

# THE MONTGOMERY DECADE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD: 1955 TO 1965

# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>WHY MONTGOMERY?</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>“The Scar of Racial Hatred”</i>	8
A Capital of Domestic Trafficking	9
Reconstruction’s Collapse	11
The Era of Racial Terror	13
Jim Crow in Montgomery	16
<b>ORIGINS OF THE BUS BOYCOTT</b>	<b>20</b>
Humiliation on Montgomery Buses	21
Arrests in the 1940s	24
Violent Attacks on Black Women	27
<b>ORGANIZING IN THE 1950s</b>	<b>30</b>
<i>“The Longer I Rode the Madder I Got”</i>	31
Hope for Desegregation	34
Dr. King Arrives in Montgomery	36
The Women Before Rosa Parks	37
<i>“I Thought of Emmett Till and I Couldn’t Go Back”</i>	41
<b>IGNITING A MOVEMENT</b>	<b>46</b>
The Bus Boycott Begins	48
<i>“The Heart of the Movement”</i>	62
Montgomery Police <i>“Get Tough”</i>	63
The White Citizens’ Council	65
Support for Montgomery City Lines	68

<b>VICTORY IN MONTGOMERY</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>“Our Way of Getting Tough”</b>	71
<b>Prosecuting Dr. King</b>	73
<b>Federal Courts and “States’ Rights”</b>	78
<b>Integration Achieved, Respect Denied</b>	81
<b>INTEGRATION AND OPPOSITION</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Keeping Schools Segregated</b>	96
<b>Closing Montgomery’s Public Spaces</b>	99
<b>Violent Resistance to Integration</b>	104
<b>The Struggle to Desegregate Athletics</b>	107
<b>Using the Law for State Retribution</b>	109
<b>VOTING RIGHTS AND THE SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Alabama Bars Black Voters</b>	118
<b>Disenfranchisement in Selma</b>	123
<b>To Montgomery</b>	126
<b>CONCLUSION: 1965 AND BEYOND</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>“A New Philosophy Was Born”</b>	134
<b>The Voting Rights Act</b>	140
<b>Voting Rights Struggle Continues</b>	141
<b>The Beloved Community</b>	142
<b>NOTES</b>	<b>144</b>

# INTRODUCTION

At the start of the Civil War, 400,000 Black people were enslaved in Alabama, and the largest number were in Montgomery and surrounding counties. Enslaved Black people made up two-thirds of the population of Montgomery County in 1860. Following the war, Emancipation was poised to create opportunities and growth for everyone in the region. But eventually those who opposed racial equality reclaimed power after the collapse of Reconstruction and they imposed new systems to further the racial subordination and economic exploitation of freed Black people.

Enforced through economic exploitation, convict leasing, lynching, and violence, the racial caste system in Alabama was codified in 1901 when a state constitution was adopted with the stated purpose of “maintain[ing] white supremacy.” Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Black people in Montgomery were subjected to a violent system of racial segregation—frequently abused, beaten, imprisoned, lynched, and killed. This included daily humiliation on city buses.<sup>1</sup>

The activism of people in the Montgomery community following the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 shocked the world. Fifty thousand Black people boycotting buses for over a year was an unprecedented act of organized resistance. Committed citizens ultimately succeeded in ending degradation and abuse on buses, one of the primary spaces of racial bigotry.

**The courage and commitment of Black people in Montgomery inspired a movement that spread across the country.**

A decade later, when thousands of people marched for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, a new era in America was born. The passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the end of codified racial segregation that had persisted for over a century lifted this nation closer to its promise of liberty and justice for all.

Some who participated in these historic events are still alive. So too are many who openly opposed this progress or quietly failed to support it. Many more carry living memories of the experiences of their parents and family members during this era.

And all of us—across the country and the world—live in a world shaped by this period of astonishingly effective activism in Montgomery. We are all the heirs of this powerful movement that strengthened this country. We honor all who struggled, suffered, and died for justice in this community. We celebrate those who committed their lives to racial equality decades ago and those who continue to do so today. The battle is not over, and more work remains.

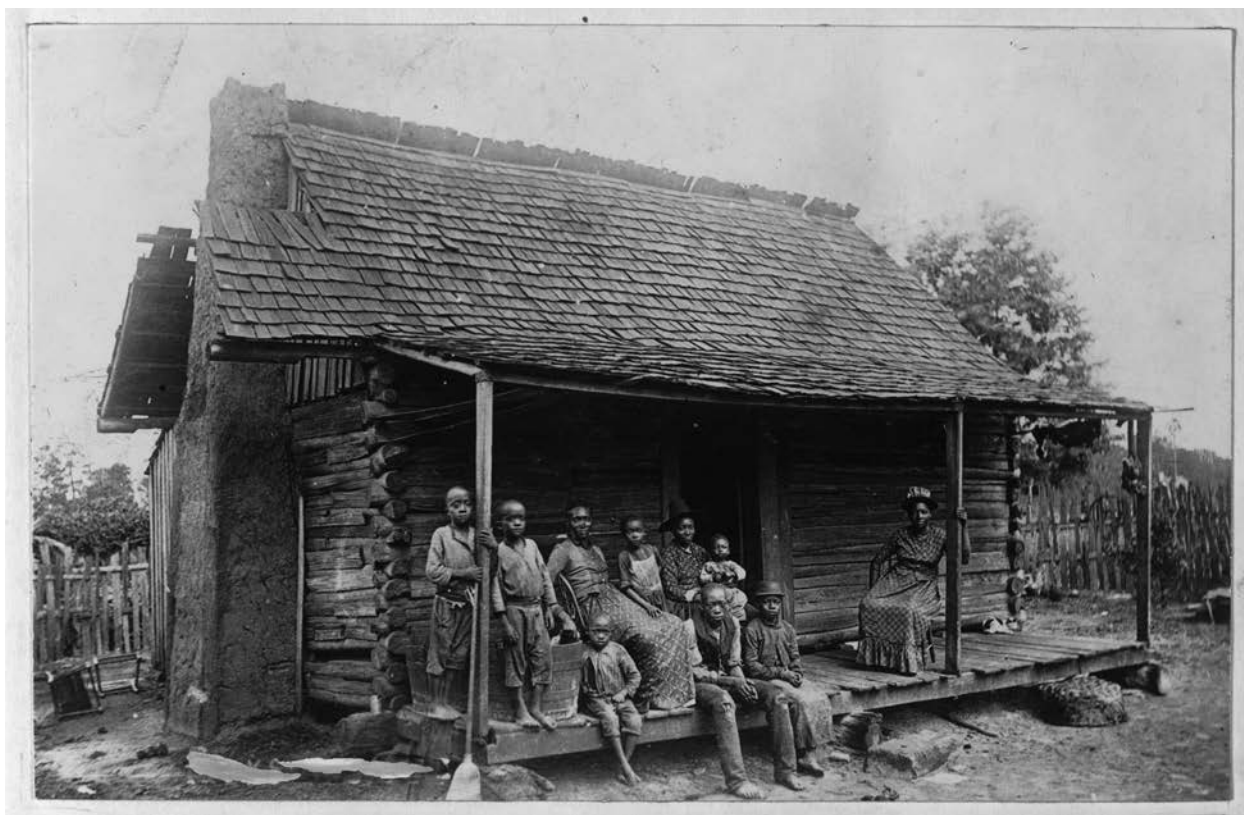
# WHY MONTGOMERY?

“ Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people—a Black people, “fleecy locks and Black complexion,” a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.’”<sup>2</sup>

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**M**ost of the Black people who lived in Montgomery during the civil rights era were descendants of enslaved people who had been trafficked to the region. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were forced to navigate a world ordered primarily around the institution of slavery, as well as the broader landscape of violence, suffering, and humiliation it wrought.

Rosa Parks was herself the descendant of people enslaved on a plantation in Pine Level, Alabama. After Emancipation, her ancestors continued to live on the same land where they had forcibly labored during the era of slavery. In the post-slavery era, they continued to suffer inhumane treatment by the white plantation owners. A white overseer regularly beat Ms. Parks's grandfather Sylvester Edwards, starved him, and prevented him from wearing shoes.<sup>3</sup>



Enslaved family near Eufaula in Barbour County, Alabama. (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division)

The injustices inflicted upon him deeply influenced not only on his own life but also that of his descendants. Her grandfather's perseverance in the face of dehumanization, Ms. Parks wrote, "was passed down almost in our genes." This lineage is one of the many ways in which the activism of Montgomery was shaped by the history of racial injustice in Alabama.<sup>4</sup>

## “The Scar of Racial Hatred”

The history of racial injustice in Montgomery began long before people of African descent were enslaved and trafficked to the region. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote,

Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles over racial supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

Humans have lived in the territory that now comprises the state of Alabama for at least 13,000 years. Stone tools used by Indigenous people more than 11,000 years ago have been found in present-day Montgomery County. Modern Indigenous nations formed between the 1500s and 1700s, and the Muscogee people—referred to as “Creeks” by Europeans—occupied large swaths of the territory now known as Alabama.<sup>6</sup>

The Muscogee Nation encompassed many socially and politically diverse peoples with their own languages, geographic origins, and creation stories. One of these groups, the Alabama-Coushatta, coalesced around the fertile and strategic junction near present-day Montgomery where the upper Alabama River meets the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers.<sup>7</sup>



*Three Sisters of the Earth* by Cliff Fragua at Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama. (Human Pictures)

The first contact between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples living in Alabama occurred in the mid-16th century during a Spanish expedition led by Hernando de Soto. The territory became a site of conflict between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples, as well as between competing European powers who claimed the territory for their own. This led to centuries of war, disease, and dispossession of Indigenous land.<sup>8</sup>

This dispossession accelerated when the U.S. government took control of great swaths of territory to the south of the original 13 colonies and began to subsidize white settlement in the region. To facilitate this, it carried out a policy of forced removal of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral homelands. By 1838, over 20,000 Muscogee people had been forcibly removed or fled as the U.S. government seized over 20 million acres of their land, much of which was awarded to white Americans.<sup>9</sup>

### **The city of Montgomery, established in 1819, played a key role in the forced removal of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>10</sup>**

Muscogee people who were captured while resisting removal in the 1830s were held in the Montgomery County jail.<sup>11</sup>

In 1836, more than 2,300 Muscogee men, women, and children were loaded onto steamboats in Montgomery and removed by boat and then forced to march hundreds of miles by foot on the “Trail of Tears.” Hundreds perished or went missing on this journey. Later that year, President Andrew Jackson ordered the forced removal of all remaining Muscogee people from their ancestral homelands.<sup>12</sup>

This history is still not often acknowledged. “We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its Indigenous population,” Dr. King wrote. “Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode.”<sup>13</sup>

## **A Capital of Domestic Trafficking**

Prior to the late 18th century, few people of African descent lived in the area now known as Alabama.

That changed in the 1780s when the U.S. government began encouraging white settlers eager for cheap, fertile land to move to this area from states in the Upper South, including North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. These settlers trafficked enslaved Black people to work the land and care for their homes.<sup>14</sup>

This dynamic coincided with the invention of the cotton gin, which radically transformed the speed and profitability of cotton production and created incentives for white settlers in search of wealth to expand their plantations and enslave more people.

In territories that would later become the Lower South states of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida, the demand for enslaved Black people skyrocketed. In 1808, Congress outlawed transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people. As a result, white settlers turned to domestic trafficking to meet this new demand.<sup>15</sup>

The new, burgeoning domestic trafficking industry forced hundreds of thousands of people into bondage in the Deep South, through reproduction which was often forced, and human trafficking of enslaved people laboring in the Upper South, where many had developed deep family connections over generations.

An elaborate trafficking network emerged to provide Alabama farmers with a new and highly profitable supply of enslaved workers.<sup>16</sup>

### **An estimated one million enslaved people were forcibly transferred from the Upper South to the Lower South between 1790 and 1860. Over half were separated from a spouse or a child.<sup>17</sup>**

By 1860, more than 400,000 Black people were enslaved in Alabama.<sup>18</sup>



Loading cotton on the steamboat Alabama on the Alabama River in Montgomery. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)



Enslaved people work in cotton fields outside Montgomery in the 1860s. (Library of Congress)

Montgomery developed as a hub in the domestic trafficking network as new methods of transportation altered the routes used by those seeking enslaved labor. The arrival of the steamboat in 1811 allowed traffickers to transport enslaved people via inland rivers, including the Ohio, Mississippi, and Alabama. The steam locomotive arrived in the 1830s, and within two decades, rail lines stretched across the South. Often cleared, constructed, and maintained by enslaved people laboring in dangerous and frequently deadly conditions, these rail lines became a preferred method for trafficking enslaved people to the Lower South. Trips that had taken weeks on foot now took less than two days by rail.<sup>19</sup>

These transportation changes transformed Montgomery from one of many stops along the overland route to a primary trafficking market. In 1847, a direct steamboat line was established between New Orleans and Montgomery, which eventually rivaled Mobile, Alabama, as a center for trading in enslaved Black people.<sup>20</sup>

Montgomery's proximity to the fertile Black Belt region, where enslavers amassed large enslaved populations to work the dark, rich soil, elevated Montgomery's prominence in human trafficking. The enslaved Black population in Montgomery County rose from 2,655 in 1820 to 23,710 in 1860.<sup>21</sup>

**By 1860, Montgomery was the capital of the domestic trafficking of enslaved people in Alabama, a state with one of the largest enslaved populations in the country. More people were enslaved in and around Montgomery than any other Alabama city.<sup>22</sup>**



Illustration of an auction in Montgomery published in 1861. (Donated by Corbis)

The overwhelming presence of Black people in the Montgomery community would have a lasting impact on the history of the city. In fact, many people who later participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott were descended from people trafficked to and enslaved in Montgomery County.

## Reconstruction's Collapse

On February 18, 1861, Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the Confederacy in Montgomery, the first capital of the Confederate States of America.

In an address to the Confederate Congress in Montgomery on April 29, 1861, Davis declared white people a “superior race,” claimed that slavery was “indispensable,” and said the Southern states were driven to secede because their “interests of such overwhelming magnitude” in the institution of slavery had become “imperiled.”<sup>23</sup>

After Emancipation and the Confederacy’s defeat in the Civil War, federal troops arrived in Alabama during the era of Reconstruction, the period of social, political, and economic re-creation that promised equality for the beleaguered nation. The adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 extended equal protection of the law to Black people, and the Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1870, gave African American men the right to vote nationwide.<sup>24</sup>



Betty Jackson, a woman once enslaved by President Andrew Jackson, sits with her great-grandchildren, 1867. (Carl Giers)

**The promise of Reconstruction greatly shaped Montgomery, leading to the founding of institutions that would become vital in the civil rights era.**

The Lincoln Normal School, established in Marion, Alabama, in 1867, moved to Montgomery and became the country's first state-sponsored higher education institution for Black people. Later renamed as Alabama State College—and today known as Alabama State University—it was “the social and cultural heartbeat” of the Black community in Montgomery in the mid-20th century.<sup>25</sup>

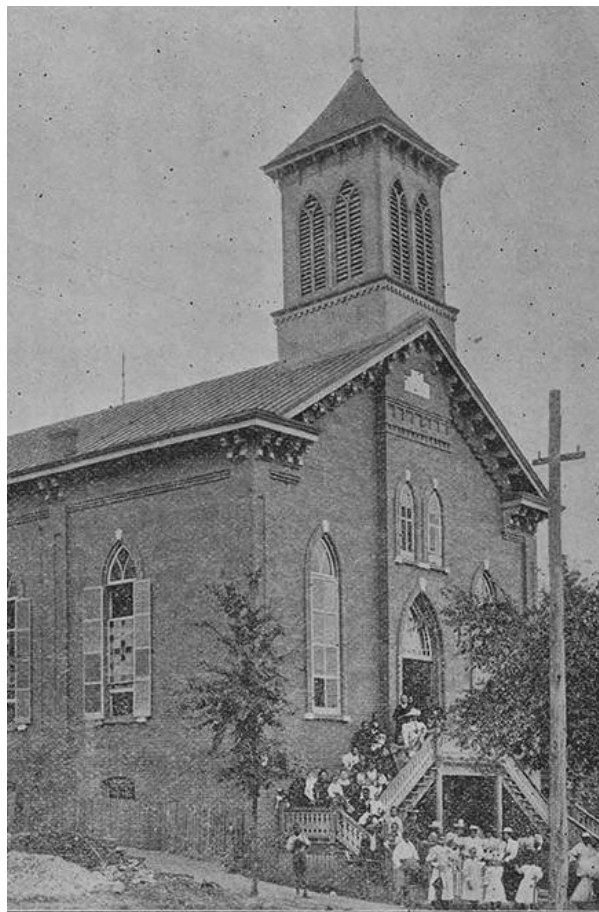
Many participants in the Montgomery Bus Boycott were connected to Alabama State, and its faculty and students served as leaders in the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s and '60s. At the same time, many white Montgomerians regarded Alabama State as a threat to racial hierarchy in the city, and when higher education was ordered to desegregate in Alabama in the 1960s, state leaders created a new public university in the city, Auburn University at Montgomery, rather than increase funding to Alabama State, which was then Montgomery's only public college.<sup>26</sup>

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pastored and led many mass meetings during the Boycott, was founded in 1877 at the end of the Reconstruction era. It sits on the site of a “pen” that had been used in the trafficking of enslaved people and just one block from the Alabama State Capitol.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1870s, a new business class composed of formerly enslaved people emerged in Montgomery, many of whom served exclusively a Black clientele. In the years after Emancipation, Montgomery also became home to many rural transplants seeking to escape sharecropping and tenant farming.<sup>28</sup>

Many white Southerners remained fiercely resistant to racial equality. In the immediate aftermath of Emancipation, widespread violence directed at newly freed Black people led to dangerous and lawless conditions in the region. In many cases, the new constitutional rights of Black people were ignored.

The Reconstruction government collapsed in Alabama by the end of the 1870s and the federal government ceased its military protection of formerly enslaved Black people. The legal regime of Jim Crow segregation emerged and was violently enforced for decades.<sup>29</sup>



Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery c. 1895 (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

## The Era of Racial Terror

Lynching became the most public and notorious form of racial terrorism employed to maintain the social, political, and economic subordination of Black people.

Montgomery County’s first documented racial terror lynching took place in 1890, when a Black man from Birmingham named Ike Cook—who had been accused of stealing a pair of pants—was ambushed on a roadside 12 miles from Montgomery and shot to death by a white mob.<sup>30</sup>

**At least a dozen documented lynchings of Black people took place in Montgomery County between 1890 and 1934. None of the perpetrators were ever held accountable.**

As late as 1934, a mob of white men beat and shot to death a 16-year-old Black boy named Otis Parham. For most Black Montgomery residents who would go on to lead or participate in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the era of racial terror lynching was within living memory and had profoundly shaped their lives. This level of violence, perpetrated with impunity, precluded mass organizing as a viable option in Montgomery prior to the 1950s.<sup>31</sup>



Lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, on February 1, 1893. (Library of Congress via Getty Images)

Racial terrorism also defined and altered the racial demographics of the city. Montgomery had been a majority-Black city in the aftermath of the Civil War, and Black people still made up 57% of the city's residents at the start of the 20th century.

But as large numbers of African Americans fled to the North and West to escape racial terrorism in the first half of the 1900s, the Black population in Montgomery,

like many other Southern cities and towns, precipitously declined. By 1955, at the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Black people made up less than 40% of the city's population. Montgomery's shift to a white majority facilitated the ascendancy of white economic and social power in the city.<sup>32</sup>



# Jim Crow in Montgomery

The system of segregation, of which the bus system was a part, was codified with Alabama's adoption in 1901 of a new state constitution that white leaders explicitly proclaimed was designed to enshrine "white supremacy."<sup>33</sup>

State lawmakers created one of the most rigid and extensive systems of racial segregation in the world—prohibiting marriage between white and Black people, mandating separate schools for Black and white children, disenfranchising most Black men, and creating a legal system of second-class citizenship for Black people that would last for generations.<sup>34</sup>

No area of daily life was too trivial to regulate—the law even barred Black and white people from playing checkers together.

## **The Montgomery City Code enforced the separation of races across virtually all daily activities, including recreation, dining, and public transportation.**

Within city limits, Black and white people were forbidden from playing cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, or billiards together. Any owner or proprietor of facilities including theaters, auditoriums, parks, and vaguely defined "room[s]" and "hall[s]" that did not completely segregate entrances, exits, and standing and seated accommodations could face legal consequences. Ticket sales and lines for admittance had to be completely separate unless "well defined physical barriers" achieved adequate racial segregation.<sup>35</sup>

## **As one of the few places where Black and white people "were segregated under the same roof and in full view of each other," city buses served as the stages for a daily ritual of racial humiliation and abuse.<sup>36</sup>**

Drivers, all of whom were white men, were charged with maintaining racial segregation on the buses and were specifically granted police powers in order to do so. The only exception to this otherwise strictly enforced racial boundary was for "negro nurses having in charge white children or sick or infirm white persons."<sup>37</sup>

The strictures of the Jim Crow era meant that Black residents of Montgomery moved in separate—and unequal—spaces from white people. Black children in Montgomery were relegated to underfunded schools, Black families were confined to less desirable neighborhoods, and Black people were banned from white recreational facilities and other establishments.

But, because there were no separate public buses for Black and white people, using racially segregated public buses was unavoidable and became the primary space of racial humiliation for Black Montgomarians.

Virtually every Black resident directly experienced mistreatment at the hands of white bus drivers and white passengers. This unrelenting humiliation fueled one of the most prominent mass protests in U.S. history, the Montgomery Bus Boycott.



A mother and her child sit on a segregated bus in 1955. (Courtesy of the Jim Crow Museum and Ferris State University)

Jo Ann Robinson, leader of the Women’s Political Council (WPC), a politically oriented civil rights group focused on Black voter engagement and anti-discrimination efforts, wrote that civil rights efforts in Montgomery began immediately after the legal codification of the system of segregation. “[F]rom the beginning, protests had been registered repeatedly,” she wrote. Black people “were determined to get an education, to become financially secure, so that when the time came they would be prepared to walk away from the system.”<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Dr. King traced the roots of the activism in Montgomery to the service of Black veterans in World War I and II and the Great Migration, during which millions of Black Americans fled the racial terror of the South to the North and West, as well as to the opportunities for economic and educational advancement created by Black civic and labor organizations in the first half of the 20th century.

These events built a platform upon which Black people could organize and insist that they comprised “an equal element in a larger social compound and accordingly should be given rights and privileges.”<sup>39</sup>

This activism took inspiration from anti-colonial movements that developed in India and Africa and spread across the globe after World War II. “The determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from all forms of oppression,” Dr. King wrote, “springs from the same deep longing that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world.”<sup>40</sup>

# The 1900-1902 Montgomery Streetcar Boycott



A streetcar in Court Square in Montgomery, 1906. (Wikimedia Commons)

Decades before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Black residents in Montgomery organized to protest the city's first segregated transit ordinance. Similar protests took place in more than 25 other Southern cities at the start of the 20th century. These movements arose in response to the passage of streetcar segregation laws and ordinances at the end of the 19th century that, while initially limited to certain counties and cities, were eventually enforced statewide in Alabama and nine other Southern states.<sup>41</sup>

An electric streetcar system—the first in the U.S.—was established in Montgomery in 1886.

On August 6, 1900, after a campaign by the local white press, the Montgomery City Council unanimously passed an ordinance that required separate accommodations for Black and white passengers on streetcars.<sup>42</sup>

The ordinance mandated that streetcar employees separate passengers by race, with limited exceptions, and gave conductors and other employees police authority to enforce its provisions. Passengers who refused to comply could be fined up to \$100 and employees who failed to enforce the ordinance were likewise subject to hefty fines.<sup>43</sup>

To comply with the law's segregation requirements, Montgomery's streetcar company designated seats in the front of the cars for white passengers and forced Black passengers to sit in the back.<sup>44</sup>

In Southern cities, segregated seating served as a physical representation of racial subordination, serving not only to separate Black passengers from white ones, but to transform everyday transit into a site of humiliation and control.<sup>45</sup>

The mobilization of Montgomery's Black residents in response to the law was swift. Catalyzed in large part by preachers who encouraged their congregations to walk where possible, and supported by Black "hackmen and draymen"—private horsecart drivers who transported passengers and goods—this collective resistance quickly and significantly reduced the city's Black streetcar ridership and put financial pressure on the streetcar company.<sup>46</sup>

The boycott, which lasted from 1900 to 1902, was unprecedented in its length and scope, and achieved a significant but temporary victory. In 1902, the city's streetcar company suspended enforcement of the ordinance. Four years later, a new ordinance reinstated segregated accommodations.<sup>47</sup>

The streetcar system in Montgomery was ended soon after a public bus service was established in the city in 1935.<sup>48</sup>

The mobilization and activism of Montgomery's Black residents during the streetcar boycott laid important groundwork for the historic Montgomery Bus Boycott.

