in no way a

violation against the already existing segregation laws. The seating arrangements proposed was already in practice in another Alabama city, Mobil.

The Mobil bus company was also run by the same bus company as the Montgomery bus line.

Attorney Crenshaw was adamant about the seating proposal. Commissioner Frank was ready to give in and accept the seating proposal, but Crenshaw argued

I don't see how we can do it within the law. If it were legal I would be the first to go along with it, but it just isn't legal. The only way that it can be done is to change the segregation laws. Commissioner Clyde Sellers who was staunchly opposed to segregation was not about to compromise. Crenshaw did not

help the MIA in stating that If we granted the Negroes these demands, they
would

Social Issues