# ORIGINS OF THE BUS BOYCOTT

“

**The bus boycott originated in the demeaning, wretched, intolerable impositions and conditions that black citizens experienced in a caste system commonly called segregation.<sup>49</sup>**

— Jo Ann Robinson

**T**he roots of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began in December 1955 and continued until the integration of city buses in December 1956, are inextricably intertwined with the legacy of political organizing that shaped Montgomery's Black community in the 1940s and '50s.

Confronting a rigid and deeply entrenched racial hierarchy that permeated all aspects of society, Black community members formed councils, committees, and clubs to register Black voters, form labor unions, resist economic exploitation, and protest the daily dehumanization of segregation. During the 15 years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, numerous people were arrested for violating segregation statutes—and many more mobilized in response.

## Humiliation on Montgomery Buses

On Montgomery city buses, Black residents were subject to routine racial segregation, humiliation, and even physical abuse. When boarding a Montgomery bus, Black riders were forced to pay their fare at the front of the bus, disembark, and reboard through the rear door. This practice often resulted in riders being left on the roadside as the bus pulled away despite having already paid, an additional hardship and painful humiliation.<sup>50</sup>

Black residents forced to sit in the back of a segregated bus in the South. (Stan Wayman/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images)



**Jo Ann Robinson, one of the Boycott's foremost leaders, characterized the reserved seating policy on the city's segregated buses as the "ultimate humiliation" for Black Montgomerians.<sup>51</sup>**

Montgomery city buses had 36 seats with standing room in the center aisle. The 10 seats at the front of the bus were reserved exclusively for white riders—Black passengers could not use those seats even if no white riders were on the bus. About a quarter of city bus riders in Montgomery were white, while at least 75% of Black Montgomerians relied on the buses as their primary form of transportation.<sup>52</sup>

The arbitrary reservation of 10 "white-only" seats meant that Black people—the overwhelming majority of bus patrons—were regularly forced to stand next to empty seats. Ms. Robinson explained that so often did "weary workers, whose tired feet and aching backs urged them to sit down" have to stand over these 10 seats that the number itself became a "damnable number" signifying bad luck.<sup>53</sup>

Black people were relegated to the rear 10 seats, and the 16 seats between the two "reserved" sections fell to the driver's discretion. Deputized as enforcers of the racial caste system, drivers were empowered to constantly adjust the color line on buses by ordering Black riders out of their seats, ostensibly to ensure that white riders had adequate seating.<sup>54</sup>

Although the city ordinance did not require Black riders to vacate their seat for a white person unless another seat was available, that stipulation was often ignored, and Black patrons were regularly ordered to give up their seats to a white person and stand in the aisle.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the authority to assign seats—which was exclusively wielded against Black patrons—white bus drivers were granted "the powers of a police officer of the city while in charge of any bus" for the express purpose of enforcing segregation.

Equipped with police powers, bus drivers' abuses and racial humiliation of Black patrons went virtually unchecked. Some drivers armed themselves with guns and used them to threaten Black riders.<sup>56</sup>

Montgomery resident Sadie Brooks was riding a city bus when a Black man boarded with inexact change. The driver refused to make change for the man, she recalled. They argued until "this bus driver then whipped a gun out of his pocket and drove the man off the bus because he didn't have change for a dollar."<sup>57</sup>

Black bus patrons would later testify in court about the daily abuse of riding the bus, which often included physical injury. Drivers purposefully closed the doors on Black passengers before they could safely exit the bus, catching their feet or clothing between the doors.

A bus driver closed Gladys Moore's foot in the door, causing her to be thrown off the bus. Without checking to see if she was injured, the bus driver admonished her, "The next time you catch your foot I ought to drag you all the way up South Jackson Hill." So common were these injuries on buses that Ms. Moore did not report the incident because, she explained, "I didn't think it would do any good."<sup>58</sup>

Another driver threatened to close the door on Ms. Moore's sister-in-law, telling her, "I wasn't quick enough closing the door or you would be holding up the daisies." He followed up his degrading remark by saying that he wished only white people could ride the buses.<sup>59</sup>

Mary Harris was taking a Montgomery bus to see a doctor when the driver closed the door on her right foot as she exited. She recalled, "I was skinned up, the skin was off my right leg from the door." Despite pulling the cord on the bus requesting an earlier stop, the driver did not stop the bus until it was 10 blocks past her doctor's office. In her injured condition, Ms. Harris was forced to walk the long distance to receive medical attention.<sup>60</sup>



Black residents were confined to the back of segregated buses in Alabama, even when empty seats were available in the “white-only” section. (Birmingham, Ala. Public Library Archives)

In addition to threats and physical violence, bus drivers’ disrespect of Black patrons infiltrated even the smallest interactions. Name-calling and racist epithets were as much a feature of Black riders’ experience on city buses as paying the 10-cent fare. Black women and men were never afforded the basic courtesy of being addressed as “Mrs.” or “Mr.” Drivers denigrated Black people by calling them “boy,” “girl,” or “n-----,” regardless of their age, while ordering them to the back of the bus.<sup>61</sup>

Numerous Black riders remembered bus drivers disparaging them with hideously racist names: “black bastard,” “damn, dumb negro,” “ugly black apes,” “a bunch of cows,” “big baboon,” and “damn nasty negroes.” As Lula Mae Hopper boarded a city bus, the white driver looked at her and griped, “I hate n-----s.” On the Maxwell Field bus line, a driver ordered Arretta Burney, “I told you to get back there, don’t come up no further, stay back there where you belong.”<sup>62</sup>

Georgia Gilmore and her elderly mother pleaded with a white bus driver to allow them to board the bus through the front door, as the higher incline of the back steps made boarding difficult for her mother. The driver refused and seethed, “You damn n-----s are all alike, you don’t want to do what you are told, if I had my way I would kill off every n----- person.”<sup>63</sup>

Black women were the primary targets of abusive bus drivers. Most Black riders were domestic workers, cooks, service workers, and day laborers who relied on city buses to get to work. More than 60% of Black women workers in Montgomery were employed as domestics, cooking, cleaning, and housekeeping in white homes.<sup>64</sup>

In 1950, a Black domestic worker’s median salary was \$523 per year, precluding car ownership and leaving city buses as the only option for many.<sup>65</sup>

## Arrests in the 1940s

During the 1940s, Montgomery police arrested numerous Black citizens for sitting in “white-only” seats on city buses.<sup>66</sup>

In July 1942, Ella Ree Jones was a student at Alabama State College, a historically Black institution in Montgomery. Feeling ill, Ms. Jones took a seat in the rear section of the Cleveland Avenue bus from Alabama State to travel home after studying. As the bus filled to capacity, the white driver noticed a white man standing and shouted at the student, “Girl, get up and let this passenger sit down.”<sup>67</sup>

Ms. Jones replied that she felt too sick to stand and she was seated in the section reserved for Black riders. The driver pulled the bus over and called the police. A white passenger armed with carpenter’s tools threatened Ms. Jones with a saw. He told her he had a “notion to slap [her] brains out.”<sup>68</sup>

When police officers arrived, the bus driver chided her, “I’m going to teach you to do what the white man tells you to do.” The officers forced her off the bus and shoved her into a police car. Once they arrived at city hall, the officers beat Ms. Jones with a pipe and kicked her when she tried to stand up. An officer banged her head into a brick wall and picked her up by her hair. They forced her into a jail cell and refused her medical treatment. Ms. Jones was charged with “suspicion” and fined \$28.<sup>69</sup>

Viola White, a 35-year-old widow, used the Montgomery city buses to commute to her job at Maxwell Air Force Base. In 1944, after refusing a bus driver’s order to vacate her seat for a white person, she was arrested and found guilty of “disobeying a bus driver.”<sup>70</sup>

Ms. White filed an appeal of her conviction. In retaliation for directly challenging the racial order, a white police officer kidnapped Ms. White’s 16-year-old daughter, drove her to a cemetery, and raped her. Ms. White’s daughter committed the officer’s license plate to memory and bravely reported the assault the following day.<sup>71</sup>



Three police officers violently arrest a woman in Alabama, 1963. (John Duprey/NY Daily News via Getty Images)

Union leader and civil rights activist Edgar Daniel (E.D.) Nixon fiercely supported both women in their pursuit of justice. Given his reputation as a dedicated advocate against discrimination, E.D. Nixon was often the first call after a Black Montgomerian’s civil rights were violated. (In February 1954, Mr. Nixon became the first Black person in the 20th century to run for elected office in Montgomery.) Mr. Nixon convinced a judge to sign an arrest warrant for the officer who assaulted Ms. White’s daughter. But instead of being arrested, the officer was allowed to leave town and never faced prosecution.<sup>72</sup>

Ms. White’s appeal never made it to trial before her death in 1954. Mr. Nixon later remembered the difficulty of getting such cases heard in court due to the lack of Black lawyers in Montgomery at the time.<sup>73</sup>

In 1943, a 30-year-old seamstress named Rosa Parks boarded a crowded city bus. While the front “white-only” seats sat empty, Black riders filled the seats at the back of the bus, stood packed in the aisle, and overflowed onto the steps of the rear boarding door. Unable to board through the obstructed back door, Ms. Parks boarded through the front and made her way to the back of the bus without reboarding. The driver, James F. Blake, grabbed Ms. Parks by her coat sleeve and ordered her off “[his] bus.”<sup>74</sup>

Ms. Parks did not attempt to reboard. She vowed that she “never wanted to be on that man’s bus again.” From then on, she checked who was driving before she boarded a bus in an effort to avoid “any more run-ins with that mean one.” She joined the Montgomery NAACP later that year.<sup>75</sup>

E.D. Nixon (left) and Rosa Parks arrive at court on March 19, 1956, for her trial during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (AP Photo/Gene Herrick)



Racial segregation and humiliation continued unabated on Montgomery city buses, as did resistance to discriminatory statutes and practices. Yet another Black woman, Katie Wingfield, was arrested in the 1940s for refusing to give up her seat to a white rider.<sup>76</sup>

Arrests on city buses were not limited to segregated seating violations. Police arrested Geneva Johnson in 1945 for not having the correct change and “talking back” to the driver.<sup>77</sup>

In 1948, a new voice joined the chorus of those calling for reforms on city buses. The Rev. Vernon Johns, pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, became known for his impassioned sermons, in which he masterfully quoted Scripture and called upon his congregation to become more vocal about the injustices faced by the Black community.<sup>78</sup>

During his four-year tenure, he denounced the segregation of city buses and generated controversy for refusing to enter a bus through the rear “colored” entrance or move from his seat in the “white-only” section until his fare was refunded. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described Rev. Johns, his predecessor, as a “fearless man” who “never allowed an injustice to come to his attention without speaking out against it.”<sup>79</sup>

The arrests of two children on a city bus in June 1949 focused the community’s attention again on the humiliating conditions. Teenagers from Newark, New Jersey, Edwina and Marshall Johnson, visited their aunt in Montgomery after attending their grandfather’s funeral in Georgia.<sup>80</sup>

Edwina, 16, and Marshall, 15, boarded a city bus and unknowingly sat down in “white-only” seats next to a white man and boy. The driver, S.T. Law, immediately ordered the confused siblings to move. Marshall exited the bus, but Edwina refused to move. She told Law, “[W]here we come from we can sit anywhere we wish. I paid my fare—and I’m not going to move.”<sup>81</sup>

Law forced Edwina off the bus and had reached for his gun when he claimed Marshall “advanced toward him in a threatening manner.” Despite getting off the bus, the 16- and 15-year-olds were arrested for violating segregation law.<sup>82</sup>

Edwina and Marshall were held in jail for two days before they were brought before Judge Wiley Hill. After threatening to send the children to reform school until they turned 21, the judge sentenced them to probation. Judge Hill chastised them, “What you do in New Jersey is your business. What you do in Alabama is Alabama’s business.” The judge continued, “The segregation law is a good law—for the colored people as well as for the white people.”<sup>83</sup>



(South Side High School Yearbook 1951)

**The routine nature of these arrests meant that such incidents rarely appeared in newspapers. Countless abuses and stories of mistreatment were never documented.**



Jo Ann Robinson

In December 1949, Alabama State English professor Jo Ann Robinson was traveling to visit family in Cleveland for the holidays. She took a city bus to a friend's house, where they planned to leave for the Montgomery airport together. The bus was empty aside from the driver, a white woman seated in the third row, and a Black man near the back of the bus.<sup>84</sup>

Ms. Robinson took a seat in the fifth row. The bus driver stopped the bus and stood over her. With his hand poised to hit her, he ordered her to get up and get off the bus. Frightened and humiliated, Ms. Robinson ran to the front of the bus and exited. Tears flowed until she reached Cleveland, and the scar of this indignity would last a lifetime.<sup>85</sup>

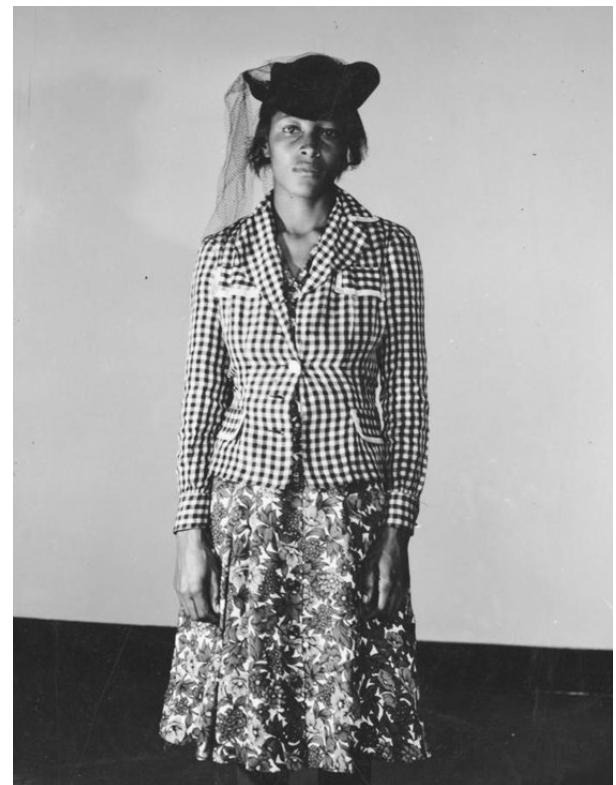
The experience fueled Ms. Robinson's determination to challenge pervasive abuses on city buses when she became president of the Women's Political Council (WPC), a politically oriented civil rights group focused on Black voter engagement and anti-discrimination efforts, in 1950.<sup>86</sup>

## Violent Attacks on Black Women

In 1944, 1949, and 1951, three horrific attacks on Black women generated outrage from community members—both Black and white—and galvanized the movement for justice and civil rights. Rosa Parks, along with E.D. Nixon, embraced a vigorous approach to issues of racial discrimination and confronted issues beyond segregation on city buses during her years of work with the Montgomery NAACP.

In 1944, Ms. Parks was sent to investigate the case of Recy Taylor, a 24-year-old Black woman who was walking home from a church service in Abbeville, Alabama, when she was abducted by seven white men. Armed with weapons, they drove her to a tree grove where six of the men raped her and threatened multiple times to kill her. After courageously reporting the attack, Ms. Taylor received death threats. Her home was firebombed while she, her husband, and their two-year-old daughter were inside. Ms. Taylor turned to the Montgomery NAACP Branch for help.<sup>87</sup>

Recy Taylor (Long View Publishing Co., Inc. / People's World via Tamiment Library, New York University)



In Montgomery, E.D. Nixon, Rosa Parks, and another local activist, Rufus Lewis, united to found the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. The committee established chapters across the nation and, in turn, generated nationwide press coverage. Newspapers recounted the attack and the extreme retaliatory violence lodged against Ms. Taylor and other Black women who dared to report acts of violence committed against them by white people.<sup>88</sup>

The reports engendered sympathy from white people outside of Alabama, reaching people as far away as Italy. A white captain of a Black U.S. Army company serving abroad wrote, "We have felt here that the fight for a greater democracy was being carried forward by such organizations as the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor."<sup>89</sup>

A national letter-writing campaign launched by the committee pressured Alabama Gov. Chauncey Sparks to call for a special grand jury investigation. Despite a confession from one of the attackers, the all-white, all-male grand jury declined to indict the seven men, and none faced prosecution. The State of Alabama did not issue a formal apology to Ms. Taylor until 2011, over 60 years after she was assaulted.<sup>90</sup>

In March 1949, the rape of yet another Black woman again ignited outrage and organizing in Montgomery. As recalled by Joe Azbell, journalist and city editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Gertrude Perkins and the assault perpetrated against her "had as much to do with the bus boycott and its creation as anyone on earth."<sup>91</sup>

After attending a party, Gertrude Perkins, a 25-year-old Black woman, was walking home from a bus stop when a Montgomery police car pulled up next to her. Two white officers confronted Ms. Perkins and forced her into the back of their squad car. The officers drove her to a secluded railroad embankment, dragged her behind a building, and raped her repeatedly. After the violent attack, the officers kicked her out of their car in the middle of town.<sup>92</sup>

Ms. Perkins went straight to the home of her minister, the Rev. Solomon S. Seay Sr., and recounted the crime. The pastor of Mt. Zion AME Zion Church, Rev. Seay listened to Ms. Perkins and made careful notes. The next morning, he distributed Ms. Perkins's account to a radio show and accompanied her to the police station, where she bravely reported the rape. Mayor and Police Commissioner John L. Goodwyn refused to allow access to a log of officers on duty or to organize a lineup so that Ms. Perkins could identify the perpetrators.<sup>93</sup>

The attack on Gertrude Perkins prompted several Black religious and civic organizations to join together in pursuit of justice. Rev. Seay and E.D. Nixon formed a new Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins, following the example of the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor established five years earlier. Police retaliated against Rev. Seay by arresting him outside a Citizens Committee meeting.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the NAACP, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and the Negro Civic and Improvement League aligned in support of Ms. Perkins. The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance had been convening all Black ministers in Montgomery for weekly meetings of prayer and politics. The League was led by a number of future Montgomery Bus Boycott activists, including Rev. Seay and Alabama State political science professor J.E. Pierce. Mr. Pierce took a special interest in voting rights, heading the "get-teachers-to-vote" program and surveying Alabama districts to expose the disparity between the populations of eligible Black voters and registered Black voters.<sup>95</sup>

Ms. Perkins's case remained in the local spotlight thanks to continued advocacy from community organizations. The *Alabama Tribune*, Montgomery's only Black newspaper, highlighted Gertrude Perkins as "the symbol of every Negro woman in Montgomery in the light of the way that this matter is being treated by [the] police authorities."<sup>96</sup>

The Alabama Tribune columnist accused the mayor, who was also the city police commissioner, of “giving the people the run around” and of having “tried Miss Perkins, without a court” by publicly denying her allegations. He refused to arrest the two officers who attacked her, despite the circuit’s criminal prosecutor conceding that arrest warrants were justified by the evidence.<sup>97</sup>

The sustained attention ultimately pressured officials to convene a grand jury. However, when the case was brought in front of the all-white and all-male jury, they refused to indict the officers.<sup>98</sup>

Meanwhile, Montgomery’s largest local newspaper, the Montgomery Advertiser, admitted that despite the dismissal, “the case as it embodies relations between the white and colored people of Montgomery is not closed.” The editorial board added, “[T]here is no doubt that some unwholesome feeling has been engendered.”<sup>99</sup>

While acknowledging a growing sentiment in favor of equal justice, the Advertiser nonetheless insisted that the case “ran the full process of our Anglo-Saxon system of justice,” and apathetically asked, “What more could have been done?”<sup>100</sup>

Two years later, Flossie Mae Hardman, a 15-year-old Black girl, received a ride home from her employer, Sam E. Green, a white grocery store owner whose children she regularly babysat. Before arriving at Flossie’s home, Green pulled the car over and raped her. Her sister later testified that Flossie came home in tears and reported the attack to her family. After hearing of the incident, civil rights advocate Rufus Lewis pressured white officials to bring charges against Green and worked to mobilize the community.<sup>101</sup>

**Four years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Montgomery’s Black residents demonstrated the power of an economic boycott.**



Rufus Lewis (Courtesy of Trenholm State Community College, Trenholm Library Archives, Rufus A. Lewis Collection)

Led by Rufus Lewis, Rosa Parks, and the WPC, Montgomery’s Black community demonstrated their outrage at the repeated sexual violence against Black women and girls by successfully boycotting Green’s grocery store and pressing officials to indict Green. His business, located in a Black neighborhood near Alabama State, shuttered within weeks. Green was brought to trial in June 1951, but an all-white jury deliberated for just five minutes before returning a verdict of “not guilty.”<sup>102</sup>

# ORGANIZING IN THE 1950s

“

**It was unfair to segregate us. But neither the bus company nor the mayor nor the city commissioners would listen.<sup>103</sup>**

— Rosa Parks

Over decades, Black Montgerians set the stage for the 13-month Montgomery Bus Boycott by building a robust network of nearly 70 civic, political, religious, labor, veterans, fraternal, and sororal organizations that “touched the total black population, male and female, young people, middle-aged, and old.”<sup>104</sup>

Composed of “lawyers, doctors, educators, druggists, entertainers, musicians, farmers, builders, mechanics, maids, [and] cooks,” these groups coordinated campaigns and coalesced behind specific, actionable requests to city leaders that were consistently denied. The connections and networks established during the 1940s and early 1950s facilitated the mobilization of 50,000 members of the Black community in December 1955.<sup>105</sup>

The many Black organizations in Montgomery made important inroads, but segregation in the city remained entrenched in the 1950s. Despite the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregationists remained deeply committed to racial hierarchy. State and local officials actively defied school integration orders and resisted any changes to the racial caste system that defined all aspects of life in Alabama.

## “The Longer I Rode the Madder I Got”

Like many of her fellow bus patrons, Louise Osborne explained in 1956, “The longer I rode the madder I got.” Daily threats and humiliation on Montgomery’s buses fueled community activism and made segregated buses a top priority for local organizations. Events in the half-decade preceding the Montgomery Bus Boycott pushed many Black bus riders to the conclusion that desperately needed change would not come on its own.<sup>106</sup>

On August 12, 1950, a 22-year-old Black World War II veteran named Hilliard Brooks Jr. boarded a Montgomery city bus. Mr. Brooks paid his fare before he was told by the white driver that the bus was too crowded and he could not board. His wife, Stella Brooks, later testified that Mr. Brooks “asked for his dime back and [the driver] wouldn’t give his dime back.” They argued over the bus fare before the driver called over a nearby police officer, who claimed Mr. Brooks was “creating a disturbance.”<sup>107</sup>

The officer fatally shot the unarmed Black man in the stomach and wounded two other bystanders. Though several eyewitnesses reported the shooting was unnecessary, the officer was cleared by a police board and faced no charges. Mr. Brooks left behind a pregnant wife and two young children.<sup>108</sup>



Hilliard Brooks Jr., a 22-year-old Black World War II veteran, was shot and killed in 1950 by a Montgomery police officer. (CRRJ Archive)

The killing of Mr. Brooks sparked complaints and activism from a local Black veterans organization and spurred calls for the hiring of Black officers on the Montgomery police force. The leadership of AMVETS Post No. 16, Ronald R. Young and Thomas Gray, advocated on behalf of Mr. Brooks and wrote a letter to the city commission.<sup>109</sup>

Their letter, which also appeared in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, called the killing “a malicious and unjust act, depriving a man of his life.” The veterans—both future Montgomery Bus Boycott activists—evoked democratic principles and asserted that the Black citizens of Montgomery were “certainly worthy of some meager reciprocity short of slaughter.”<sup>110</sup>

The AMVETS chapter quickly organized a voter registration demonstration. Members of Post No. 16 lined up to register to vote at the Montgomery County Courthouse, holding signs that read “Ballots Will Stop Bullets.” As a direct response to the killing of a fellow veteran on a city bus, at least 135 Black veterans completed applications to become registered voters.<sup>111</sup>

Mr. Brooks would not be the sole victim of lethally enforced racial segregation on city buses in Montgomery. Two more Black men were killed by police on Montgomery city buses between 1950 and 1953, according to interviews conducted by Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw.<sup>112</sup>

In 1950, under Jo Ann Robinson’s leadership, the Women’s Political Council (WPC) took the lead in advancing reforms on city buses and repeatedly met with Montgomery city officials. Former president Dr. Mary Fair Burks, an English professor at Alabama State College, had founded the WPC in 1946 after she was excluded from joining the Montgomery League of Women Voters, a white organization.<sup>113</sup>

WPC membership grew to over 200 Black women, spanning three chapters. They agreed to focus on three main priorities: political organizing in the form of voter registration and candidate vetting, challenging rampant abuses on city buses and the use of taxpayer funds on segregated city parks, and educating high school students on the democratic

process and ensuring Black adults could fulfill literacy requirements to vote. When Ms. Robinson assumed the presidency in 1950, she further elevated the issue of the abusive treatment of Black bus patrons.<sup>114</sup>



Dr. Mary Fair Burks founded the Women’s Political Council, which played a key role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Alabama State University Archives, Levi Watkins Learning Center)

In 1952, WPC members Sadie Brooks and Zoeline Pierce attended a public hearing held by the city commission regarding the prospect of increasing bus fares. The women raised concerns about seating arrangements and discourteous treatment of Black riders. The commission took their requests “under advisement” and made no meaningful improvements.<sup>115</sup>

The following year, the WPC received over 30 complaints about the bus conditions in Montgomery, most of which were lodged by Black women who relied on the buses to get to and from work.<sup>116</sup>

In 1953, Epsie Worthy boarded a bus at a transfer stop. Despite having already paid her fare on the first bus, the driver would not accept her transfer and demanded that Ms. Worthy pay again. To avoid any trouble with the driver, Ms. Worthy elected to get off the bus and walk to her destination. The white driver chased Ms. Worthy and began beating her. She “defended herself, fighting back with all her might,” but was arrested by police and charged with disorderly conduct. Ms. Worthy was fined \$52.<sup>117</sup>

The WPC again met with city officials and presented them with detailed reports “pointing out drivers, bus numbers, hours, and routes when certain incidents occurred.” The barrage of arrests and abuses negatively affected business, and Montgomery City Lines attempted to increase fares to compensate for waning ridership.<sup>118</sup>

The WPC identified four primary grievances on city buses, beginning with bus drivers’ widespread mistreatment and name-calling of Black passengers. They also criticized the infrequency of bus stops in Black neighborhoods (while buses stopped at every block in white neighborhoods) and the dangerous and disrespectful requirement that Black patrons pay their fare at the front of the bus, disembark, and reboard through the rear doors. Finally, the WPC protested the reservation of 10 seats for white passengers at the front of the bus, often resulting in Black passengers standing over empty seats.<sup>119</sup>

As a result of the meeting, Montgomery Mayor W.A. Gayle agreed to implement more frequent bus stops in Black neighborhoods, claimed that drivers would permit Black passengers to enter through the front door, and encouraged more courteous treatment of Black patrons by white drivers.

Members of the Women’s Political Council (Alabama State University Archives, Levi Watkins Learning Center and The Beta Nu Omega Chapter Of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.)



Both the mayor and bus officials simply rejected any changes to seating arrangements and deferred to the city's segregation laws. The apparent victory was short-lived, however, as "the mumblings started again" and "stories of unhappy experiences began to circulate once more."<sup>120</sup>

In February 1954, the WPC used another attempt to raise rates by Montgomery City Lines to bring attention to the "insults and indignities" of Black riders on city buses. At a meeting of city commissioners, a coalition of Black organizations circulated a mimeographed sheet to the commissioners.<sup>121</sup>

Signed by the WPC, City Federation of Women's Clubs, Women's Business and Professional Club, Progressive Democrats, Citizens' Education Committee, and Ministerial Alliance, the sheet outlined areas for redress, including the reservation of "white-only" seats, the forced reboarding through the back door, and the lack of bus stops in Black neighborhoods. City leaders again dismissed these concerns and made an empty promise to "try to see that the company provides adequate transportation, and at the minimum fare."<sup>122</sup>



Teenage boys wave Confederate flags in support of school segregation in Montgomery, 1963. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

## Hope for Desegregation

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, unanimously invalidated racial segregation in public education, ruling that segregated public schools were "inherently unequal" and violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. By overturning the nearly 60-year-old precedent of "separate but equal," which had been established by the Supreme Court in the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown* threatened to dislodge a cornerstone of the Southern racial caste system.<sup>123</sup>

In Alabama, the implications of *Brown* would take years to come to fruition. The Supreme Court decision “appeared to have no effect on Montgomery’s determination to keep” the schools segregated. In Montgomery’s Black community, however, the decision was celebrated as the second Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>124</sup>

NAACP Legal Defense Fund founder (and future Associate Justice of the Supreme Court) Thurgood Marshall successfully argued the *Brown* case. In a speech at Alabama State on June 10, 1954, Mr. Marshall urged Black Alabamians to press local governments to desegregate public schools.<sup>125</sup>

In the first effort to integrate public schools in the state of Alabama, NAACP leaders attempted to register 23 Black children in the fall of 1954 at William R. Harrison Elementary School, a newly opened white school in Montgomery. The students, their parents, and NAACP representatives were immediately rebuffed. The day after the unsuccessful integration attempt, the Montgomery Advertiser editorial board assuaged white readers’ fears, writing that “Segregation in Montgomery schools is in no danger for the time being.”<sup>126</sup>

Other prominent white voices defended racial segregation as a Christian practice. Dr. G. Stanley Frazer, pastor of St. James Methodist Church in Montgomery, asserted in a speech to a local white civic club that “nothing is more misleading than the statement that racial segregation is an un-Christian thing.” This statement, he continued, “is not supported by the authority of the Holy Bible.”<sup>127</sup>

**For years to come, white city leaders and residents of Montgomery alike fought fiercely to maintain segregation in schools and all other spheres.**

The WPC seized the momentum of the *Brown* victory and renewed calls for reform on Montgomery’s buses. Four days after the Supreme Court decision, the WPC sent a letter to the mayor threatening a boycott if injustices on public buses were not addressed—and reminding the mayor that city buses could not operate without the patronage of Black riders.<sup>128</sup>

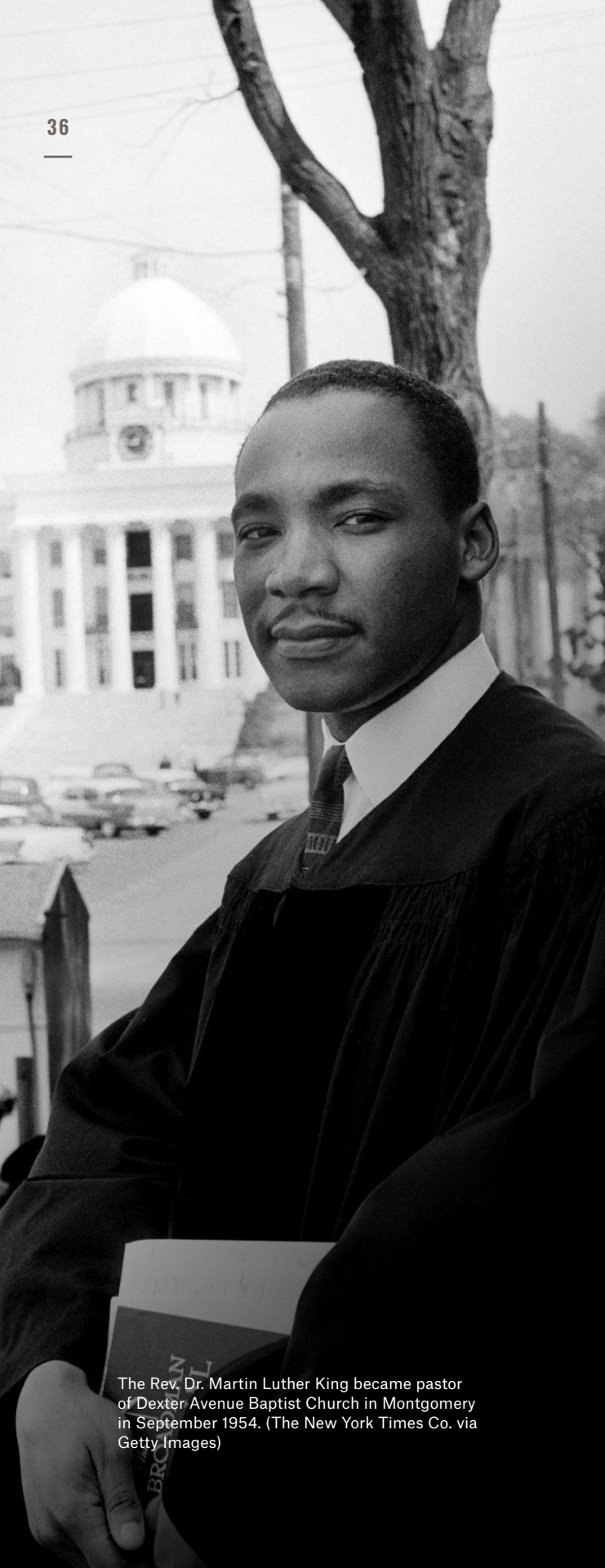


Teenage girls scream obscenities at Black students entering their high school in Montgomery, Alabama. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

A growing number of Black residents were “already arranging with neighbors and friends to ride to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers,” the WPC informed the city. Their letter also listed other Southern cities—including Atlanta, Macon, and Savannah, Georgia, and Mobile, Alabama—where integrated first-come, first-served seating arrangements had been implemented without issue.<sup>129</sup>

And for the first time, the WPC informed the mayor that more than 25 local organizations had made plans for a citywide boycott of the buses if conditions did not improve.

Montgomery officials refused to make changes.<sup>130</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in September 1954. (The New York Times Co. via Getty Images)

## Dr. King Arrives in Montgomery

In September 1954, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began his full-time pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Dr. King recognized that many members of his congregation had been fighting for racial equality for years before his arrival.<sup>131</sup>

Dr. King had also experienced firsthand the humiliation of racial segregation law on buses. When he was 14 years old, Dr. King traveled by bus from Dublin, Georgia, back to Atlanta after winning an oratorical competition. When white passengers boarded the bus, the driver ordered the young Dr. King and his teacher, who accompanied him, to give up their seats to them. Forced to stand for 90 miles until reaching Atlanta, he later wrote, "That night will never leave my memory. It was the angriest I have ever been in my life."<sup>132</sup>

At Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he created the church's Social and Political Action Committee and tasked the group with keeping church members informed of ongoing activism efforts throughout Montgomery and ensuring that all Dexter Avenue congregants became registered voters. Current and former WPC presidents Jo Ann Robinson and Dr. Mary Fair Burks served as co-chairs with voting rights activist Rufus Lewis as a committee member.<sup>133</sup>

Dr. King also became involved with the NAACP and the Alabama Council on Human Relations, which was the only interracial civic group in Montgomery prior to 1955. It endeavored to achieve equal opportunity for all Alabamians through education. Dr. King was elected as the council's vice president and hosted monthly meetings at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He expressed appreciation for the council as the sole open communication channel between Black and white Montgomery.<sup>134</sup>



Raymond and Rosa Parks (third and fourth from left) seated at a banquet table, likely at an NAACP branch meeting, in Montgomery. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Visual Materials from the Rosa Parks Papers [LC-DIG-ppmsca-38699])

Council members—Black and white ministers alike—were targeted and harassed for their work on the interracial committee. Johnnie Carr, NAACP member and future president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, remembered that police would go to council meetings, note the members' license plate numbers, and intimidate them at their jobs the following day. She lamented, "Any time you stood up and spoke out against something that was wrong for human beings, you were just branded."<sup>135</sup>

The WPC and other Black-led organizations bravely accepted branding, harassment, and threats for speaking out against the daily discrimination inflicted on Black bus patrons. Thanks to their many efforts over the course of the 1940s and '50s, they were prepared to respond to a series of arrests of Black women in 1955 by launching an extraordinary and effective campaign to end the exhausting and demeaning treatment on Montgomery's buses.

## The Women Before Rosa Parks

In the months before Rosa Parks's arrest on December 1, 1955, at least five other Montgomery women—Claudette Colvin, Jeanetta Reese, Aurelia Browder, Mary Louise Smith, and Susie McDonald—were arrested for refusing to vacate their seats for white people on city buses. A sixth woman, Lucille Times, was violently attacked by the same white bus driver who accosted Ms. Parks in 1943 and went on to order Ms. Parks's arrest in December 1955.

**“ I have told the press time after time that we were doing these things for years before December 1955, but all they want to do is start at December 1 and forget about what happened [before]. They say that Mrs. Parks is the lady that sat down on the bus and then they want to start talking about what happened on December 5. But that leaves a whole lot of folks out and ignores a lot of what was done over a long period of time to set the stage.”<sup>136</sup>**

— E.D. Nixon

On March 2, 1955, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was seated in the back section of the bus when the driver ordered her to give up her seat to a white person. Three other Black people vacated their seats, leaving available the seat next to Claudette and two seats across the aisle. But segregation law did not allow Black and white people to sit in the same row. The white bus driver shouted at her. Claudette’s decision to ignore his commands was “built on a lifetime of nasty experiences.”<sup>137</sup>

The driver called the police and told the two officers, “I had trouble out of that ‘thing’ before.” One officer kicked Claudette before forcibly removing and arresting her. She was charged with violating segregation laws, disturbing the peace, and assaulting the arresting officers, even though she’d gone limp when they dragged her off the bus.<sup>138</sup>



Claudette Colvin (Wikimedia Commons)



Jeremiah Reeves (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

In 1951, four years before her arrest on the bus, Claudette Colvin's friend at Booker T. Washington High School, 16-year-old Jeremiah Reeves, was accused of raping a white woman. In fact, he was in a consensual romantic relationship with the woman.

Police arrested Jeremiah and strapped the frightened boy into the electric chair at Montgomery's notorious Kilby Prison. They told him he would be electrocuted unless he admitted that he had committed all of the rapes reported by white women that summer. Under this terrifying pressure, he falsely confessed to the charges.

Despite quickly recanting and insisting he was innocent, Jeremiah was convicted in a two-day trial and sentenced to death by an all-white jury after less than 30 minutes of deliberation.<sup>139</sup>

Claudette Colvin called Jeremiah Reeves's arrest the "turning point of my life." The incident drove her and her classmates to interrogate the prejudice and racism they faced daily. "That changed me," she said later. "I stayed angry for a long time."<sup>140</sup>

Claudette also joined the Montgomery NAACP Youth Council founded and led by Rosa Parks. Through the Youth Council, Claudette and other Black children learned to challenge the racial order, writing letters to congressional representatives in support of anti-lynching legislation and repeatedly visiting the segregated main library in Montgomery to attempt to check out books.<sup>141</sup>

At the same time, Montgomery's white children largely opposed integration. In April 1955, the white YMCA Youth Legislature enacted two segregation proposals. "Segregation is a way of life to the South," they asserted. "No good could be accomplished by abolishing segregation."<sup>142</sup>

The news of Claudette Colvin's arrest spread swiftly throughout Montgomery's Black community. Civil rights organizations immediately convened to plan their responses to the arrest, and women renewed calls for a boycott. The WPC had prepared to distribute 50,000 boycott notices, awaiting the addition of a start time and place. They were ready.<sup>143</sup>

The many Black organizations in Montgomery came together to form a larger organization with two representatives from each group. Headed by Rufus Lewis with membership that included Jo Ann Robinson, the committee met with Montgomery Police Commissioner Dave Birmingham, who then convened a meeting with bus officials and the arresting officers.<sup>144</sup>

Birmingham assured the steering committee that Claudette Colvin would be afforded a fair trial. Because it was thought that Claudette would likely be vindicated, the question of a boycott was again deferred.<sup>145</sup>

Attorney Fred Gray agreed to represent Claudette. He believed her case presented an opportunity to challenge both Montgomery and Alabama's segregation statutes on constitutional grounds. The young attorney had recently returned from Ohio, where he earned his law degree because law schools in Alabama did not admit Black students. Mr. Gray was active in the Montgomery NAACP and maintained a standing lunch appointment with Rosa Parks to discuss the problems of the day.<sup>146</sup>

At Claudette's trial, the arresting officer told the judge that "she insisted she was colored and just as good as white." The same juvenile court judge who placed the young siblings Edwina and Marshall Johnson under probation in 1949 convicted Claudette on all counts. The verdict thrust Montgomery's Black community "as near a breaking point as they had ever been."<sup>147</sup>

Abuses and arrests of Black bus patrons for violating the segregation law continued in quick succession. In April 1955, the month after Claudette Colvin's arrest, Aurelia Browder was riding a Montgomery city bus. Ms. Browder worked as a seamstress, teacher, and midwife, and she rode city buses two to four times a day. By the time a white man and woman boarded the Day Street bus, the "white-only" seats at the front of the bus were filled. The driver ordered Ms. Browder and two other Black people to vacate their entire row to accommodate the white couple. Ms. Browder refused, and she was arrested. She later joined the Montgomery Bus Boycott, drove protesters in the carpool effort, and was active in Black voter registration efforts.<sup>148</sup>



The courage of Black women bus riders in Montgomery is even more astonishing given the widespread violence that Black women frequently faced at the hands of police officers. Ms. Ruth E. Tinsley, 58, is dragged away from a demonstration against segregated eating facilities at a department store by two police officers in Richmond, Virginia, February 1960. (Library of Congress)

In June 1955, Lucille Times drove her Buick to the dry cleaners on an errand. Before Ms. Times reached the dry cleaners, bus driver James F. Blake—the same driver who had accosted Rosa Parks in 1943—attempted three times to run her off the road into a ditch. Blake followed Ms. Times in his city bus and confronted her. He berated Ms. Times, called her a “Black son of a bitch,” and then violently attacked her. When Ms. Times fought back, the driver called the police. A white motorcycle officer arrived on the scene and hit Ms. Times in the neck with a flashlight. The officer did not arrest her but warned that if she had been a man, he would have “beat [her] head to jelly.”<sup>149</sup>

Ms. Times filed complaints against the bus company, but they were ignored. Dissatisfied and seeking justice, she and her husband, Charlie, began a boycott of their own. The couple drove to bus stops and offered rides to would-be Black bus patrons. When the Montgomery Bus Boycott officially began six months later, the Timeses continued to offer rides, and were soon joined by hundreds of other carpool drivers.<sup>150</sup>

Two more Black women—Mary Louise Smith and Susie McDonald—were arrested in October 1955 for refusing to give up their seats to white passengers.<sup>151</sup>

Mary Louise Smith, an 18-year-old domestic worker for a white family, earned \$2 a day. She was riding the Highland Avenue bus when a white woman boarded and asked the bus driver to remove Ms. Smith from her seat in the rear section of the bus. Ms. Smith refused the driver’s order three times. She stated plainly, “I am not moving. Not one step.” The driver called the police. Ms. Smith firmly told the officer, “I am not going to move out of my seat. I am not going to move anywhere, I got the privilege to sit here like anybody else.” The officer arrested her, and she was fined \$12, an entire week’s pay.<sup>152</sup>

Years later, Ms. Smith recalled being pushed and shoved on the buses, having doors slammed in her face, and being forced to stand over empty “white-only” seats. “I wasn’t afraid at all,” she affirmed. “You can be pushed around so long when you come to the boiling over point. I didn’t care what would happen.”<sup>153</sup>

The same month, Susie McDonald, a 77-year-old widow, was also arrested for violating segregation law.

Claudette Colvin, Aurelia Browder, Mary Louise Smith, and Susie McDonald followed these acts of bravery by taking another bold step. All four became plaintiffs in a 1956 federal lawsuit challenging segregation on public transportation as unconstitutional.

## “I Thought of Emmett Till and I Couldn’t Go Back”

In August 1955, an appalling case of racial violence profoundly impacted Black Montgomeries. The murder of Emmett Till exposed the brutality of racial terrorism in the American South to a nationwide audience. At just 14 years old, the Chicago teen was kidnapped and murdered by two white men in Mississippi, where he was visiting family. Accused of whistling at a young white woman, a perceived violation of the Southern racial hierarchy, Emmett was severely beaten, shot, mutilated, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River, where his remains were found days later.

Emmett’s mother, Ms. Mamie Till, insisted on an open casket at her child’s funeral. She permitted the media to publish photos of her son’s body, and the horrifying image of young Emmett’s disfigured corpse forced the country to confront the reality of racial violence and sparked protests that fueled the civil rights movement. The two white men responsible for killing Emmett were acquitted by an all-white jury; they later confessed to the crime in a magazine interview.<sup>154</sup>

Organizers like Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a Mississippi physician and decades-long civil rights activist, galvanized communities across the country to fight for justice and equality in the wake of Emmett Till's murder and his mother's courageous act of defiance. Black citizens in Mississippi and the broader South were determined to achieve an integrated society, Dr. Howard told one audience in Baltimore, urging them to share the conviction that "makes us know that this reign of terror and the undemocratic practices of the South will soon be over and we'll all soon be free." He called on their support at this pivotal moment, reminding the audience, "Someone said a long time ago that the darkest hours are just before dawn."<sup>155</sup>

In November 1955, Rosa Parks attended a mass meeting hosted by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to hear a speech by Dr. Howard who told a packed audience at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church the harrowing stories of Emmett Till and other recent victims of racial terror lynchings in Mississippi, including voting rights activists Lamar Smith and the Rev. George Lee.<sup>156</sup>

Four days later, she refused to give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery city bus. "I thought of Emmett Till," she said, "and I couldn't go back."<sup>157</sup>



Mamie Till insisted on an open casket at her son's funeral. The photographs of Emmett Till prompted many across the nation to reckon with the reality of racial violence. (ST-17600658, Chicago Sun-Times Collection, Chicago History Museum)

# Forerunners of Rosa Parks



The four plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*: Mary Louise Smith, Claudette Colvin, Susie McDonald, and Aurelia Browder.

Rosa Parks's courageous refusal to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery city bus on December 1, 1955, drew the nation's attention to the longstanding humiliation, harassment, and abuse of Black people on public transportation in the South.

Black women rode the bus in greater numbers than men, and as a result, were the primary targets for mistreatment on public transportation during the era of segregation. The norms of the racial order

permitted white men to cross into the "Jim Crow" sections of transportation to harass Black women riding alone—and women who attempted to resist were typically demeaned and often threatened with violence.<sup>158</sup>

Countless Black people across the U.S. nonetheless undertook great personal risk to challenge segregated transportation in the century before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Many of these pioneers were women.

These protests began with the efforts of free Black people in the North before the Civil War. One of the earliest documented acts of resistance to transportation segregation took place in November 1832, when Harriet Mundrucu, a free Black woman from Boston who was active in the abolition movement, presented tickets for herself and her infant daughter for the “ladies’ cabin” of a boat, but was denied access because she was Black.

When Ms. Mundrucu objected, the white captain forced her off the boat, despite her having paid the highest-priced ticket. Ms. Mundrucu and her husband filed a lawsuit against the captain and were awarded \$125 for breach of contract. But the captain appealed, and the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court overturned the award, ruling that Black people had no specific right to access the ladies’ cabin.<sup>159</sup>

A decade later, on September 30, 1841, Mary Newhall Green, a Black woman who served as secretary of the Lynn Anti-Slavery Society, boarded a train in Lynn, Massachusetts, headed to Boston with her five-month-old infant. After she entered the first-class car, which she paid for, the conductor ordered her to use the “negro car” instead. When she refused, the conductor and five other white men violently forced Ms. Green and her infant child off the train. Afterward, Ms. Green wrote a letter to the railroad officials. “I think I have a right, in common with others, to go in any car I choose,” she wrote.<sup>160</sup>

On July 16, 1854, Elizabeth Jennings Graham attempted to board a segregated white streetcar in New York City on her way to the First Colored American Congregational Church, where she was the organist. The white streetcar driver insisted she wait



Black women who faced daily humiliation and mistreatment on city buses launched and sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott for 382 days. (Don Cravens via Getty Images)

for the trailing—and already full—Black segregated car. When Ms. Jennings persisted in explaining her need to get to her destination quickly and tried to board, the driver and a nearby policeman dragged her from the car and pushed her into the street with such force that a companion of hers feared they might kill her. Ms. Jennings succeeded in her legal challenge against the Third Avenue Railway Company’s policy. She was awarded \$225 in damages and the company desegregated its streetcars the next day, paving the way for integrated public transportation in New York City.<sup>161</sup>

In October 1865, legendary Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman was working as a nurse in the U.S. Army and had been riding on a train with a government-provided half-price ticket between Philadelphia and New York. The conductor came to take her ticket, but ordered her out, telling her, “We don’t carry n-----s for half fare.” After she told the conductor she was a government employee and was entitled to ride in the same car with U.S. soldiers, she was assaulted and thrown into the “negro car” by the train conductor and three other white men, who broke her arm.<sup>162</sup>

On June 6, 1896, Alice A. Bowie, a Black Sunday school teacher who was escorting a large group of children to a picnic, was injured after being violently removed from a segregated streetcar in Birmingham, Alabama. When she sued the streetcar company, the Alabama Supreme Court, citing the recently decided *Plessy v. Ferguson*, ruled that “the carrier’s right of property...and the public interest is best subserved by a separation of negro and white passengers.”<sup>163</sup>

On July 16, 1944, Irene Morgan was returning home to Baltimore on a Greyhound bus after visiting her mother in Virginia. The driver demanded that Ms. Morgan vacate her seat for a white person. When Ms. Morgan refused to do so, a sheriff’s deputy forcefully removed her from the bus. Ms. Morgan was arrested and charged with resisting arrest. Although she pleaded guilty and paid the \$100 fine for resisting arrest, she refused to pay a \$10 fine for violating a Virginia law requiring segregated seating on public transportation. Ms. Morgan appealed the fine, and in

*Morgan v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, invalidating state laws requiring segregation in interstate motor travel.<sup>164</sup>

On August 2, 1952, Pfc. Sarah Louise Keys, who served in the U.S. Army, was ordered to give up her seat to a white Marine on a bus in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. After she refused, she was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. Pfc. Keys filed a complaint against the bus company with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), challenging the company’s internal segregation policy as a violation of federal law. The ICC ruled in Pfc. Keys’s favor, holding that *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s separate-but-equal rule no longer applied to interstate travel after *Brown v. Board of Education* and thus closing a loophole that had allowed Southern carriers to continue discriminating in interstate travel after the *Morgan v. Virginia* decision.<sup>165</sup>

Seventeen months before the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 20-year-old Sarah Mae Flemming was assaulted by a white bus driver for sitting in the “white-only” section of a segregated bus in Columbia, South Carolina. Ms. Flemming filed a lawsuit against the bus company challenging the local segregation ordinance. She won a legal victory when a federal appellate court determined that segregation on local buses was no longer constitutional after *Brown v. Board of Education*, but when the case was sent back for trial, an all-white, all-male jury refused to award any compensation for the harm she suffered. Ms. Flemming’s case led to some municipalities desegregating their public buses, but the ruling was ignored in Montgomery and many other parts of the South. Nevertheless, it helped lay the foundation for the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>166</sup>

Rosa Parks’s arrest was the culmination of a series of arrests of Black bus riders in Montgomery, including the four plaintiffs of *Browder v. Gayle*—Claudette Colvin, Aurelia Browder, Mary Louise Smith, and Susie McDonald—and her defiance of discriminatory treatment on public transportation opened a new chapter in the long struggle for equal treatment undertaken by generations of Black people.

# IGNITING A MOVEMENT

“ **But there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled by oppression. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged into the abyss of exploitation and nagging injustice. The story of Montgomery is the story of 50,000 such Negroes who were willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk the streets of Montgomery until the walls of segregation were finally battered by the forces of justice.**<sup>167</sup>

— The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Throughout the Bus Boycott, mass meetings held at Black churches in Montgomery served as strategic touchpoints and sources of motivation and inspiration. (Grey Villet/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images)

In the decades leading up to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, many Black organizations in Montgomery worked tirelessly to improve conditions for the city's Black citizens. Specific coalitions formed to address deeply entrenched racial disparities in voting rights, housing, employment, education, and other aspects of life in the Jim Crow South.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott united the entirety of the Black community behind a common goal, irrespective of class, age, occupation, or religious denomination. The indignities suffered on city buses resonated with every Black Montgomerian. From December 1955 to December 1956, some 50,000 members of Montgomery's Black community shouldered enormous risks in an expansive effort to end racial segregation and humiliation on public transportation.



Rosa Parks sitting on a bus in Montgomery, 1956. (Photo12/Ann Ronan Picture Library/Alamy)

Jeopardizing their personal safety and economic livelihood, Boycott participants faced unrelenting opposition from white city leaders and residents. During and after the 382-day Boycott, a stream of obstacles offered community members valid reasons to abandon the effort. And yet, this resistance only strengthened Boycott supporters' resolve and showcased the movement's unity and dexterity as thousands were repeatedly forced to adapt on a moment's notice.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott demonstrated the power of a campaign driven by faith, love, nonviolence, and the affirmation of dignity.

## The Bus Boycott Begins

On December 1, 1955, after her shift as a seamstress at Montgomery Fair department store, Rosa Parks boarded a Montgomery City Lines bus to make her way home. Ms. Parks took an available seat in the fifth row of the crowded bus. After the bus picked up additional passengers at the next stop, a white man stood without a seat. The bus driver ordered Ms. Parks and the three other Black people seated in her row to move. "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats," he said.<sup>168</sup>

When she looked up at the driver, a familiar face looked back at her. The bus driver was James F. Blake, the man Ms. Parks intentionally avoided since he grabbed her by her coat sleeve and forced her off a bus for boarding through the front door 12 years earlier. Remembering this humiliation and the many abuses perpetrated against others on city buses, Ms. Parks knew that “the more we gave in and complied, the worse [drivers] treated us.” She resolved to remain seated.<sup>169</sup>

When two police officers arrived to arrest her for violating segregation law, she asked them, “Why do you all push us around?” One of the officers answered, “I don’t know, but the law is the law and you’re under arrest.” The officers drove Ms. Parks to the jail, where officers stamped her fingerprints and took her mugshot; she was denied a phone call and water.<sup>170</sup>

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**“ It was very humiliating having to suffer the indignity of riding segregated buses twice a day, five days a week, to go downtown and work for white people.”<sup>171</sup>**

— Rosa Parks

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While Ms. Parks’s story would become widely known, the bus conditions in Montgomery had generated protests and outrage for years before her arrest in December 1955. After decades of daily abuses, brutalities, and humiliations, every Black citizen had experienced denigration on city buses—or knew someone who had. At “barber shops, beauty parlors, grocery stores, street corners,” Richard Jordan, a Pullman porter, attested, “anywhere you see a negro in Montgomery he is dissatisfied about the condition we put up with.”<sup>172</sup>

Before any formal calls to boycott, Ms. Parks vowed that she “would never, never ride another segregated bus, even if [she] had to walk to work.” Many other Black Montgomerians had already made similar pledges. Thousands more would join them in the coming days, in assertion of their dignity and right to be treated with respect.<sup>173</sup>

News of Ms. Parks’s arrest spread quickly through Montgomery’s Black community. E.D. Nixon, with whom Ms. Parks worked as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP, attempted to ascertain the circumstances of the arrest. When police refused him any information, he called Clifford Durr, a white civil rights attorney, to accompany him to make bail for Ms. Parks. Fred Gray, the 24-year-old Black attorney who had represented 15-year-old Claudette Colvin on a similar charge earlier in the year, had joined Ms. Parks for lunch earlier that day, and he agreed to represent her. At the start of his prolific legal career, Mr. Gray effectively became the chief legal strategist for the Boycott.<sup>174</sup>

Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council (WPC) decided to renew their calls for a boycott after Ms. Parks's arrest. Late that night, she headed to Alabama State and printed tens of thousands of leaflets that read:

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. 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, or your daughter, or mother. This 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 of all buses Monday.<sup>175</sup>



Rosa Parks with E.D. Nixon (middle) and Fred Gray on December 5, 1955, the day of Ms. Parks's trial for violating segregation law. (AP Photo/Gene Herrick)

By printing these leaflets and being publicly associated with a boycott of city buses, educators at Alabama State risked their livelihoods and students risked their educations. As a state-funded institution, Alabama State was vulnerable to retaliation from state officials who could deny funding and force expulsions. Professors Jo Ann Robinson, Dr. Mary Fair Burks, Rufus Lewis, and J.E. Pierce, along with Alabama State students, nonetheless played major roles in organizing and sustaining the Montgomery Bus Boycott, often working behind the scenes to minimize retribution against the college.

Dozens of WPC members quickly and efficiently distributed tens of thousands of leaflets on the day after Ms. Parks's arrest to schools, businesses, beauty parlors, factories, barber shops, and other locations throughout the Montgomery community. From there, the unsigned leaflets changed hands multiple times. Dr. Burks, one of the many WPC members who went out into the community to raise awareness of boycott plans, recalled not only explaining the leaflet to community members, but also reading it to many who could not do so themselves. Through these efforts, crucial information reached all corners of the Black community by 2 pm on Friday—and thousands of Black Montgomeries began making plans to stay off the buses on Monday.<sup>176</sup>

As word spread, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy of First Baptist Church, and E.D. Nixon arranged a meeting of Black leaders that evening at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Dr. King marveled at the attendance of “physicians, schoolteachers, lawyers, businessmen, postal workers, union leaders, and clergymen,” who represented virtually every Black organization in the city. The cross-section of the Black community represented at the meeting reflected the broad coalition that mobilized Montgomeries—irrespective of class, occupation, education, or age—to end racial segregation on public transportation.<sup>177</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. outlining strategies for the Boycott to a group of leaders including the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy and Rosa Parks. (Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

The Rev. L. Roy Bennett, president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, presided over the meeting, where leaders unanimously agreed that the persistent indignities and abuses on buses demanded action. They announced a boycott on Monday, December 5, the day of Rosa Parks's trial. The leaders left the meeting with a promise that ministers would reinforce the need for a boycott in their Sunday sermons. The ministers soon found their

congregations had already received WPC leaflets and largely supported the protest.

At the meeting, Dr. King and other attendees crafted a statement to supplement the WPC's messaging and to add information about a mass meeting scheduled Monday evening at Holt Street Baptist Church. The mimeographed statement instructed:

Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday  
December 5.

Another Negro Woman has been arrested and put in jail because she  
refused to give up her bus seat.

Don't ride the buses to work to town, to school, or any where on Monday.  
If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk.

Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7:00 P. M. at the Holt Street  
Baptist Church for further instruction.

On December 5, 1955, a “dreary, dark, cloudy” Monday with “the threat of rain,” Montgomery’s Black community waited with great anticipation to see how many people would boycott the city buses. Support was widespread in the community, but organizers knew that more than 20,000 Black citizens regularly relied on the buses for transportation to their jobs. Dr. King and other leaders hoped 60% of Black residents would stay off the buses that day.<sup>179</sup>

Montgomery City Lines buses began traversing their regular routes, only to find that bus stops ordinarily filled with Black riders were vacant. Montgomery Advertiser city editor Joe Azbell went to the Court Square bus stop in downtown Montgomery on the morning of December 5. A WPC flyer urging Black residents to stay off the buses was tacked to the bus shed, where one Black man stood alone. The Montgomery City Lines bus arrived at the unusually deserted bus stop. The man refused to board the bus, which drove away without him. When asked why he did not board the bus, the man replied, “Jim Crow’s on board. When he gets off, I’ll get on.”<sup>180</sup>

The first day of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was an undeniable success. Cooperation far surpassed expectations—Dr. King estimated that nearly 100% of Black bus riders had boycotted that day.<sup>181</sup>

**Ultimately, some 50,000 Black people would take part in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, walking, taking taxis, carpooling, biking, and even riding mules and horse-drawn buggies to get around town.<sup>182</sup>**

By order of Montgomery’s mayor, W.A. Gayle, two motorcycle police officers followed each bus, purportedly to protect Black bus riders from “Negro goon squads” rumored to be planning to intimidate Black would-be bus riders. The rumors were false, but that did not stop local newspapers or the mayor from stoking fears of violence. But the mayor’s plan backfired—reports of intimidation squads were quickly dismissed by the thousands of Black residents who were resolved to boycott, and the police detail served only to frighten any Black person who may have considered taking the bus.<sup>183</sup>

Montgomery residents walking during the Bus Boycott. (Grey Villet/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images)



Crowds of day laborers and domestic workers walked proudly to their jobs. The sight of empty buses energized the Black community and created a palpable sense of unity. Throughout the day, crowds gathered to watch and cheer the empty buses.

**Dr. King wrote, “As I watched them I knew that there is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity.”<sup>184</sup>**

Other community members gathered outside the courthouse to show support for Rosa Parks during her trial. After hearing brief testimony from bus driver James F. Blake and a white witness, the court found Ms. Parks guilty of disorderly conduct and fined her \$10 plus costs. Ms. Parks’s conviction was expected, and attorneys Fred Gray and Charles D. Langford planned to appeal to a higher court where a challenge of segregation laws was more likely to prevail.<sup>185</sup>

As they left the courthouse, E.D. Nixon, the Rev. Edgar N. French of Hilliard Chapel AME Zion Church, and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy recognized the need for a dedicated organization to oversee and coordinate the Boycott. Meeting at Mt. Zion AME Zion Church ahead of the evening’s mass meeting, Black ministers and community leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and unanimously elected Dr. King to serve as its president.<sup>186</sup>

On the evening of December 5, 1955, Dr. King drove anxiously toward Holt Street Baptist Church for the first mass meeting of the Boycott. Without much time to prepare his remarks—or much confidence that many people would attend following the Boycott’s first day—Dr. King came upon a traffic jam five blocks from the church. “Cars were lined up as far as [he] could see on both sides of the street.” To his surprise and relief, thousands of people had gathered at the church two hours before the meeting was scheduled to begin.<sup>187</sup>

In all, six thousand Black people attended the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott at Holt Street Baptist Church. With the sanctuary filled to capacity, thousands huddled outside the church doors. The Rev. A.W. Wilson, pastor of Holt Street Baptist Church, positioned loudspeakers outside for the benefit of the overflow crowd and curious white residents alike.<sup>188</sup>

Georgia Gilmore worried about police retaliation against those who attended the mass meeting, but ultimately she decided that being there in person was worth the risk. Like many others in attendance, Ms. Gilmore knew firsthand the humiliation inflicted on Black bus riders. Before the meeting, Ms. Gilmore spent \$14 on chicken, lettuce, and white bread. A cook at the segregated National Lunch Company restaurant in Montgomery, Ms. Gilmore prepared fried chicken sandwiches to sell to meeting attendees and donated the profits to the MIA. This initial act evolved into the Club From Nowhere, a group of women who secretly prepared and sold food out of homes and local businesses to raise money to support the Boycott.<sup>189</sup>

Inspired by the Club From Nowhere, Inez Ricks organized the Friendly Club, which created a friendly competition to see which cooks could generate the most donations at each mass meeting. Ms. Ricks had similarly experienced mistreatment by white bus drivers. In the early 1950s, she boarded a bus at a transfer point and handed her transfer to the driver. The driver denied receiving the transfer and demanded that Ms. Ricks pay again, but she refused. Furious that she challenged him, he “drove off as fast as he could right through town, jerked the bus this way and twisted it that way and did the best he could to throw [her] down.”<sup>190</sup>



The first mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery on December 5, 1955. (Montgomery Advertiser, color by Marina Amaral)



The two groups brought in more than \$500 each week in contributions, which financed the purchase of station wagons and gas for the MIA carpool operations. The membership of the Club From Nowhere and the Friendly Club was kept secret. Anonymity allowed the women—employed as domestic workers, cooks, and day laborers—to support the Boycott without inviting reprisals from their white employers.<sup>191</sup>

The Holt Street meeting began with the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Six thousand voices crescendoed in a “mighty ring like the glad echo of

heaven itself,” united behind the common goals of ending racial segregation and humiliation on city buses and achieving equal citizenship. The Rev. Willie F. Alford, pastor of Beulah Baptist Church, gave the opening prayer, followed by a reading of Scripture by new MIA recording secretary, the Rev. Uriah Fields. Then 26-year-old Dr. King gave his first of many addresses as president of the MIA.<sup>192</sup>

Dr. King explained that this Boycott intended to secure the fulfillment of democratic principles that had been kept out of reach for Black Americans.

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**“ And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. Love has no meaning. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”<sup>193</sup>**

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To roaring cheers, he verbalized the congregants’ collective exhaustion from “being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression.” Bringing the focus to the bus situation, a problem that was “not at all new” and “existed over endless years,” Dr. King gave voice to the intimidation, humiliation, and oppression inflicted on community members “because of the sheer fact that they were Negroes.”<sup>194</sup>

Dr. King laid out a set of guiding principles intended to both continually unify and reinvigorate the movement in the face of the many obstacles to come. Love and a shared faith in God, he said, would inform and sustain their courageous pursuit of justice, freedom, and dignity. An uncompromising commitment to nonviolence, he argued, would differentiate their peaceful and righteous endeavor from the hateful and violent campaigns of segregationist organizations.<sup>195</sup>

**The Weather**  
 Montgomery: Cloudy to partly cloudy and continued cool. Predicted high today 54, low 38. High yesterday 57, low 43. (Details, Weather Map, Page 3A.)

**The Montgomery Advertiser**


127th Year—No. 291      Full Day, Night and Sunday Service  
 By The Associated Press      Montgomery, Ala., Tuesday Morning, December 6, 1955

**5,000 At Meeting Outline Boycott; Bullet Clips Bus**

By JOE AZBELL  
 Advertiser City Editor

An estimated 5,000 hymn-singing Negroes packed the Holt Street Baptist Church to its outer doors and spilled over into three streets blocking traffic last night as they voted to continue a racial boycott against buses of the Montgomery City Lines Inc.

Meanwhile, J. H. Bagley, manager of the Montgomery City Lines, reported that a



"5,000 at Meeting Outline Boycott," Montgomery Advertiser, Dec. 6, 1955.

"Unity," Dr. King said, "is the great need of the hour, and if we are united we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve." Concluding his address, he predicted their victory—one which history books would celebrate: "There lived a race of people, a black people, 'fleecy locks and black complexion,' a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization."<sup>196</sup>

As the audience applauded, the Rev. Edgar N. French introduced Rosa Parks and Fred Daniel, an Alabama State student who had been falsely accused of impeding a woman from boarding a bus and arrested earlier that day. Rev. French praised Ms. Parks and Mr. Daniels's moral courage but emphasized that they must not stand alone. Rather, each person in attendance had "a responsibility in this great task" of achieving "this victory that inevitably must be ours." He asked for the masses to join "hands and hearts together" and resolve themselves as never before to not "give back one inch until we shall be accorded the full respect and rights."<sup>197</sup>

The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy took the podium to present the MIA's resolutions. All citizens of Montgomery were urged to refrain from riding city buses until three basic conditions were realized: courteous treatment of Black passengers; first-come, first-served seating, with Black passengers filling seats from the back and white passengers from the front of the bus; and an end to the ban on hiring Black bus drivers. The crowd of six thousand people unanimously voted to continue the Boycott until these demands were met.<sup>198</sup>

During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, newspapers and other media reported on the burgeoning movement for dignity and racial justice in Montgomery. Overwhelmingly, however, the media coverage inflamed racial tensions. Nationwide news coverage brought intense national backlash from white people determined to protect segregation.<sup>199</sup>

Eager to maintain their longstanding political, social, and economic dominance, white Montgomery city officials and community members also responded to the announcement of the Boycott with intimidation, threats of arrest, legal reprisals, and violence.

Local journalists were told not to cover the activism of the Black community as editors sought to minimize the Boycott's importance. Journalists who defied these orders received threats. Editors of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, after initially covering the Boycott, later dismissed it as a futile exercise that would lead only to further resentment from white people. They wrote, "There will be white rule for as far as the eye can see."<sup>200</sup>

Local Black journalist Inez Baskin's coverage as a correspondent for *Jet* magazine and the *Associated Negro Press* brought national attention to the protest in Montgomery. Ms. Baskin had grown up in Montgomery and received a bachelor's degree from Alabama State. A journalist for the *Montgomery Advertiser's* Black news section—a single page in editions delivered only to Black households—Ms. Baskin was committed to reporting positive stories about the Black community and exposing the discrimination they faced.<sup>201</sup>



Inez Baskin (David Bundy/*Montgomery Advertiser*)

Ms. Baskin took detailed notes during the December 3 planning meeting of Black ministers and civic leaders at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and was among the crowd of thousands at Holt Street Baptist Church for the MIA's first mass meeting on December 5. Her reporting in *Jet* magazine made her the first Montgomery journalist to publish an account of the Boycott in a national news outlet.<sup>202</sup>

Despite numerous threatening phone calls, Ms. Baskin continued to bring informed and revelatory reporting to a national audience throughout the duration of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>203</sup>

Boycott leaders received dozens of threatening letters and phone calls each day. Letters signed by the Ku Klux Klan demanded that they “get out of town or else.” Phones rang incessantly; many leaders took their phones off the hook in order to sleep.<sup>204</sup>

Without Black riders, Montgomery City Lines' financial struggles were significant. Bus and city officials realized within weeks the degree to which the company's profitability relied on fares paid by Black passengers.

White city leaders and bus officials were determined to project strength during nationally televised meetings with the MIA's negotiating committee. On the fourth day of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the MIA's 12-member negotiating committee met with the three city commissioners, Montgomery City Lines' manager and attorney, and leaders from Montgomery's white civic organizations and presented their three demands: first-come, first-served seating, the guarantee of courteous treatment, and the employment of Black bus drivers. Bus company representatives dismissed the proposed seating plan as illegal, ignored concerns of mistreatment by bus drivers, and stated that they had “no intention now or in the foreseeable future of hiring ‘n-----s.’”<sup>205</sup>

Jack Crenshaw, attorney for the bus company, “mugged and leered before the cameras.” He showcased the opposition's unwillingness to compromise with the MIA. “If we granted the Negroes these demands,” he

said, “they would go about boasting of a victory that they had won over the white people; and this we will not stand for.”<sup>206</sup>

The meetings that followed adhered to the same pattern—city and bus leaders rebuffed reasonable MIA suggestions without consideration. White newspapers ran stories with headlines such as “Boycott Leaders Reject Compromise Proposals,” creating a false impression that city leaders' good faith efforts to compromise were being met with stubborn defiance by Boycott leaders. In reality, all “new” proposals put forth by white Montgomery officials were the same ones that had been previously considered and rejected.<sup>207</sup>

Frustrated that the MIA refused to acquiesce to empty promises or abandon their bold crusade for equal treatment, city officials became openly hostile and shut down any avenues for compromise.

On January 22, Montgomery officials falsely declared that a settlement had been reached and the Boycott was over. The news that three Black ministers had met with city leaders came as a shock to Dr. King when a journalist from the *Minneapolis Tribune* called to confirm that the MIA had ended the Boycott after conceding the same bus conditions that existed prior. The three ministers, who were not members of the MIA, contended that they were tricked into attending the meeting with the city commissioners, where they expected to discuss other matters.<sup>208</sup>

The Montgomery Advertiser planned to announce the “settlement” on its front page, but waited a day to publish. As the news nonetheless spread throughout Montgomery like wildfire, MIA leaders successfully utilized their extensive network to ensure that no Boycott supporters fell for the ruse.<sup>209</sup>

Having failed to divide the Black community or to trick people into getting back on the buses, city officials next sought to undermine the MIA carpool.

# The Role of Black Churches



A meeting in a Montgomery church attended by 3,000 people who pledge to continue the five-month-old Boycott against the city buses. (Robert W. Kelley/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images, color by Marina Amaral)

Beyond logistics, Black churches nurtured Boycott supporters' secular and religious needs. They were places for "psychological and spiritual sustenance," refuges from the violence and humiliation of the Jim Crow South, and incubators for group identity and solidarity.<sup>210</sup>

Interdenominational cohesion secured the support of a broad coalition of the Black community that cut across class divisions. Ministers served as leaders and spokespeople of the Boycott, emphasizing their commitment to a philosophy of nonviolence and to the struggle for integration as a moral endeavor rooted in Christian doctrine.<sup>211</sup>

For the first few months of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, mass meetings were held twice a week at rotating churches throughout the city. The gatherings included songs and Scripture readings. As the president of the MIA, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed these gatherings, where funds were collected, committees gave reports, and a different minister at each meeting delivered words of encouragement. Attendees consistently received a message of "love rather than hate" and were reminded of their mandate to "suffer violence if necessary but never to inflict it."<sup>212</sup>

Black churches in Montgomery served as pickup stations for the organized carpool effort, an elaborate network that transported tens of thousands of residents daily. Many churches also purchased station wagons for the carpool. These "rolling churches," as they were called, were proudly emblazoned with the congregations' names and driven by volunteers, oftentimes parishioners and pastors.

As the Montgomery Bus Boycott continued, Black churches and their parsonages became targets of white retribution. In January 1956, Dr. King's home was bombed with his wife and infant daughter inside. The Rev. Robert Graetz's parsonage was bombed in August of the same year.

Just weeks after the Montgomery Bus Boycott concluded with the integration of city buses in December 1956, a number of Black churches were bombed, including Bell Street Baptist Church, Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, Mt. Olive Baptist Church, and First Baptist Church, and bombs exploded at the homes of the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy and (for the second time) Rev. Graetz.<sup>213</sup>

Speaking to an overflowing crowd at St. John AME Church at the last mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott on December 20, 1956, Dr. King reflected on the yearlong commitment and sacrifice that made possible the Supreme Court mandate to integrate the buses.

Dr. King evoked the Boycott supporters' faith as a sustaining force. "It is my firm conviction that God is working in Montgomery," he said. "Let all men of goodwill, both Negro and white, continue to work with Him. With this dedication we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice."<sup>214</sup>

## “The Heart of the Movement”

To replace city bus service, MIA members Rufus Lewis and the Rev. W.J. Powell persuaded Black taxi companies to charge 10 cents—the same as the bus fare—to take Boycott participants to work. All of the city’s 18 Black-owned taxi companies lowered their fares, providing an alternative method of transportation for Black bus riders who joined the Boycott.<sup>215</sup>

But just five days into the Montgomery Bus Boycott, city officials eliminated this alternative by forcing Black taxi companies to dramatically increase their rates and arresting cab drivers for minor offenses, effectively eliminating taxis as an affordable alternative.<sup>216</sup>



A group gets into an automobile to carpool during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, February 1956. An empty city bus is visible in the background. (Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

The MIA needed to adapt quickly. The transportation committee set up a carpool system that transported residents free of charge. More than 150 people immediately volunteered as drivers or offered their cars for the carpool. The system eventually grew to more than 200 cars serving 100 pickup stations.

Due to their comprehensive understanding of city mail routes, Black mail carriers and postal workers—many of whom served on the MIA’s executive board—were instrumental in mapping the citywide carpool routes.<sup>217</sup>

Each day starting at 5 am, people congregated at 48 dispatch stations throughout the city and waited to be picked up by the fleet of cars. Nearly every Black church served as a dispatch station, and many churches also purchased station wagons for use in the carpool effort. Pastors and members of the congregation drove these “rolling churches” to central hubs.<sup>218</sup>

As the Boycott continued, Black-owned businesses participated in the organized carpool network and supported the cause in other ways. Pharmacist Richard Harris dispatched cars by telephone throughout the day, while simultaneously operating Dean Drug Store and filling prescriptions. Rufus Lewis, whose wife’s family owned the city’s largest funeral business, deployed its fleet of cars for the carpool. Montgomery’s Black-owned businesses also served as crucial information distribution centers and provided alternatives for Black customers who could not or chose not to support white businesses.<sup>219</sup>

Many women and men volunteered as carpool dispatchers and drivers, helping to keep the system running smoothly and reliably. Ann Smith Pratt worked as a hairdresser and as a chief dispatcher for the carpool, communicating with drivers via radio. At 62 years old, Irene West, member of the WPC, drove Montgomery residents in her green Cadillac for the MIA carpool every day during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>220</sup>

Newspapers reported that the carpool was “highly organized...operating with military precision.” A staggering 30,000 people utilized the carpool daily to travel to and from work, and were treated with respect while doing so. “The success of the car pool is at the heart of the movement,” MIA transportation committee chairman Rufus Lewis said. “It must not be stopped.”<sup>221</sup>



A police officer writes a ticket for a carpool driver in the Posey parking lot at the intersection of Monroe and North McDonough streets. It was the only Black-owned parking lot in downtown Montgomery. (Photo by Dan Weiner, © John Broderick)

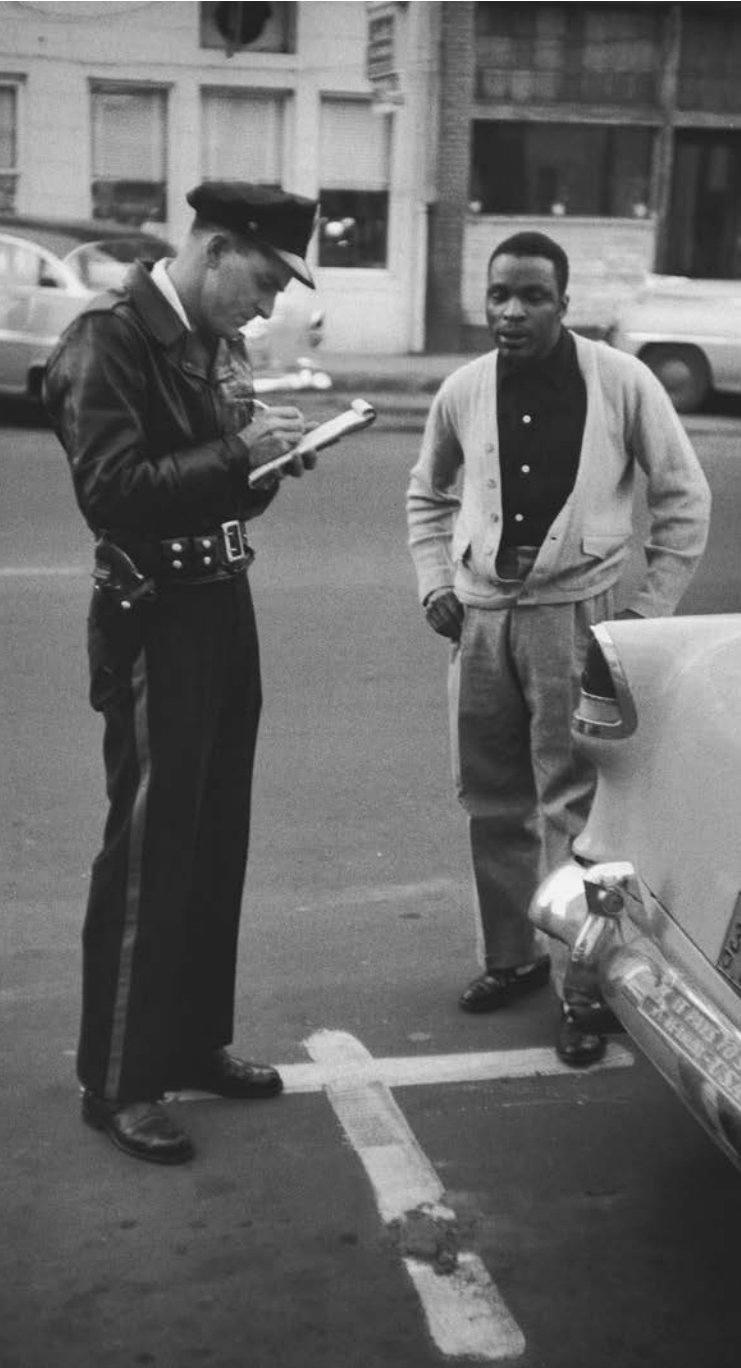
## Montgomery Police “Get Tough”

On January 23, 1956, the mayor, W.A. Gayle, instituted a “get tough” policy to target, harass, and intimidate carpool drivers and other Boycott participants. He enlisted two full-time detectives to surveil the carpool system and compile evidence for a grand jury investigation. Police began arresting Montgomery Bus Boycott participants for minor or imagined traffic violations.<sup>222</sup>

Law enforcement constantly monitored carpool pickup and dispatch stations as well as drivers themselves. “Every black person would get a traffic ticket two and three times a week,” Georgia Gilmore, a carpool driver who received more than 30 tickets, remembered. “Policemen would give hundreds and hundreds of tickets every day to black people.”<sup>223</sup>



Motorcycle police surveil Black Montgomery residents who are waiting for a carpool lift. (Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)



Montgomery carpool driver receives a parking ticket during the Boycott. (Don Cravens via Getty Images)

Alberta James, a restaurant owner who drove a station wagon owned by Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, was regularly targeted by police. She received one traffic violation for nearly every month she served as a carpool driver, despite widespread agreement among her peers that she was “unquestionably the best driver employed by the MIA transportation committee.”<sup>224</sup>

Yancey Martin was a student at Alabama State during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Mr. Martin and his friends became dedicated carpool drivers who drove the same route in multiple cars each day to ensure adequate transportation for the high volume of riders. Being pulled over by police was so common and expected that carpool drivers made sure to learn the names of every person they drove in order to refute charges of operating an illegal taxi service. Mr. Martin recalled that, if questioned, “we’d just say that these are my cousins or these are friends of mine I’m giving a lift. There’s no law against giving anybody a ride.”<sup>225</sup>

Even if drivers successfully avoided a ticket, escaping police harassment proved more difficult. Police recorded carpool vehicles’ tag numbers and surveilled them long after the day’s carpool duties ended. Mr. Martin recalled a common occurrence, “If you were out one night and you were at Gordon’s Ice Cream Parlor,... the police would see your car and know that you were one of the cars that were always involved in picking up the people.” The police would locate the owner of the car and “they’d say, ‘You’re not parked close enough to the curb....’ They’d find something wrong to harass you about.”<sup>226</sup>

The community’s elaborate carpool system became a model for collective organizing. In 1956, inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, two Black students at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee were arrested after taking the only two available seats on the bus in the “white-only” section. Black residents joined the students in a bus protest in May 1956. They, too, created a carpool system to sustain the movement.<sup>227</sup>



View of a Ku Klux Klan highway sign at the city limits, Montgomery, Alabama, mid-1960s. (Charles Moore photographic archive, e\_clm\_0291, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin)

## The White Citizens' Council

On January 23, 1956, Montgomery Mayor W.A. Gayle vowed that he would no longer negotiate with Black community leaders. The day after this outburst, Gayle joined the Montgomery White Citizens' Council.<sup>228</sup>

First formed in the Mississippi Delta in response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling requiring school desegregation, local chapters of the White Citizens' Council spread rapidly throughout the South during 1955 and 1956. The Montgomery White Citizens' Council was founded in October

1955 with a membership of 300 people committed to defending racial hierarchy and using social pressure and economic retaliation to intimidate and coerce Black and white people who supported integration.<sup>229</sup>

By February 1956, less than three months into the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Montgomery chapter had grown to 12,000, making it one of the fastest-growing White Citizens' Councils in the South and the largest white organization in Montgomery County. The White Citizens' Council was composed of businessmen and professionals who wielded substantial political and economic power—distinguishing it from the Ku Klux Klan—but it shared the Klan's fierce commitment to segregation.<sup>230</sup>



Alabama college students burn materials to protest against racial integration, February 6, 1956. (Library of Congress/Associated Press)

White Citizens' Council members published racist handbills, pressured insurance agencies to cancel policies for church-owned station wagons used in the carpool, and were suspected of bombing Boycott leaders' homes and churches. Following a November 1956 federal district court ruling that segregated buses were unconstitutional, the leader of the Montgomery WCC threatened, "Any attempt to enforce this decision will inevitably lead to riot and bloodshed." By the end of that year, Alabama was home to 100 WCC chapters with 80,000 members. The WCC continued to fight against equal rights for Black people throughout the 1950s and '60s.<sup>231</sup>

In January 1956, all three city commissioners—Mayor W.A. Gayle, Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers, and Commissioner Frank Parks—publicly joined the WCC. Boycott leaders saw an immediate uptick in threatening phone calls and mail. With the police

commissioner on board, the Montgomery Advertiser reported, "In effect, the Montgomery police force is now an arm of the White Citizens Council."<sup>232</sup>

On January 26, 1956, police arrested Dr. King for allegedly driving 30 miles per hour in a 25 miles per hour zone. Realizing he was being tailed by police, Dr. King drove especially slowly and carefully so as not to provide any reason for a traffic stop. But police stopped him and ordered him out of the car, searched him, and placed him under arrest. As they traveled on a dark road unfamiliar to Dr. King, he worried whether the officers "were driving me out to some waiting mob, planning to use the excuse later on that they had been overpowered." Until they reached the city jail, Dr. King "found [himself] trembling within and without."<sup>233</sup>

Just four days after his arrest, Dr. King's home was bombed with his wife, Coretta Scott King, their infant daughter, and a friend inside. The bomb exploded on the porch of the parsonage, shattering windows and destroying part of the home's facade. Dr. King rushed home from a mass meeting to find his family unharmed, and hundreds of people gathered on South Jackson Street, angered by the vicious and violent attack on the MIA leader. Dr. King spoke to the crowd, using the opportunity to make a powerful recommitment to nonviolence. Acknowledging their shared frustration, Dr. King urged anyone with weapons to take them home and anyone unarmed not to buy a gun. Instead, he emphasized meeting hate with love. Before the crowd dispersed, he reassured them that even "if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement."<sup>234</sup> He told those assembled:

**"We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence."<sup>235</sup>**

Opposition to the Boycott was not limited to city officials or segregationist groups—it also extended to white church leaders in Montgomery. Years later, Dr. King remembered his disappointment when he realized that many Southern white ministers, priests, and rabbis—whom he'd believed would be the Boycott's strongest allies—were instead "outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders." Disappointing to Dr. King, far too many spiritual leaders opted for neutrality and "remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."<sup>236</sup>

Dr. Henry L. Lyon, the minister of Montgomery's largest church, Highland Avenue Baptist Church, was among the many white religious leaders in Montgomery who emerged as vocal opponents of the Bus Boycott and integration. Dr. Lyon asserted that he

considered "separation of the races Christian," and, furthermore, racial segregation was "morally right" and "one of the main teachings of the Holy Bible." He went on to say that "never, never, 10,000 times never, do we find, as white Southerners, any guilt complex concerning our belief in and the practice of separation of the races because it is the edict of God in the Holy Bible."<sup>237</sup>

In his column in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Dr. G. Stanley Frazer, the pastor of St. James Methodist Church, wrote that segregation was both Christian and supported by the Bible. Rabbi Eugene Blachsclager served Temple Beth Or in Montgomery and was considered a "gradualist" on segregation. Rabbi Blachsclager distanced himself from both the Boycott and Dr. King, claiming he would not recognize him if they passed each other on the street.<sup>238</sup>

White Citizens' Council membership grew across the South in the months following the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. On January 26, 1956, 3,500 segregationists gathered in Columbia, South Carolina. (The State Newspaper, courtesy of Richland Library, Columbia, S.C.)



But a small number of white clergy in Alabama publicly advocated for civil rights and racial integration—at great personal and professional risk. The Rev. Robert Graetz, the white pastor of a Black congregation at Trinity Lutheran Church, was a member of the MIA’s executive board and participated in the carpool effort from its inception. Because Rev. Graetz publicly supported the Boycott, he and his family faced multiple forms of harassment and violence. He was arrested under the “get tough” policy, acid and sugar were poured on his car and in the gas tank, his children received death threats, and his home was bombed twice. These attacks contributed to his decision to leave Montgomery in 1958.<sup>239</sup>

White opposition to segregation crossed religious lines. While many in the Jewish community were fearful of antisemitic backlash for supporting integration and civil rights, several leaders supported racial justice. Rabbi Seymour Atlas of Agudath Israel in Montgomery tutored Dr. King in Hebrew. After he appeared on an interfaith panel discussion broadcast

on a Black radio station in Montgomery and prayed for the Montgomery Bus Boycott’s success at a Shabbat service the following week, Rabbi Atlas’s synagogue attempted to censor him by requiring him to submit any public statements for approval at least three days in advance. Rabbi Atlas refused to comply and the board voted against renewing his contract. Forced to resign, Rabbi Atlas moved to Bristol, Tennessee.<sup>240</sup>



The Graetz home after a bombing by the Ku Klux Klan. (*A White Preacher’s Message on Race and Reconciliation* by Robert S. Graetz Jr., courtesy of NewSouth Books, an imprint of the University of Georgia Press)

## Support for Montgomery City Lines

After the first full month of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Montgomery City Lines’ revenue fell by nearly 65% from January 1955 figures. Newspapers around the country reported on the ongoing Boycott and the significant decline in bus ridership. While the coverage inspired donations to the MIA from sympathetic communities in other states and countries, it similarly gave rise to donations in support of Montgomery City Lines from white people across

the nation who opposed racial integration. Donations ranged from cents to significant amounts that totaled thousands of dollars in today’s currency, some signed from “a friend for States Rights.”<sup>241</sup>

J.W. Holliday, owner of an auto body shop in Montgomery, donated \$10 to Montgomery City Lines. In an accompanying letter, he wrote, “If the negroes should succeed and get their way in the boycott there would be no stopping them. I am for not giving in one inch.”<sup>242</sup>

From Plateau, Alabama, a contribution was compiled “to keep you in business and keep fighting for white supremacy and segregation on public transportation.”<sup>243</sup>



A nearly empty bus during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Photo by Dan Weiner, © John Broderick)

From Birmingham, E. Stark Collier, "one who is back of you 100% in your fight for our Southern way of life and against the forces that would destroy this heritage, both the Communists and the NAACP," sent a check to inform Montgomery City Lines that "the good citizens of this state are behind you 100%." He maintained that "the Rabble-Rousers and Adjitators [sic] are now having a Holiday, it cannot last always. I hope the cancellation of your bus routes into their sections, will be on a permanent basis."<sup>244</sup>

To many, the fight to maintain segregation on Montgomery city buses symbolized the larger fight to preserve racial hierarchy, white "heritage," and the "way of life" in a changing landscape. Support for Montgomery City Lines came from states across the South and as far away as California.<sup>245</sup>

From San Antonio, Texas, a white man wrote, "I would be glad to pay double the fare if I could ride negroe free...I am not affiliated with any group but speak as an individual white person who believes in segregation 100%."<sup>246</sup>

Several letter-writing campaigns generated contributions. The director of the "Association for the Advancement of White People" in Atlanta posited that if the "white man had the back bone, courage, family pride, decency, or what ever" to "boycott the negro," the "entire Africanizing program would end over night [sic]." Referencing President Woodrow Wilson as "our only all white president," he wrote in consternation, "This country will be owned by the Jews, worked by the whites and enjoyed by the Negro's [sic]."<sup>247</sup>

# VICTORY IN MONTGOMERY

“

**Boycotting taught me courage. The memory of the thousands of boycotters, walking in hot and cold weather, in rain, sleet, and sunshine, for thirteen long months, makes me feel ever so humble. These people inspired me to refuse to accept what was wrongfully imposed upon me. Justice in the end was the coveted goal that helped and inspired me and fifty thousand others to become involved.<sup>248</sup>**

— Jo Ann Robinson

The first two months of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were a success. Despite violent threats and economic retribution, thousands of Black residents remained united and continued to mobilize in pursuit of justice. They made tremendous sacrifices and shouldered enormous risks to sustain the Boycott, which would last over a year.

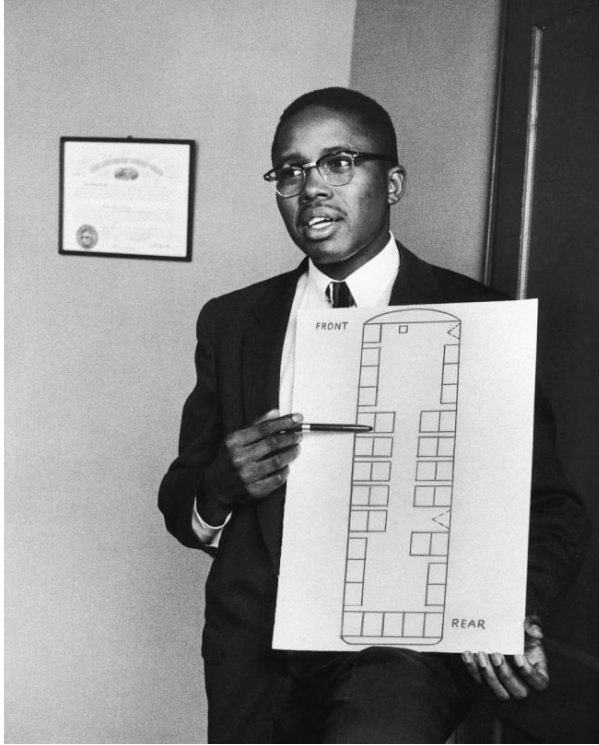
Fred Gray remembered, “The Bus Protest was ongoing, but it was a hardship to many people.” He wrote, “[W]e had to give the people something to hang on to so they would continue to make the sacrifice of staying off the buses.”<sup>249</sup>

At the start of the Boycott’s third month, Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) leaders filed a federal lawsuit to challenge the constitutionality of segregation on Montgomery city buses. The lawsuit reenergized the thousands who made the daily commitment to carpool or walk until the landmark ruling ended codified racial segregation on city buses in December 1956. *Browder v. Gayle* also unleashed a flood of resistance that intensified and continued long after the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

## “Our Way of Getting Tough”

On February 1, 1956, Boycott activists took a decisive step toward dismantling the legal architecture of segregation. Attorneys Fred Gray and Charles D. Langford filed *Browder v. Gayle*, a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of segregation statutes on city buses in Montgomery as violating the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees equal protection under the law. The lawsuit called for an injunction barring city officials from enforcing the segregation statutes.<sup>250</sup>

Rosa Parks, whose case remained on appeal in the state courts, declared, “The new suit was our way of getting tough.” The four plaintiffs—Aurelia Browder, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and Susie McDonald—were all women arrested between March and October 1955 for refusing to give up their seats on city buses to white passengers.<sup>251</sup>



Fred Gray uses a diagram to help illustrate his case, *Browder v. Gayle*, in Montgomery, 1956. The successful case ended legal segregation on city buses. (Don Cravens via Getty Images)

The backlash to the lawsuit was swift. Lead attorney Fred Gray became a target of harassment, intimidation, and false accusations. City officials attempted to have him disbarred. A grand jury indicted Mr. Gray and accused him of representing one of the plaintiffs without her consent.<sup>252</sup>

Despite having secured an exemption due to his ministerial duties as assistant pastor of Holt Street Church of Christ, Mr. Gray's military draft status was immediately reclassified by white officials as eligible for the selective service after he filed the *Browder* suit. Newspapers smeared Mr. Gray as a "draft dodger" and "NAACP troublemaker" before the national Selective Service director intervened the night before he was due to report for duty.<sup>253</sup>

Mr. Gray was later arrested for sitting in the "white-only" section at the Montgomery airport while en route to Boston for a speaking engagement on behalf of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The night of the *Browder v. Gayle* filing, the home of E.D. Nixon, treasurer of the MIA, was bombed—the second bombing of an MIA leader's property in three days.<sup>254</sup>

On February 10, nine days after *Browder* was filed, 12,000 white residents attended a mass White Citizens' Council meeting at the Montgomery Coliseum in opposition to integration. Handbills circulated through the crowd, explicitly calling for racial violence:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to abolish the Negro race, proper methods should be used. Among these are guns, bows and arrows, sling shots and knives. We hold these truths to be self evident that all whites are created equal with certain rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead n-----s.<sup>255</sup>

The largest crowd in the venue's history flocked to hear keynote speaker Mississippi Sen. James O. Eastland, a notorious segregationist. Priming the crowd for what could come in the *Browder v. Gayle* case, he told them they were not required to obey the Supreme Court—and, in fact, white citizens were "obligated to defy it."<sup>256</sup>

The following month, Eastland became chairman of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee. At a mass meeting of white citizens, he reportedly warned segregationists of dire consequences if they failed to fight the forces of integration. "If we don't stop these Africans," he said, "we'll wake up some day and find Martin L. King in the White House."<sup>257</sup>



A mass meeting of the White Citizens' Council of Greater New Orleans to protest integration, 1960. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

# Prosecuting Dr. King

On February 13, 1956, the opposition took extreme measures to legally suppress the Boycott and its threat to segregation. A Montgomery County grand jury returned indictments against 115 Montgomery Bus Boycott activists for allegedly violating a 1921 anti-boycott law that prohibited interfering with or hindering business “without just cause.”<sup>258</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was among more than 100 Boycott participants arrested in February 1956. (Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)



**In its report, the grand jury proclaimed, "In this state we are committed to segregation by custom and by law; we intend to maintain it."<sup>259</sup>**

In the coming weeks, police began arresting more than 100 Black Boycott organizers and participants. Instead of waiting for police, those indicted paraded proudly to the jail in their Sunday best, surprising police officers and white community leaders. The boycotters transformed their arrests from symbols of shame into badges of honor.<sup>260</sup>

Dr. King described arriving at the jail to find "an almost holiday atmosphere," with Boycott supporters unable to contain their delight after their mugshots were taken and fingerprints stamped. Jo Ann Robinson remembered, "They were defiant, willing to go to jail, ready to let Americans and the world know that they could not and would not take any more."<sup>261</sup>

Montgomery police arrested more than 100 Black Boycott organizers and participants in February 1956.



## Neither violence nor mass arrests would compel them back to the buses.

Community members gathered outside the city jail as people continued to surrender themselves for arrest and others celebrated their releases. Many people came to the jail to be arrested, only to find their names were not among those formally indicted. While cheering the indicted community members, a spectator outside the jail claimed, "I wanted to be indicted too...because I wanted to be numbered with the right, but they wouldn't charge me."<sup>262</sup>

From the arrests emerged inspiration and encouragement rather than defeat or deterrence. Around 5,000 people gathered for a mass meeting at First Baptist Church on February 23. The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, pastor of First Baptist, rejected the idea that the Boycott was "a one-man show, a preacher's show" and credited the assembled crowd for drawing nationwide attention to the movement.<sup>263</sup>



MIA leaders announced a Prayer-Pilgrimage Day of walking to take place the following day. To demonstrate their unshakeable commitment to desegregating public transportation, they urged all “freedom-loving people” to reject all forms of transportation by car on February 24, including the MIA carpool and their own private cars. Instead, thousands of Black people defiantly walked through the rain to commute to and from their jobs—for some, a journey of over 10 miles on foot.<sup>264</sup>



A Montgomery resident carries a box of turnip greens on her head during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Don Cravens via Getty Images)

They joined the many people, like Ethel Robinson, who had opted to walk every day since the protest began. Ms. Robinson walked up to 20 miles to and from her six-day-a-week job as a domestic worker.<sup>265</sup>

Due to her age, an elderly Black woman known as Mother Pollard was repeatedly encouraged to abandon walking and resume taking the bus. She refused. Capturing the spirit and the fortitude of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, she insisted, “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.”<sup>266</sup>

Out of all those indicted for allegedly violating the anti-boycott statute, only Dr. King was prosecuted. His case went to trial on March 19 in a packed courtroom. His attorneys brought more than two dozen witnesses to testify about the reasons for their abstention from city buses. Dr. King listened “with a mixture of sadness and awe” as witness after witness told of the humiliating abuses suffered on Montgomery City Lines buses while “[looking] the solicitor and the judge in the eye with a courage and dignity to which there was no answer.”<sup>267</sup>

After four days of testimony and argument, Dr. King was convicted and fined for organizing an illegal boycott. Photographs show a jubilant crowd of 300 cheering supporters surrounding a smiling Dr. King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, on the steps of the courthouse following his conviction. The conviction served only to strengthen their resolve. The crowd chanted, “We ain’t gonna ride the buses no more!”<sup>268</sup>

Mentha L. Johnson, a student at Alabama State who participated in the Boycott, succinctly summarized the shared outlook of Boycott supporters. She told a reporter, “We’re still happy, still in the protest and we’re still going to be Christian about it.”<sup>269</sup>



The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy (left) shakes hands with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery on March 22, 1956, after Dr. King was convicted for his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (AP Photo/Gene Herrick)



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy leave the Montgomery County Courthouse, 1956. (Alpha Historica/Alamy)

MIA leaders echoed Ms. Johnson's sentiments to an assembly of thousands. At a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church that night, Black leaders announced the Boycott would continue. Dr. King professed that "no matter how many times they convict me," the Black community of Montgomery would continue the Boycott in accordance with the principles of love and nonviolence.<sup>270</sup>

To thunderous applause, he affirmed that the unity and dedication fostered throughout the three months of the Montgomery Bus Boycott had crystallized into a steadfast determination. They were no longer "content to accept second-class citizenship," but "determined to struggle for justice and equality until we achieve it." Dr. King's conviction was not his to bear alone; rather, it was as if the judge "had convicted every Negro in Montgomery."<sup>271</sup>

# Federal Courts and “States’ Rights”

The mere possibility of federal court intervention against segregation elicited fierce retaliation from Montgomery leaders and segregationists across the South. In March 1956, 19 U.S. senators and 82 U.S. representatives declared their opposition to integration in the “Southern Manifesto,” which condemned the Supreme Court’s school integration ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* as a “clear abuse of judicial power” and decried the “meddl[ing]” of out-of-state “agitators.” They pledged the South to use “all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation.” Alabama’s entire congressional delegation signed the manifesto. Indeed, newspapers reported that Alabama Sen. Lister Hill “almost tripped over himself in his hurry to sign.”<sup>272</sup>

On May 11, 1956, a panel of three federal judges convened to hear *Browder v. Gayle*, which alleged that the bus segregation law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Each of the plaintiffs who suffered humiliation and arrest for violating the segregation law described riding city buses multiple times daily before the start of the protest.<sup>273</sup>

Attorneys for the city attempted to paint the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the federal suit itself as disingenuous schemes concocted by MIA leaders to manipulate the larger Black community. Each of the plaintiffs denied the suggestion that they were merely pawns tricked by MIA leaders to reject segregation.<sup>274</sup>

When city leaders testified, they took the opportunity to trumpet their commitment to segregation and perpetuate unsubstantiated beliefs that integration would inevitably result in violence. “There is danger of bloodshed or something like that,” Mayor W.A. Gayle claimed, “unless we strictly enforce the segregation laws.” Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers charged that “violence would be the order of the day” if bus

service in Montgomery was integrated. He continued, “I don’t feel that we have enough police officers to take care of the situation, to prevent the violence that would be a menace to public safety.”<sup>275</sup>

The court deliberated for over three weeks before issuing a ruling on June 4, 1956. In a 2-1 decision, Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. and Judge Richard T. Rives concluded that segregated buses in Montgomery were illegal and unconstitutional; Judge Seybourn Lynne dissented. The city was defiant—it refused to integrate and instead launched an appeal.<sup>276</sup>

In the same month as the *Browder v. Gayle* ruling, Montgomery Circuit Court Judge Walter B. Jones granted an injunction banning the NAACP from meeting, fundraising, and organizing in the state. Alabama Attorney General John Patterson, who had filed suit to enjoin the NAACP’s activities and was later elected governor of Alabama, stated, “The NAACP is no credit to the Negro race and has set the Negro’s cause back 100 years in Alabama.”<sup>277</sup>

The end of the summer of 1956 saw successive menacing acts targeting Boycott supporters and the Black community as a whole. In August, the house of the Rev. Robert Graetz, a white pastor supportive of the Boycott, was bombed. And the FBI began COINTELPRO, a counterintelligence program that attempted to surveil, disrupt, and discredit civil rights activists, including Dr. King.<sup>278</sup>

In September, on the eve of the start of the school year, effigies of Black people were hung at three all-white public schools in Montgomery: Sidney Lanier High School, Robert E. Lee High School, and William R. Harrison Elementary School. Days later, 1,200 white people attended a Ku Klux Klan cross-burning rally at the parking lot of Paterson Field, a baseball field in Montgomery, to celebrate the re-establishment of a Ku Klux Klan “klavern” in Montgomery for the first time in a quarter century.<sup>279</sup>

Under pressure from the White Citizens’ Council, local white insurance agents canceled liability insurance for 17 of the 24 church-owned station wagons used in the carpool, forcing them out of service.<sup>280</sup>



Members of the Ku Klux Klan burn a cross in Montgomery, 1956. (The Denver Post via Getty Images)

Sam Engelhardt, an Alabama state senator and the executive secretary of the White Citizens' Councils of Alabama, emerged as a brazen spokesperson for the segregationist organization and the principal architect of the Alabama Legislature's strategy to defy desegregation. He openly resented the Montgomery Bus Boycott and declared that "Montgomery would have been a much better place if there had never been any Martin Luther King. And that goes for Ralph D. Abernathy, too."<sup>281</sup>

By 1956, a year after its founding, Montgomery County's White Citizens' Council, which aimed to "fight any attempt at race-mixing in the county," had grown from 300 members to over 13,000.<sup>282</sup>

As the Montgomery Bus Boycott neared its 11th month, city leaders went beyond the "get tough" policy's near-constant harassment, ticketing, and arrest of carpool drivers. Mayor Gayle sought to eliminate the carpool altogether and pursued a legal injunction against its operation in Montgomery County Circuit Court. The city petition named the MIA, churches that had purchased station wagons, and individuals active in the MIA and carpool effort as defendants.<sup>283</sup>

November 13, 1956—the date of the hearing on the city's petition against the carpool—was remembered by Dr. King as "an important and ironic date in the history of the Montgomery bus protest." He and other MIA leaders and attorneys gathered in the courtroom and expected the circuit court judge to grant the injunction against the carpool. Sensing an "unusual commotion," they watched as Mayor Gayle and Commissioner Sellers convened in another room.<sup>284</sup>

**A reporter then handed a note to Dr. King that read: "The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge U.S. District Court in declaring Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional."<sup>285</sup>**

In what Dr. King called "a glorious daybreak to end a long night of enforced segregation," the Supreme Court had upheld the lower court's decision in *Browder v. Gayle*.<sup>286</sup>

Not long afterwards, Circuit Court Judge Eugene Carter sided with the city in ruling that the organized Black carpool system was illegal, forcing more people to walk or arrange alternative transportation.<sup>287</sup>

The MIA hosted two mass meetings attended by 8,000 people to discuss these major developments. The MIA executive board recommended an end to the Boycott but a delay in the return to buses until the Supreme Court's decision formally took effect.<sup>288</sup>

City leaders again bucked the Supreme Court's decision, and segregationists resorted to violence and intimidation. The Alabama Public Service Commission president C.C. "Jack" Owen declared, "The people of Alabama are not going to put up with integration." The Ku Klux Klan rode through the city and sent terrorizing letters. One sent to Dr. King threatened, "If you allow the n-----s to go back on the buses and sit in the front seats we're going to burn down fifty houses in one night, including yours."<sup>289</sup>

The Weather  
 Montgomery: Clear and cool today with increasing cloudiness tomorrow. Predicted high today, 71, low, 47. High yesterday 66, low, 42. (Details, see Weather Map, Page 7C.)

**The Montgomery Advertiser**

WILL ACCEPT 1956 PREFERRED 3-6c  
 Perfect condition. 100% P.P. 9-1518  
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128th Year—No. 273      Full Day, Night and Sunday Service By The Associated Press      Montgomery, Ala., Wednesday Morning, November 14, 1956      38 Pages      Price 5 Cents

**Supreme Court Outlaws Bus Segregation**

\*\*\*\*\*

**Boycotters Instructed To End Car Pool**      **White Spokesmen Warn Of Possible Violence**

"Supreme Court Outlaws Bus Segregation," Montgomery Advertiser, November 14, 1956.

On November 24, 5,000 white people attended a Ku Klux Klan rally in Montgomery to protest the Supreme Court’s *Browder v. Gayle* ruling. Mob members burned a 40-foot cross outside city limits off Old Selma Road. In the following weeks, around 20 Black leaders had acid splashed on their cars; witnesses reported that some of the assailants were uniformed police officers.<sup>290</sup>

With the carpool enjoined, the Rev. Solomon S. Seay Sr. organized a “share-a-ride” plan to ensure that people continued to receive transportation without having to utilize city buses before the desegregation mandate was issued. During the five weeks awaiting the Supreme Court mandate, the MIA held training sessions to prepare for integration. They arranged chairs to mimic bus seating and selected members of the audience to play the parts of bus driver and passenger, Black and white. In practicing different scenarios, the training emphasized nonviolent techniques in the face of hostile treatment.<sup>291</sup>

Around the anniversary of the beginning of the Boycott, leaders held the “Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change” from December 3 to 9. Cautious not to imply a premature victory, the celebration centered around a rededication to the principles of nonviolence and passive resistance. Attendees participated in nonviolence training in preparation for the integration of buses.<sup>292</sup>

Meanwhile, the Montgomery Board of Commissioners released an emphatic statement on *Browder v. Gayle*:

The City Commission, and we know our people are with us in this determination, will not yield one inch, but will do all in its power to oppose the integration of the Negro race with the white race in Montgomery, and will forever stand like a rock against social equality, intermarriage, and mixing of the races in schools. In these matters, for the common good of all the people of Montgomery, and the public peace and quiet of this city, there must continue the separation of the races under God’s creation and plan.<sup>293</sup>

On December 20, 1956, the news thousands of Boycott supporters were waiting for finally arrived. The Supreme Court ended the city’s appeals and ordered the immediate implementation of integration.<sup>294</sup>

## Integration Achieved, Respect Denied

In a nonviolent movement for dignity and respect, Montgomery’s Black community joined together to achieve civil rights victories in the face of incredible odds.

On the eve of integration, Dr. King addressed triumphant assemblies at Holt Street and First Baptist churches. He paid homage to their shared understanding that it was “more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation.” He marveled at the concerted commitment of nearly all in Montgomery’s Black community to “substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk the streets of Montgomery until the sagging walls of injustice had been crushed by the battering rams of surging justice.” Dr. King remarked:

These twelve months have not been easy. Our feet have often been tired. We have struggled against tremendous odds to maintain alternative transportation. We can remember days when unfavorable court decisions came upon us like tidal waves, leaving us treading the waters of despair. But amid all of this we have kept going with the faith that as we struggle, God struggles with us, and that the arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending toward justice.<sup>295</sup>

One of the voices among the thousands who exultantly sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “This Little Light of Mine” belonged to Georgia Gilmore. Her delicious food sustained the Boycott by satiating appetites and financing the carpool.



Rosa Parks boards a city bus after the Bus Boycott succeeds in desegregating Montgomery's buses. (Don Cravens/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

"Weary feet and weary souls were lightened" as the thousands of Black people who had sacrificed tremendously and continuously recognized they had done what had been considered impossible one year prior. Ms. Gilmore reflected on the sheer feat of accomplishing "something that no one ever thought would ever happen in the city of Montgomery...Being able to ride the bus and sit any place on the bus that you desire was something that hadn't ever happened before."<sup>296</sup>

On December 21, 1956, racial segregation on public transportation in Montgomery ended. Rosa Parks and thousands of other Black residents rode for the first time on integrated city buses.<sup>297</sup>

Dr. King boarded the first integrated bus through the vehicle's front door without the humiliation of forced reboarding through the back doors. He shared a seat in the front section of the bus with the Rev. Glenn Smiley, a white minister with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization committed to nonviolence. Rev. Abernathy and journalist Inez Baskin sat in front of them.<sup>298</sup>

Despite a relatively quiet return to city buses on December 21, a wave of violence followed and incited fear for months after racial integration. White citizens attacked Black bus riders, buses themselves, and Boycott proponents with their fists, guns, and bombs.

Although the Supreme Court decision changed segregation law overnight, the segregationist attitudes held by many in Montgomery's white community remained steadfast.

Recognizing the lag between changing legal doctrine and transforming public sentiment, Dr. King ended his statement at the final mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott by appealing to higher principles of compassion and nonviolence.

He encouraged the Black community to be "understanding of those who have oppressed us," to "act in such a way as to make possible a coming together of white people and colored people on the basis of a real harmony of interests and understanding," and to "seek an integration based on mutual respect."<sup>299</sup>

**"As we go back to the buses," Dr. King prayed, "let us be loving enough to turn an enemy into a friend. We must now move from protest to reconciliation."<sup>300</sup>**

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. rides a Montgomery city bus on December 21, 1956, with the Rev. Glenn Smiley (right), the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy (front left), and journalist Inez Baskin (front right). (Bettmann via Getty images)



The love and mutual respect asked of the Black community would not be reciprocated by many in the white community. Violence had been used for generations to maintain racial hierarchy and segregation, and it would be employed anew to suppress integration. Just two days after the first integrated bus service, someone fired a shotgun blast through Dr. King's front door. Fortunately, no one was injured. Just as he had done after the bombing of his home almost a year earlier, Dr. King responded to the attack by advocating nonviolence.<sup>301</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1956, teenager Ollie Mae Collins waited at a bus stop. A white man in a passing car yelled at the 15-year-old Black girl, "Don't ride the bus any more," before getting out of his car and beating her. Three more white men exited another car and joined in on the assault. Ollie Mae suffered head trauma but did not seek medical treatment because she was afraid. None of the perpetrators faced any consequences for attacking the young teenager.<sup>302</sup>

In the following days, multiple sniper attacks targeted integrated city buses. On December 26, a shotgun blast hit one bus and another was struck by nine rifle bullets. On December 28, sniper gunshots struck Rosa Jordan, a 22-year-old Black woman who was eight months pregnant, as she rode an integrated bus through a Black neighborhood. Ms. Jordan was shot in both legs. Doctors were hesitant to remove a bullet lodged in her leg for fear that it could spark premature labor. Instead, Ms. Jordan remained hospitalized for 15 days—nearly the rest of her pregnancy.<sup>303</sup>

After Ms. Jordan's shooting, Montgomery Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers ordered all buses to end service for the night. The following day, three city commissioners met with a bus company official and decided to suspend all evening bus service after 5 pm, forcing many riders to arrange alternate transportation home from work.<sup>304</sup>

In Birmingham, Alabama, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and other Black leaders initiated a bus protest in December 1956. After Rev. Shuttlesworth called on Black residents of Birmingham to participate in the desegregation demonstration, Ku Klux Klan

members bombed his home. Undeterred, 200 protesters attempted to integrate the Birmingham transit system after city leaders refused to repeal segregation statutes. Police arrested over 20 protesters, who then filed a federal lawsuit to end the enforcement of segregation ordinances.<sup>305</sup>

In the new year, white mob violence persisted. On the night of January 10, 1957, six bombs exploded in the city of Montgomery at the homes and churches of Montgomery Bus Boycott proponents. Bell Street Baptist Church, Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, First Street Baptist Church, and Mount Olive Baptist Church sustained significant damage. The homes of Rev. Abernathy and Rev. Graetz were also bombed—the latter for the second time. A night watchman prevented a seventh bomb from detonating at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.<sup>306</sup>



The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and other Black Birmingham residents defy segregation law and sit in the "white-only" section of a bus in Birmingham, Alabama, on December 26, 1956. (Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Tommy Hill and Sally Samuel, Birmingham News.)



The Rev. E.D. Bell inside Mount Olive Baptist Church in Montgomery, 1957, after it was bombed. (Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Trudy Cargile, Birmingham News.)

Dr. King arrived at each of the six bomb sites to find groups of people angry about the attacks, but “with a restraint that [he] never ceased to wonder at, they held themselves under control.” The city commission canceled all bus service after the multiple bombings, and MIA leaders worried that they would cite the continued violence as justification for revoking the bus company’s franchise. Two white men were indicted for the bombings, but despite their signed confessions, they were acquitted by an all-white jury.<sup>307</sup>

On January 22, 1957, Raymond C. Britt Jr. (who signed a confession admitting to the church bombings) and a group of other white men, enraged by rumors that a Black truck driver was dating a white woman, ambushed a delivery truck driven by a different Black man, 24-year-old Willie Edwards Jr. Mr. Edwards’s truck was found near Montgomery on January 23. His family ran ads seeking information, but Mr. Edwards’s fate remained unknown until April 23, when a fisherman found his body in the Alabama River 10 miles from Montgomery. After local police claimed the body was in too poor condition to determine the cause of death and conducted no further investigation, Mr. Edwards’s wife, Sarah Jean, left Montgomery with their children and never returned.<sup>308</sup>

According to a confession decades later, four Klansmen abducted Mr. Edwards at gunpoint from his truck and, after wrongly accusing him of bothering a local white woman, forced Mr. Edwards to jump to his death from a bridge over the Alabama River. Despite this information, the case remained unsolved, and no one was ever prosecuted for the lynching of Willie Edwards Jr.<sup>309</sup>

Attempts to retain segregation and the use of violence to intimidate integrationists advanced unabated in Montgomery in the years following the Bus Boycott. On January 16, 1957, the mayors of around 25 of the largest cities in Alabama met in Montgomery and pledged to aid each other in continuing to enforce segregation laws. On January 25, a group of white Montgomery businessmen attempted to form an all-white private bus service called the “Rebels Club.” On January 27, an early-morning bomb destroyed the home of a Black hospital worker in Montgomery and injured three people. Another bomb that failed to detonate was placed nearby at the home of Dr. King.<sup>310</sup>

Due to the violence on buses and subsequent bombings in Montgomery, all bus service had been suspended on January 10, 1957. After nearly a week, daytime bus service resumed on January 16 accompanied by police escorts and with a 5:15 pm curfew. City commissioners gradually extended the bus curfew by 30-minute increments before lifting the curfew and resuming normal service on February 20. By March 1957, “[a] semblance of normality began to develop,” as riders took seats on buses without restriction.<sup>311</sup>

# Martyrs of the Movement

Civil rights activism was extremely dangerous, and its opponents often responded to peaceful protests with violence. Scores of people lost their lives in racially motivated violence and lynchings.

At the completion of the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights in March 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to tens of thousands of people gathered at the Alabama State Capitol about the need to honor the sacrifices of the many who were

killed. "We must go on and be sure that they did not die in vain," he said. "The pattern of their feet as they walked through Jim Crow barriers in the great stride toward freedom is the thunder of the marching men of Joshua, and the world rocks beneath their tread."<sup>312</sup>

The deaths of the 34 people listed below had profound impacts on the community of activists who organized, boycotted, and marched to advance racial justice.

## Otis Parham

June 18, 1934  
Montgomery County, Alabama

A mob of white men beat and shot to death a 16-year-old Black boy named Otis Parham, the 12th documented victim of racial terror lynching in Montgomery County since 1890.<sup>313</sup>



## Hilliard Brooks Jr.

August 13, 1950  
Montgomery, Alabama

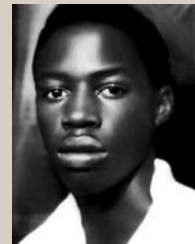
Northeastern University  
(CRRJ Archive)

Police fatally shot Hilliard Brooks Jr., a Black World War II veteran, after a fare dispute with a white bus driver on a Montgomery bus.<sup>315</sup>

## Mary Lizzie Norris

May 4, 1947  
Camp Hill, Alabama

Mary Lizzie Norris, a 22-year-old pregnant woman, was killed when a white mob, which included police officers, terrorized a Black neighborhood in Camp Hill and fired indiscriminately on Black patrons in a segregated cafe.<sup>314</sup>



## Rogers Hamilton

October 22, 1957  
Lowndesboro, Alabama

An 18-year-old Black man named Rogers Hamilton was abducted from his home by two white men and fatally shot for waving at a white girl.<sup>316</sup>



## Timothy Hood

February 8, 1946  
Bessemer, Alabama

Northeastern University  
(CRRJ Archive)

Honorably discharged U.S. Marine Timothy Hood removed a sign separating Black and white passengers on a streetcar in Bessemer. In response, the white streetcar conductor, William R. Weeks, unloaded his pistol into Mr. Hood, firing five shots. Mr. Hood staggered away, only to be arrested by the chief of police, who put Mr. Hood in the back of a police car and murdered him with a single bullet to the head.<sup>317</sup>



## Jeremiah Reeves

March 28, 1958  
Montgomery, Alabama

Alabama Department of  
Archives and History

Despite protests from Black community leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, the State of Alabama executed Jeremiah Reeves, who had been arrested for an interracial affair and tortured by police into giving a false confession. Police strapped the frightened 16-year-old into the electric chair and told him he would be electrocuted unless he admitted to having committed all of the rapes white women reported that summer.<sup>318</sup>



## The Rev. George Lee

May 7, 1955  
Belzoni, Mississippi

Wikimedia Commons

A local NAACP leader and voter registration activist, the Rev. George Lee was shot and killed after refusing demands by White Citizens' Council members to remove his name from voter rolls.<sup>319</sup>



## Niecey Brown

June 12, 1945  
Selma, Alabama

Niecey Brown, a 74-year-old Black woman, died from injuries after an off-duty white police officer named George Booker forcibly entered her house and beat her with a bottle. After only minutes of deliberation, Booker was acquitted by an all-white jury.<sup>320</sup>



## Elmore Bolling

December 4, 1947  
Lowndes County, Alabama

Courtesy of Ms. Josephine  
Bolling McCall

Elmore Bolling, a successful Black businessman, was lynched near his general store by white mob members resentful of the economic competition.<sup>321</sup>



## Lamar "Ditney" Smith

August 13, 1955  
Brookhaven, Mississippi

A 63-year-old World War I veteran and farmer, Lamar Smith was shot and killed on the courthouse lawn by white men who opposed his voting rights activism.<sup>322</sup>



## Willie Edwards Jr.

January 22, 1957  
Montgomery, Alabama

Associated Press

A group of white men, enraged by rumors that a Black truck driver was dating a white woman, ambushed a delivery truck driven by a different Black man, 24-year-old Willie Edwards Jr. The mob kidnapped and beat Mr. Edwards. He was then lynched on a bridge over the Alabama River.<sup>323</sup>



## Herbert Lee

September 25, 1961  
Liberty, Mississippi

Wikimedia Commons

A farmer and voting rights activist, Herbert Lee was confronted about his efforts to register Black voters by a white legislator, who then shot and killed him. Witnesses to Mr. Lee's murder were intimidated by the sheriff to falsely corroborate the legislator's claim of self-defense.<sup>324</sup>



## William Lewis Moore

April 23, 1963  
Attalla, Alabama

A Ku Klux Klansman shot and killed William Lewis Moore, a white postal worker from Baltimore who was marching from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, to hand-deliver a letter to the governor urging an end to segregation.<sup>325</sup>



## Emmett Till

August 28, 1955  
Drew, Mississippi

Bettmann via Getty Images

Two white men kidnapped and lynched a 14-year-old Black boy named Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta. Emmett was severely beaten, shot, mutilated, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River, where his remains were found days later.<sup>326</sup>



## Medgar Evers

June 12, 1963  
Jackson, Mississippi

CBS Photo Archive via Getty Images

World War II veteran and NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was shot in the back and killed in the driveway of his home by a white Ku Klux Klan member.<sup>327</sup>



## Fred Johnson

June 11, 1947  
Montgomery, Alabama

Courtesy of Ms. Debbie Stringer

Fred Johnson was the victim of a racial terror lynching in Pike County, Alabama, after being accused of being a "nuisance" and looking into a window at a white woman. After he was beaten and shot, police arrested him and incarcerated him at Old Kilby Prison in Montgomery County, where he died three days later.<sup>328</sup>



## Addie Mae Collins

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Fourteen-year-old Addie Mae Collins was one of four Black girls killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Addie, the three other girls, and Addie's younger sister Sarah, who survived, were in the church's basement when the bomb exploded.<sup>329</sup>



## Carol Denise McNair

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Eleven-year-old Carol Denise McNair was one of four Black girls killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan who bombed 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>330</sup>



## Carole Robertson

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Fourteen-year-old Carole Robertson was one of four Black girls who were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>331</sup>



## Cynthia Wesley

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Fourteen-year-old Cynthia Wesley was one of four Black girls who were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>332</sup>



## Virgil Lamar Ware

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Family of Virgil Lamar Ware

Thirteen-year-old Virgil Lamar Ware was shot and killed by white teenagers who had attended a National States' Rights Party rally opposing integration, on the same day the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed.<sup>333</sup>



## Johnny Robinson

September 15, 1963  
Birmingham, Alabama

Hours after the bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church, white teenagers waving Confederate flags and shouting racist slurs taunted Johnny Robinson and other Black teenagers. When police arrived, Johnny was shot in the back and killed by a white Birmingham police officer.<sup>334</sup>



## James Chaney

June 21, 1964  
Philadelphia, Mississippi

Wikimedia Commons

James Chaney was one of three civil rights workers with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who were jailed by a Neshoba County deputy sheriff—a member of the Ku Klux Klan—and went missing after their release. Their station wagon was found burned and the three men were found shot to death and buried in a shallow grave.<sup>335</sup>



## Andrew Goodman

June 21, 1964  
Philadelphia, Mississippi

Wikimedia Commons

Andrew Goodman was a new member of CORE when he went missing with his two fellow civil rights workers, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner. After an extensive search for nearly two weeks, their bodies were found shot and buried in a shallow grave.<sup>336</sup>



## Michael Schwerner

June 21, 1964  
Philadelphia, Mississippi

Wikimedia Commons

A white New Yorker working with CORE, Michael Schwerner was targeted by a Neshoba County deputy sheriff and was killed alongside James Chaney and Andrew Goodman by members of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>337</sup>



## Louis Allen

January 31, 1964  
Liberty, Mississippi

Louis Allen, a 44-year-old World War II veteran, was ambushed outside his property and shot twice in the face with a shotgun after providing evidence to the FBI about the murder of Herbert Lee, a local voting rights activist who was murdered by a white legislator for registering Black voters.<sup>338</sup>



## Jimmie Lee Jackson

February 26, 1965  
Selma, Alabama

An Alabama state trooper fatally shot Jimmie Lee Jackson during a peaceful march in Marion, Alabama, to protest the arrest of civil rights leader James Orange. He died eight days later in Selma.<sup>339</sup>



## Viola Liuzzo

March 25, 1965  
Lowndesboro, Alabama

Associated Press

Members of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a white voting rights activist, while she drove civil rights marchers between Montgomery and Selma after the Selma to Montgomery March.<sup>340</sup>



## Willie Brewster

July 18, 1965  
Anniston, Alabama

Bettmann via Getty Images

Willie Brewster was shot in the neck by members of the National States' Rights Party, who had come from a meeting where a party leader told the crowd, "If it takes killing to get the Negroes out of the white man's streets and to protect our constitutional rights, then I say, yes, kill them!" Mr. Brewster died three days later.<sup>341</sup>



## Sammy Younge Jr.

January 3, 1966  
Tuskegee, Alabama

After working to register Black people to vote at the Macon County Courthouse, Vietnam Navy veteran and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee member Sammy Younge Jr. was shot and killed for attempting to use a "white-only" restroom at a gas station.<sup>342</sup>



## The Rev. James Reeb

March 11, 1965  
Birmingham, Alabama

Bettmann via Getty Images

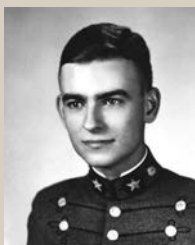
The Rev. James Reeb, a 38-year-old white Unitarian minister who traveled from Boston to Selma for the Selma to Montgomery March, died from injuries in a Birmingham hospital after being beaten in Selma by a group of white men who opposed his civil rights work.<sup>343</sup>



## Vernon Dahmer

January 10, 1966  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Armed Ku Klux Klan members set fire to the home and store of Vernon Dahmer, a successful Black businessman and NAACP leader active in the voting rights movement. Mr. Dahmer sustained fatal lung damage while holding off attackers as his family fled and died later that day.<sup>344</sup>



## Jonathan Daniels

August 20, 1965  
Lowndes County, Alabama

VMI Archives  
Photographs Collection

Jonathan Daniels, a white seminary student who traveled from Boston to Alabama to help with Black voter registration in Lowndes County, was murdered by a deputy sheriff in Hayneville.<sup>345</sup>



## The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

April 4, 1968  
Memphis, Tennessee

Flip Schulke/CORBIS/  
Corbis via Getty Images

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while standing on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>346</sup>

# INTEGRATION AND OPPOSITION

“

**Buses are integrated in Montgomery, but that is just the beginning.**<sup>347</sup>

— The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott demonstrated the power of disciplined, community-wide organizing as an effective tool to challenge racial bigotry and injustice. In its wake, numerous organizations formed to support a growing movement to advance civil rights efforts in the years that followed.

In 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headquartered in Atlanta, was created to coordinate the civil rights efforts of local organizations in communities across the South. By the 1960s, students and young people had positioned themselves on the frontlines of the movement. Black college students, who conducted nonviolent sit-ins at segregated restaurants, organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in North Carolina in 1960. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had been founded in Chicago in 1942, brought its operations south through interracial Freedom Rides in the summer of 1961.<sup>348</sup>

With the momentum of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Browder v. Gayle* declaring segregation on public transportation unconstitutional, Montgomery's Black community forged on to legally challenge the many other facets of daily life impeded by Jim Crow segregation and oppressive racial hierarchy.

Between 1957 and 1964, they next sought to end racial segregation and humiliation in schools, public spaces and accommodations, and athletics.

The legal strategist of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, attorney Fred Gray, made a commitment after graduating from law school that guided his prolific career. Mr. Gray "pledged that [he] would return to Montgomery and use the law to 'destroy everything segregated that [he] could find.'" The desegregation of public transportation in *Browder v. Gayle* was a crucial first step on the path toward integration, paved by numerous courageous demonstrations and legal challenges lodged by Mr. Gray and others throughout the 1950s and '60s.<sup>349</sup>



Members of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council join teenagers to protest school desegregation in Montgomery, 1963. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

Meanwhile, segregationists in Montgomery continued to defend the system of racial hierarchy. The White Citizens' Council actively retaliated against Montgomery Bus Boycott participants and those continuing the struggle for racial justice. The organization was staunchly committed to the opposite of Mr. Gray's pledge—it vowed to ostracize anyone who supported racial justice and declared that Montgomery would be a place where "integration efforts were stopped cold."<sup>350</sup>

Segregationists, including city and state leaders, employed the law and state-sanctioned violence in their campaign of massive resistance. Intimidation, retribution, violence, and the threat of violence met each attempt to create a more just society.

# The Global Impact of the Montgomery Decade



A 1956 newspaper clipping from the Bolton News, a newspaper in England, covering the bus boycott in South Africa. "Now S. Africa Faces a Bus Boycott," The Bolton News (England), April 16, 1956.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the integration efforts that followed, and the Selma to Montgomery March resulting in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 inspired communities across the globe to engage in boycotts, sit-ins, and marches for civil rights and liberation.

The Bus Boycott reverberated globally soon after it began. Three months into the protest, journalists

from India—where Dr. King would travel in 1959 to deepen his engagement with Mahatma Gandhi's principles of nonviolence—France, and England traveled to Montgomery to cover Dr. King's trial for allegedly organizing an illegal boycott. The power of economic boycotts and collective, nonviolent action reached people around the globe and inspired similar acts of civil disobedience to advance racial justice.<sup>351</sup>

Thousands of Black people boycotted segregated buses in Cape Town, South Africa, in April 1956. The apartheid system of strict racial segregation dictated nearly every aspect of life for Black South Africans. In Cape Town, Black passengers were forced to ride on the upper deck of double-decker buses while the lower deck was reserved for white passengers. Black South Africans protested, “Keep Your City Clean—Away With Bus Apartheid” and refused to ride for a month.<sup>352</sup>

The following year, a fare increase caused Black residents of Alexandra to launch a bus boycott in Johannesburg, South Africa. The township of Alexandra is a sprawling Black neighborhood located next to Sandton, one of the wealthiest areas in South Africa. For Alexandra residents, the fare increase was oppressive—80% of Black Africans in Johannesburg were living in poverty. The protest soon spread to surrounding towns.<sup>353</sup>

Similar to the bus conditions in Montgomery before 1956, Johannesburg buses were overcrowded, routes and schedules failed to meet riders’ needs, and drivers routinely disrespected bus riders. Chanting “Azikwelwa,” or “We will not ride,” the protesters in 1956 were successful in pressuring bus operators to rollback the fare to its previous rate. Formed in 1959, South Africa’s Pan-Africanist Congress utilized boycotts, marches, and civil disobedience to challenge and ultimately dismantle the country’s system of racial apartheid.<sup>354</sup>

In 1963, four West Indian men in Bristol, England, took direct inspiration from the Montgomery Bus Boycott and initiated a boycott of Bristol Omnibus Company buses to protest its refusal to hire nonwhite drivers. One of the boycott’s organizers, Paul Stephenson, recalled, “I had seen Rosa Parks—her defiant struggle against sitting at the back of the bus.” The Bristol Bus Boycott led directly to the United Kingdom’s first law against race-based discrimination.<sup>355</sup>

The Northern Irish movement for civil rights also took inspiration from the boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations in Montgomery. Also known

as The Troubles, the Northern Ireland conflict that began in the late 1960s lasted three decades. The predominantly Catholic minority in Northern Ireland organized to end housing and employment discrimination, as well as voting practices that allowed property owners multiple votes.<sup>356</sup>

Just as the marchers in Selma, Alabama, returned to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge after being brutally beaten by police, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association launched a second attempt to cross the Craigavon Bridge in Derry in November 1968 after police had similarly blocked and indiscriminately beaten marchers the month prior.<sup>357</sup>

After 15,000 people successfully marched in Derry, protesters in other Irish cities turned out in solidarity, singing the anthem of the U.S. civil rights movement, “We Shall Overcome.” Days after the march, the prime minister announced reforms for housing and employment discrimination and promised to re-evaluate voting practices.<sup>358</sup>

Another march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969 likewise emulated the Selma to Montgomery March. The Irish marchers walked 75 miles over four days to Derry, chanting “On to Selma.”<sup>359</sup>

The civil rights movement inspired and energized global freedom campaigns against apartheid, discrimination, racial violence, and bigotry. Decades after the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Selma to Montgomery March, attorney Fred Gray reflected on their effect on subsequent protests in China, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and Russia.

“While it is inaccurate to say that we all sat down and deliberately planned a movement that would echo and reverberate around the world,” he said, “we did work around the clock, planning strategy and creating an atmosphere that gave strength, courage, faith and hope to people of all races, creeds, colors and religions around the world.”<sup>360</sup>

## Keeping Schools Segregated

Despite its holding barring “separate but equal” as the law governing public education, the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* did not end racial segregation in public schools. Instead, it transformed schools into major battlegrounds of segregation in the South.

State and local leaders openly defied *Brown* by crafting pupil assignment legislation, creating all-white “segregation academies,” and threatening to close public schools to circumvent integration orders. “I don’t care what laws are passed or what the Supreme Court rules,” Alabama state Sen. James Faulkner declared, “the will of the people is the law of the land and the will of the people in Alabama is to continue segregation in our schools.”<sup>361</sup>

Alabama’s 1957 School Placement Law claimed to allow school boards to place students in specific schools based on ability, availability of transportation, and academic background. But in practice, it provided Alabama a runaround to avoid desegregation by allowing school boards to assign individual students to particular schools at their own discretion with little transparency or oversight.<sup>362</sup>

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth challenged the law in a federal lawsuit filed on behalf of four Black students in Birmingham who had been denied admission to white schools that were closer to their homes. The Supreme Court unanimously upheld the law in its 1958 decision in *Shuttlesworth v. Birmingham Board of Education*, ruling that “[t]he School Placement Law furnishes the legal machinery for an orderly administration of qualified pupils upon a basis of individual merit without regard to their race or color. We must presume that it will be so administered.” In reality, not a single Black student was placed in a white school in Birmingham in the years leading up to and the years immediately following the *Shuttlesworth* decision.<sup>363</sup>

Black students gather outside their segregated school in Alabama, 1965. (Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos)





White students use Confederate flags to protest the integration of their school in Montgomery, 1963. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

This was typical of massive white resistance to *Brown* across the South. Until 1960, none of the 1.4 million Black schoolchildren in the five Deep South states attended school with white children. And by 1963, still only 1% of Black Southern schoolchildren attended desegregated schools.<sup>364</sup>

At the start of the 1959 school year, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which organized and coordinated the Montgomery Bus Boycott, alerted the Montgomery County School Board to the readiness of Black families to enroll their students in white schools. MIA leaders had tried to persuade school officials to use the pupil placement law to achieve rather than avoid school integration, but they recognized that judicial intervention was likely the only way to integrate schools in Montgomery.<sup>365</sup>

Alabama Gov. John Patterson vowed to close public schools if Black leaders pursued integration. Anticipating the integration or closure of public schools, local white leaders—with funding from the White Citizens' Council—established Montgomery Academy in 1959, a private school open only to “boys and girls of white parentage.” In the aftermath of *Brown*, similar “segregation academies” were established throughout the South, drawing thousands of white children away from public schools.<sup>366</sup>

The governor's threats to close public schools created substantial anxiety. The 1957 school integration efforts in Little Rock, Arkansas, proved that public school closures were not an empty threat.<sup>367</sup>

State and city leaders widely blamed Dr. King and other Black leaders for the potential “chaos and disorder and violence and the destruction of our public school system” that they alleged integration would bring. In November 1959, Dr. King resigned as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and moved to Atlanta, partly to shield his parishioners from retaliation for their efforts to integrate Montgomery public schools.<sup>368</sup>

Days before the 10th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Johnnie Carr, a Montgomery Bus Boycott participant and future president of the MIA, and her husband, Arlam, filed a lawsuit on behalf of their son, Arlam Jr. Represented by attorney Fred Gray, the Carrs had tried without success to enroll Arlam Jr. in the all-white Sidney Lanier High School.<sup>369</sup>



Police arrest Black children and lead them to jail for protesting against racial discrimination, 1963. (AP Photo/Bill Hudson)

U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. found that the Montgomery County Board of Education operated two separate school systems based on race. In the six years since Alabama’s pupil placement law was enacted, he wrote, the law had “not resulted in the transfer of any Negro students to white schools or of any white students to Negro schools in the entire system.” He ordered the school systems in Montgomery to integrate in fall 1964.<sup>370</sup>

On September 8, 1964, more than a decade after *Brown*, Montgomery public schools finally desegregated. Judge Johnson went on to mandate that the Montgomery County Board of Education integrate its faculty with a goal of hiring Black educators to reflect the racial makeup of the student body.<sup>371</sup>

## Closing Montgomery's Public Spaces

Segregation statutes mandated the strict segregation of Black and white residents in Montgomery's public spaces for decades. Rather than abide by federal court integration mandates, city leaders closed or threatened to close public spaces so that no one, Black or white, could enjoy them.

### City Parks

In June 1957, the city adopted a stringent parks segregation ordinance that banned integration in parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools. The ordinance outlawed "white and colored persons to enter upon, visit, use or in any way occupy public parks or other public houses or public places, swimming pools, wading pools, beaches, lakes or ponds except those assigned to their respective races." Violations were classified as misdemeanors against the city, penalized by a fine up to \$100, six months imprisonment, or both.<sup>372</sup>

Out of 14 Montgomery city parks, only four were open to Black residents. The city also began transferring municipal programs and recreational activities to the local YMCA, a private organization, to preserve segregation. YMCA membership rose from 1,000 to 18,000.<sup>373</sup>

After the ban, a Black family was arrested for attempting to have a picnic in a "white-only" park. Mark Gilmore, a Black teenager, was arrested and beaten by police for walking through a "white-only" park on the way to his job.<sup>374</sup>

Forty-eight Montgomery residents, including many Montgomery Bus Boycott participants, petitioned the Montgomery Board of Parks and Recreation to integrate city parks, emphasizing the disparity between "white-only" parks and the "substandard,

poorly equipped public parks which are provided, operated, and maintained for the use of negro citizens." The petition was denied.<sup>375</sup>

So, on behalf of her son Mark, Georgia Gilmore—who had founded the Club From Nowhere and prepared food to raise money for the Montgomery Bus Boycott—and seven others filed a lawsuit to end segregation in city parks and at the zoo.<sup>376</sup>

In *Gilmore v. City of Montgomery*, a federal judge ruled that segregation in city parks was illegal. Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers declared in response, "I would rather see [the city parks] plowed up and planted in corn, rather than see them integrated."<sup>377</sup>



Opposition to racial integration turned swimming pools into contested spaces that were shut down or became sites of violence. Motel manager James Brock dumps muriatic acid in the Monson Motor Lodge swimming pool in St. Augustine, Florida, where Black children were staging a "swim-in" in 1964. (Bettmann via Getty Images, color by J. Kim)

**To avoid integration, Montgomery closed all public parks, filled its swimming pools with dirt, and sold off or gave away the animals in the city zoo.<sup>378</sup>**

By the time the city reopened its parks in February 1965, seven of the 14 parks had already been repurposed for other uses, and the city chose not to reopen its public swimming pools.<sup>379</sup>

In 1969, another Montgomery Bus Boycott activist, Mary Louise Smith, filed a lawsuit after her son and nephew were prohibited from enrolling in summer camp at the YMCA. Ms. Smith was a plaintiff in the landmark *Browder v. Gayle* lawsuit after her arrest in 1955 for violating segregation law on a Montgomery city bus.

In 1972, local YMCA branches, which had safeguarded the segregation of recreational facilities and activities since the closure of public parks in 1958, were ordered to integrate.<sup>380</sup>

### **Libraries and Museums**

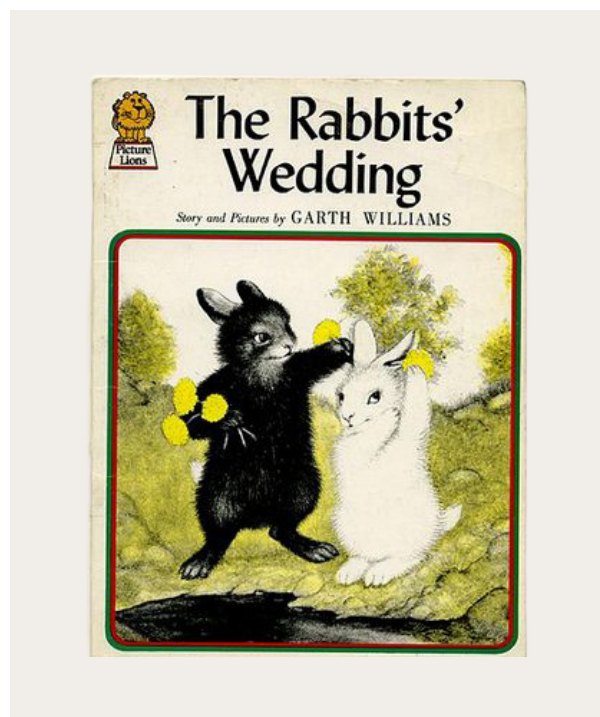
Public libraries were targeted for censorship and retribution after the Boycott. Juliette Hampton Morgan, a white librarian at the Montgomery Public Library, wrote many open letters in support of integration during the Bus Boycott, including a letter to the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser lauding Boycott activists and sharing her firsthand accounts of bus drivers' mistreatment of Black bus patrons. Ms. Morgan openly admired the thousands who took a stand against racial injustice:

It is hard to imagine a soul so dead, a heart so hard, a vision so blinded and provincial as not to be moved with admiration at the quiet dignity, discipline, and dedication with which the Negroes have conducted their boycott...Their cause and their conduct have filled me with great sympathy, pride, humility and envy. I envy their unity, their good humor, their fortitude, and their willingness to suffer for great Christian and democratic principles, or just plain decent treatment.<sup>381</sup>

Ms. Morgan was ostracized by many in Montgomery's white community. The Montgomery White Citizens' Council was outraged by her public statements. Mayor W.A. Gayle pressured the library's board of trustees to remove her from her position, and white citizens threatened to boycott the library.<sup>382</sup>

After someone burned a cross on her front lawn, Ms. Morgan resigned the following day and was found deceased two days later after taking sleeping pills. Despite her vocal support of racial equality, only white people were permitted to attend her funeral because the church refused to approve an interracial gathering.<sup>383</sup>

In 1959, the White Citizens' Council and state leaders targeted Emily W. Reed, the director of Alabama's Public Library Service Division, trying to force her out of her job based on her defense of *The Rabbits' Wedding*—a children's book depicting a black rabbit marrying a white rabbit. E.O. Eddins, an Alabama state senator, alleged that the book was integrationist propaganda and demanded that it be burned. Ms. Reed supported keeping the book in the state library. The book became a bestseller nationwide after it was taken off shelves in libraries across Alabama.<sup>384</sup>



Eddins also attacked Ms. Reed for having a copy of *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King's 1958 account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in the library's collection and for featuring the book in the library's newsletter. He introduced a bill to amend the qualifications for the director of the Public Library Service to restrict candidates to native Alabamians and thus disqualify Ms. Reed from the directorship.<sup>385</sup>

Montgomery's library branches remained segregated. In May 1960, two Alabama State students, Elroy Embry and St. John Dixon, attempted a "read-in" at one of Montgomery's white library branches on the sixth anniversary of the *Brown* decision. They were refused service and referred to the Union Street Library, a Black library branch.<sup>386</sup>

**While white Montgomery residents had enjoyed access to the city's public libraries since 1899, Montgomery was the last major city in Alabama to expand library services to serve Black residents.<sup>387</sup>**

After years of petitioning the city government for funding, the first Black library in Montgomery was established in two rooms in a home owned by the Montgomery City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in 1948 and was led by a founding member of the Women's Political Council (WPC), Bertha Pleasant Williams. A graduate of Alabama State, she was the city's first Black library professional. By 1960, Ms. Williams became the head librarian at the newly constructed Cleveland Avenue Library. Although lacking adequate funding and books at the Community House Library on Union Street and the Cleveland Avenue branch, Ms. Williams managed to build these libraries into important institutions for Montgomery's Black community.<sup>388</sup>

In 1962, 18-year-old Robert Lee Cobb and five other Black teens "read-in" at Montgomery's main public library. They were all denied service at the library and the city's art museum, which were housed in the same building. Mr. Cobb filed a lawsuit to desegregate both institutions.<sup>389</sup>

Segregation in public libraries was an especially provocative insult to many Black people but was widespread in the South. Police officers drag a Black woman away from the front of the Albany Carnegie Library in Albany, Georgia, in 1962. (Underwood Archives/Alamy)



On August 7, 1962, the museum and library were ordered by a federal judge to desegregate. City Commissioner Frank Parks, who had previously ordered the closure of Montgomery's 14 city parks, threatened to close the main library and the Cleveland Avenue Library, a branch that served the Black community. But instead of closing the libraries, city leaders removed all tables and chairs in both branches. So while both Black and white people technically could use the libraries, they could not sit or read together. At the Cleveland Avenue Library, Black children brought their own folding chairs and typewriter tables to "[make] a mockery" of the city's attempt to thwart integration.<sup>390</sup>

Members of the Ku Klux Klan—which flourished in the wake of the Bus Boycott, with two new "klaverns" chartered in October 1960 alone—positioned themselves outside the former "white-only" library to intimidate anyone who sought integrated service. Black residents were not deterred, and on August 11, 1962, Mr. Cobb became the first Black person to check out a library book at the formerly segregated main library. He selected *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare.<sup>391</sup>

### **Private Spaces**

No area of life was too remote to escape state efforts to prohibit and criminalize integration. In addition to public parks and libraries, private spaces and homes were subjected to the constraints of segregation.

In 1960, Black and white personnel from Maxwell Air Force Base who were socializing together were arrested by Montgomery police and charged with disorderly conduct after white neighbors complained of "integrated social visits." Neighbors called the police after seeing two Black men enter the home of a white man and engage in "casual conversation." In a separate incident that night, a Black man and a white man were arrested after neighbors reported witnessing the Black man sitting on a sofa, being served food, and being entertained by white hosts.<sup>392</sup>



Wesley Tolbert (right) shakes hands with three Air Force men in Montgomery after all four were arraigned in circuit court on charges stemming from the Bus Boycott, February 24, 1956. (AP Photo/Gene Herrick)

Workers and servicemen at Maxwell and Gunter Field navigated two distinct worlds. Both Air Force installations had been integrated well before the official desegregation of the military in 1948. Trolleys, buses, and public spaces on base were racially integrated, but strict racial boundaries applied as soon as they stepped off the base.<sup>393</sup>

Public accommodations in Montgomery remained racially segregated despite federal court orders to integrate. White Montgomery leaders and community members attempted to avoid integrating the city's restaurants, hotels, bus and train terminals, and the municipal airport by using threats, arrests, and violence.

## Hospitals

Hospitals in Montgomery were entirely segregated, with the exception of St. Jude Catholic Hospital, which opened in 1951. St. Jude was founded by Father Harold Purcell to provide social services to African Americans throughout central Alabama. The hospital was the first racially integrated medical facility in the Southeast.<sup>394</sup>

In November 1958, white segregationists waged a public harassment and humiliation campaign against a group of white women who attended an interracial prayer group at the hospital. The group regularly congregated in Black churches and shared fellowship over prayer, music, and tea. Segregationists published the names and addresses of the women, who received a flood of threatening phone calls and were publicly disavowed by their white husbands and fathers. The prayer group, which had convened throughout the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was disbanded.<sup>395</sup>

St. Jude Catholic Hospital continued to treat both Black and white patients, and its larger campus went on to host voting rights activists on their five-day march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.<sup>396</sup>

The segregation of medical facilities resulted in delays in treatment, disparities in health outcomes, fewer opportunities for Black medical professionals, and even death for some Black patients. Hospitals in Montgomery did not desegregate until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Even still, many resisted integration until federal funding for Medicare was withheld from institutions that refused to integrate in accordance with the Civil Rights Act.<sup>397</sup>

## Restaurants and Hotels

In Montgomery restaurants, white and Black people could not be served food in the same room unless it had a “solid partition extending from the floor upward to a distance of seven feet or higher” and separate entrances for Black and white customers.<sup>398</sup>

In 1960, a group of white students from MacMurray College in Illinois and their professor met at Regal Cafe with the Rev. Solomon S. Seay Sr. and other members of the MIA and students from Alabama State. Police arrested the interracial group while they were eating lunch and charged them with disorderly conduct and breach of peace. Local authorities retaliated against Regal Cafe owner, E.H. Ligon, a member of the MIA who had served as a carpool driver during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>399</sup>

Fred Gray represented Rev. Seay and the six Black students. During a recess in their hearing, the white students were acquitted. Mr. Gray moved to dismiss his clients’ cases on the basis that they were arrested at the same time and under the same circumstances as the acquitted white students. The judge denied his motion and convicted all seven Black defendants. Their convictions showed “what length the power structure in Montgomery, during this period of time, was willing to go for the purpose of maintaining segregation,” Mr. Gray reflected later.<sup>400</sup>



A postcard depicting the Jefferson Davis Hotel, 1940.

Two of the students were arrested again in 1960 when the Rev. R. Edwin King, one of the white students, returned to town for his trial and rented a room at the “white-only” Jefferson Davis Hotel. Rev. King invited Elroy Embry, one of the Black Alabama State students, to the hotel for lunch, and they were again charged with disorderly conduct for attempting to integrate the hotel and convicted.<sup>401</sup>

## Violent Resistance to Integration

Despite the desegregation of Montgomery city buses after *Browder v. Gayle*, interstate buses and associated facilities remained segregated until December 1960, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Boynton v. Virginia* that buses, waiting rooms, and restaurants serving interstate bus passengers must be desegregated.

An interracial group of students decided to test the enforcement of *Boynton* by traveling together on interstate buses through the South.<sup>402</sup>

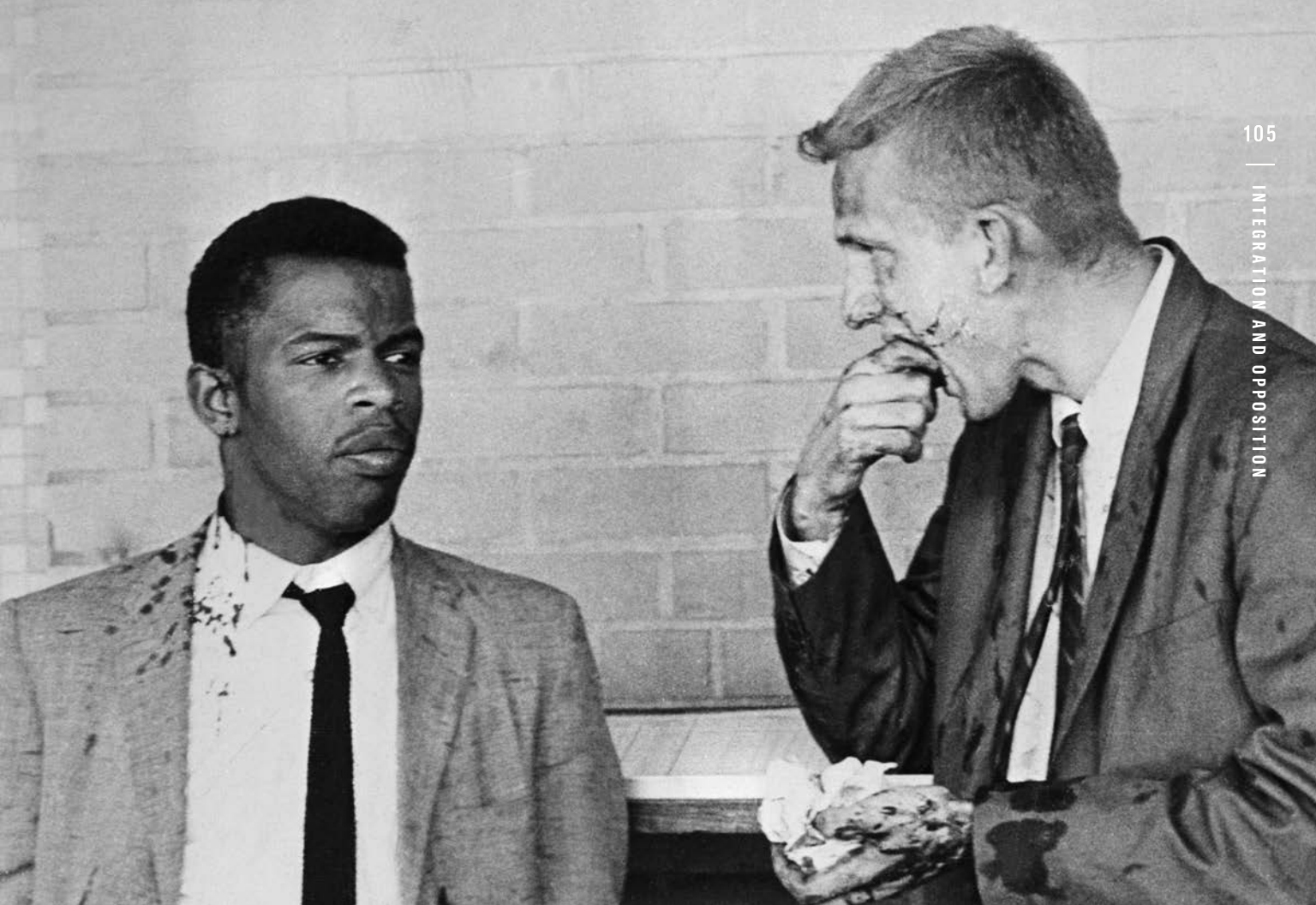
On May 20, 1961, the Freedom Riders arrived in Montgomery.

State police who had been escorting the Freedom Riders’ bus deserted them at the city limits. A mob of more than 300 white people was waiting at the Greyhound station in downtown Montgomery, where Montgomery Public Safety Commissioner Lester Sullivan promised to give Ku Klux Klan members several minutes to attack the Riders without police interference.

When the Freedom Riders, young college students trained in nonviolence, reached the station, they were pulled out of the bus and viciously attacked by hundreds of angry white people armed with baseball bats, hammers, and pipes. Witnesses later testified that police just stood by, unwilling to “lift a finger to protect” the Freedom Riders.<sup>403</sup>



White men on horseback ride toward the Greyhound station where Freedom Riders were attacked in Montgomery, May 20, 1961. (Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Norman Dean, Birmingham News.)



Freedom Riders John Lewis and James Zwerg suffered serious injuries after they were violently attacked by white segregationists in Montgomery. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

**John Lewis and James Zwerg were seriously injured and Mr. Zwerg had to be hospitalized.**

The next night, a mob of around 3,000 white people rioted outside Montgomery's First Baptist Church, where the Freedom Riders were meeting with local supporters. Fred Gray, Dr. King, Rev. Shuttlesworth, and others were confined to the church basement for their safety as rioters threatened to set the church on fire with them trapped inside. Mr. Gray remembered that night as "one of the most violent situations [he] experienced during the Civil Rights Movement."<sup>404</sup>

As the mob grew larger and more threatening, Dr. King called U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and requested assistance. Mr. Kennedy sent U.S. Marshals to dispel the violent mob. White opponents of integration pelted the federal marshals with bricks and bottles, and the marshals responded with tear gas. When police arrived to assist the marshals, the mob broke into smaller groups and overturned cars, attacked Black homes with bullets and firebombs, and assaulted Black people in the streets. Alabama Gov. John Patterson declared martial law in Montgomery and ordered National Guard troops to restore order.<sup>405</sup>



Supporters of the Freedom Riders inside First Baptist Church suffer from the effects of tear gas that federal marshals had used to disperse the pro-segregation mob outside, May 21, 1961. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

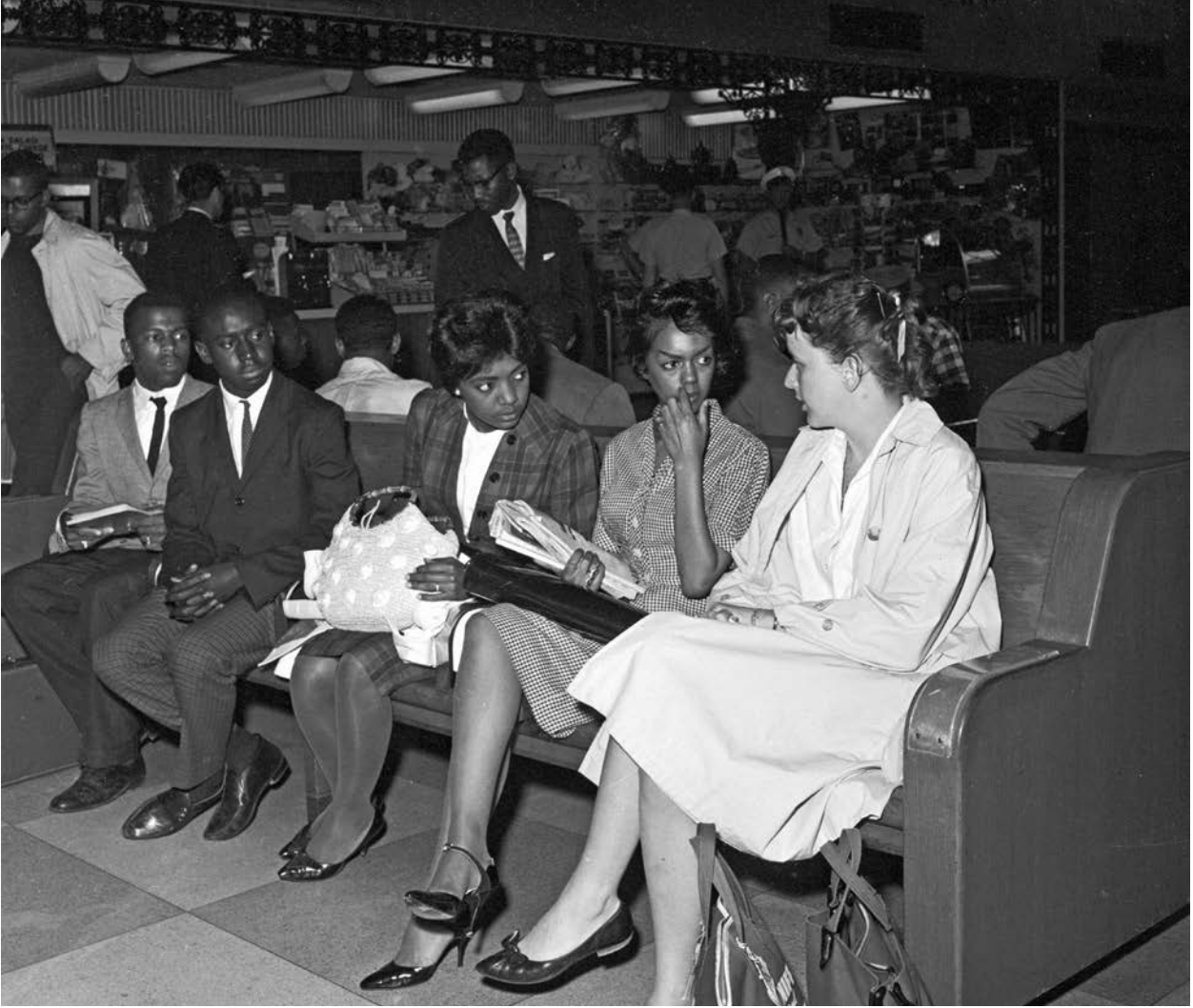
In the aftermath of the mob violence at First Baptist Church, an interracial group of Freedom Riders returned to the bus terminal to continue their journey to Jackson, Mississippi. The group was served coffee and snacks at the “white-only” lunch counter at the bus terminal—the first time Black people had been served at Montgomery’s bus terminal restaurant. The following day, Montgomery County Sheriff Mac Sim Butler arrested 10 Black people who attempted to eat there.<sup>406</sup>

Additional Freedom Rides were organized, and Freedom Riders faced more violence and mass arrests as they traversed the South during the summer of 1961.

On November 1, 1961, U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. and the Interstate Commerce Commission ordered bus and train terminals in Montgomery to desegregate as a result of the Freedom Rides.<sup>407</sup>

Faced with orders to desegregate the municipal airport, Montgomery officials announced in January 1962 that the city would remove waiting area seats, lock bathrooms, and plug water fountains at the airport rather than comply with integration orders. After repeated attempts to delay the integration order, officials eventually relented, and the airport was desegregated with seats and bathrooms intact.<sup>408</sup>

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed on July 2, 1964, banning segregation in public accommodations. Later in July, theaters, restaurants, and hotels in Montgomery desegregated.<sup>409</sup>



Freedom Riders John Lewis, Charles Butler, Catherine Burks-Brooks, Lucretia Collins, and Salynn McCollum at the Greyhound Station in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 17, 1961. Soon after this photograph was taken, police arrested the students and took them to a remote location, where they were attacked, and left them there with no protection or transportation. (Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Robert Adams and Norman Dean, Birmingham News.)

## The Struggle to Desegregate Athletics

In 1957, the city of Montgomery passed a resolution announcing a total ban on integrated athletic events and other recreational activities. The ordinance prohibited “white and colored persons to play together...in any game of cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, pool, billiards, softball, basketball, baseball, football, golf, track and at swimming pools...or in any athletic contest or contests.” It applied to all levels of competition, from casual play to national bowl games.<sup>410</sup>

The Blue-Gray All-Star Football Classic held at the Cramton Bowl was the most high-profile sporting event in Montgomery. The first Civil War-inspired collegiate Blue-Gray football game was played in 1938 and grew to attract national spectators, media coverage, and sponsorships. The Blue-Gray game heavily played upon Civil War iconography and themes of the Lost Cause. The “Blue” teams were composed of players from Northern colleges intended to represent the Union, while the “Gray” players came from colleges in the former Confederate states. None of the players, however, was Black.<sup>411</sup>



Ticket to the 1941 Blue-Gray All-Star Football Classic. (Wikimedia)

Civil rights organizations like CORE, which organized the Freedom Rides, exerted pressure on broadcasters and sponsors by protesting segregated sporting events. In December 1963, NBC pulled its coverage and two major sponsors revoked their support of the Blue-Gray game after its organizers refused to allow Black players to compete. Alabama Gov. George Wallace publicly condemned the cancellation, and organizers found more than 50 pro-segregation television and radio channels to broadcast the game instead.<sup>412</sup>

The first integrated Blue-Gray All-Star Football Classic did not occur for another two years. Economic pressures and negative publicity, more than support for racial integration, persuaded city leaders to allow Black players to participate in 1965.<sup>413</sup>

High school athletics in Montgomery and across Alabama remained almost entirely segregated. The Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA), based in Montgomery, oversaw athletics at the state’s white high schools, while the Alabama Interscholastic Athletic Association (AIAA) governed Alabama’s Black high school athletics. Competition for member schools was limited to other schools within the separate associations; no games were played between white AHSAA schools and Black AIAA schools.<sup>414</sup>

For athletic events, white schools were also permitted to use white-only city parks (before they were closed). In Montgomery, over 150 acres of athletic fields were open for white athletes, including tennis courts, baseball diamonds, basketball courts, and bleachers. Black athletes were allotted two vacant fields totaling just 40 acres. The Cramton Bowl arena alone—which was designated “white-only”—was larger than the combined size of all athletic space designated for Black athletics.<sup>415</sup>

As the sole nationally recognized athletic association of Alabama, the white AHSAA’s member schools and athletes could be certified as national recordholders and compete in state championships. Since the AIAA could not receive national accreditation, Black high school athletes in Alabama were effectively barred from certification or recognition.<sup>416</sup>

A lawsuit filed by Fred Gray ultimately changed that. In 1963, Mr. Gray filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of 14 Black students who were denied admission to Tuskegee High School despite a federal court order requiring Macon County public schools to integrate. Gov. George Wallace ordered state troopers to surround the high school on what was supposed to be the first day of the school year and closed the school to prevent integration.<sup>417</sup>



Plaintiffs in *Lee v. Macon County Board of Education*: (from left) Robert Judkins, Shirley Chambliss, Wilma Jones, Wille B. Wyatt Jr., Janis Carter, Helois Billes, Carmen Judkins, Ellen Henderson, Anthony T. Lee, Marsha Sullins, Patricia Jones, and Harvey Jackson. (Encyclopedia of Alabama, courtesy of Fred Gray)

In 1968, the case, *Lee v. Macon*, was expanded to address the integration of high school athletics. As a result of the lawsuit, a panel of federal judges ordered the AHSAA and AIAA to merge into a single entity and ruled that “all athletic programs, contests and competitions, including track, basketball, baseball, football, cheerleader clinics and coaching clinics...be conducted effective immediately without regard to the racial composition of the students in the schools involved.”<sup>418</sup>

High school athletics in Alabama were integrated at the start of the 1968 school year. Once included in the nationally recognized AHSAA, Black high school student-athletes began to receive increased publicity, which attracted opportunities from larger colleges and universities and professional sports organizations.<sup>419</sup>

## Using the Law for State Retribution

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the city of Montgomery and State of Alabama used multiple tactics and strategies to prevent racial integration and to intimidate or thwart Black people from organized opposition to segregation. Lawsuits, excessive punishment, and harassment were widespread and endorsed and utilized by state judges, elected leaders, and law enforcement.

As Walter B. Jones, a Montgomery County circuit court judge, proclaimed, “We shall never submit to the demands of integrationists. The white race shall remain forever white.” The staunch opposition of state court judges prompted Black citizens to file lawsuits in federal court to challenge the humiliation of racial segregation and obtain federal orders to enforce desegregation.<sup>420</sup>

## ***The Execution of Jeremiah Reeves***

On March 28, 1958, despite protests from Black community leaders including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, Alabama executed Jeremiah Reeves, a teenager who was tortured by police into falsely confessing to rape. Dr. King spoke at an Easter rally in Montgomery. Standing on the marked spot on the Capitol steps where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the Confederacy in 1861, Dr. King decried Jeremiah Reeves's wrongful conviction and execution. "We appeal this afternoon to our white brothers, whether they are private citizens or public officials, to courageously meet this problem," he said. "This is not a political issue; it is ultimately a moral issue. It is a question of the dignity of man."<sup>421</sup>

## ***Banning the NAACP***

When Alabama Attorney General John Patterson successfully won an injunction in 1956 that barred the NAACP—the nation's oldest civil rights organization—from meeting, fundraising, and organizing in Alabama, Dr. King and others organized the SCLC to coordinate civil rights efforts across the South. And the NAACP did not go quietly—it sued Alabama after the state required it to turn over membership records, which would have subjected members to harassment, violence, and economic reprisals.

Police officers in Montgomery push Dr. King across a police desk as he is arrested for "loitering," 1958. (Charles Moore via Getty Images)



In June 1958, the Supreme Court ruled in *NAACP v. Alabama* that the NAACP was not required to give Alabama its records. While the organization ultimately succeeded in its federal challenge to Alabama's injunction, it would be six more years before the NAACP managed to re-establish a local branch in Montgomery.<sup>422</sup>

## **Police Harassment of Civil Rights Leaders**

City and state officials relentlessly retaliated against Dr. King for his leadership of desegregation efforts with arrests and false accusations. In September 1958, Montgomery police arrested Dr. King again and charged him with "loitering" when he tried to attend the arraignment of a white person who had been charged with assaulting the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy.<sup>423</sup>

In 1960, Dr. King was accused of falsifying tax returns and jailed in Montgomery for alleged perjury. Repeatedly targeted by tax authorities, he was the first person to be criminally prosecuted under Alabama's state income tax perjury statute. Dr. King was later acquitted by an all-white jury.<sup>424</sup>

By arresting Dr. King on perjury charges in the midst of the civil rights movement, the State intentionally called his integrity into question. The prosecution was not only deliberately "embarrassing and humiliating," his attorney, Fred Gray, wrote, but also "part of the plan of Governor John Patterson, or someone in his administration, to harass and intimidate African Americans in general, King in particular, and for political reasons."<sup>425</sup>

When Montgomery Police Commissioner Lester Sullivan sued *The New York Times* and four Black ministers over an ad fundraising for Dr. King's legal defense and criticizing the police response to civil rights protests, the Supreme Court placed limits on public officials' ability to sue for libel in *New York Times v. Sullivan*. The 1964 decision weakened Southern politicians' ability to use libel law to silence critics. Fred Gray considered the ruling "another

ripple that came as a direct result of the Protest in Montgomery which started on a bus on December 1, 1955."<sup>426</sup>

As it attacked Dr. King on multiple legal fronts, the State similarly retaliated against Black students and educators who held nonviolent demonstrations. In February 1960, 35 Alabama State College students staged a sit-in at a segregated snack bar in the Montgomery County Courthouse to protest racial segregation in restaurants.<sup>427</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. attends a hearing on his charges of violating his probation after he was arrested for helping students stage a sit-in demonstration, 1960. (Donald Uhrbrock via Getty Images)



Four of the Alabama State College students who staged a sit-in at the segregated snack bar at the Montgomery County Courthouse on February 25, 1960. (Penn State)

Gov. John Patterson demanded that the student organizers be expelled and explicitly threatened Alabama State's president. "The citizens of this state do not intend to spend their tax money to educate law violators and race agitators," he said, warning, "if you do not put a stop to it you might well find yourself out of public school funds." The students were expelled.<sup>428</sup>

After the Alabama State student protests, the state Board of Education ordered a "purge" of "disloyal" faculty members. Seventeen faculty members, including Jo Ann Robinson—president of the WPC and an organizer of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—were ultimately fired or pressured to resign.<sup>429</sup>

Government officials and law enforcement officers were not alone in using intimidation and even violence to punish Black people for resisting segregation in Montgomery. The day after the student sit-in at the courthouse snack bar, members of the Ku Klux Klan rallied at Montgomery's city-owned baseball stadium. Twenty-five Klan members armed with baseball bats marched downtown to intimidate Black shoppers. One mob member was photographed striking a young Black woman with a bat but was not arrested.<sup>430</sup>



A white man beats a Black woman with a baseball bat while another Black woman is beaten in the background by a second white man in Montgomery, 1960. (Charles Moore via Getty Images)

On March 6, 1960, a group of Black people leaving Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to pray at the Capitol in support of the expelled Alabama State students was confronted by a hostile mob of 5,000 white residents and police.<sup>431</sup>

The mob descended from the Capitol towards the marchers. As the prayer group attempted to reach the Capitol steps, more than 400 city, county, and state police blocked them. Police forced them to return to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where they prayed and sang hymns until the white mob dispersed hours later.<sup>432</sup>

Perhaps no one better personified Alabama's massive resistance to racial justice than Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who declared in his January 1963 inauguration speech that he would defend "segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever!"<sup>433</sup>

# VOTING RIGHTS AND THE SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH

“

**A voteless people is a hopeless people.**<sup>434</sup>

— Rufus Lewis

Soon after the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) released a 10-point report called "Looking Forward" in which it laid out plans for future activism. The first item on the list was "unrestricted registration and voting of eligible citizens to give all citizens opportunities to elect public officials."<sup>435</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy. (Spider Martin)

# Music of the Movement



Civil rights marchers sing freedom songs en route to Jackson, Mississippi, 1966. (Matt Herron)

During the civil rights movement, music sustained Black people who were exhausted from the humiliation and mistreatment of second-class citizenship. It galvanized them to continue the fight for racial justice and prevailed as a form of protest itself.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader John Lewis remembered, “[W]ithout art, without music or writers, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings.” He continued, “They translated our feelings, our hurt, our pain. They recorded our words and helped us to make progress.”<sup>436</sup>

Hymns and spirituals, as well as freedom, folk, and protest songs, served as unifying forces that bridged divisions of class, education, age, and geography. Lyrical changes to traditional songs revealed a fountain of creativity and helped the narrative of the civil rights movement to spread.

From the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, thousands of people assembled twice a week in Montgomery churches, singing hymns and spirituals in unified harmony. The inaugural mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church opened with the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” As one congregation, 6,000 people vocalized, “We are not divided / all one body we / One in hope and doctrine / one in charity.”<sup>437</sup>

Hymns such as “Leaning on Everlasting Arms” as well as spirituals such as “Shine on Me” and “I Got a Home in That Rock” were similarly sung frequently throughout the Boycott and fortified the community’s courage and reinforced the righteousness of their struggle. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remembered, “One could not help but be moved by these traditional songs, which brought to mind the long history of the Negro’s suffering.”<sup>438</sup>

One year into the Montgomery Bus Boycott, musicians Harry Belafonte, Duke Ellington, and Dr. King’s wife Coretta Scott King performed at a benefit concert for the MIA in New York City. The concert, called “Salute to Montgomery,” included classical, spiritual, and freedom songs. The performances raised thousands of dollars to support the ongoing Boycott, which had faced economic retaliation against carpool drivers and a recent injunction against the carpool system.<sup>439</sup>



Civil rights activists sing freedom songs during the Selma to Montgomery March, 1965. (Matt Herron)

Following the five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, famous musicians including Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis Jr., Mahalia Jackson, Pete Seeger, and Nina Simone convened in the state capital for a “Stars for Freedom” rally that amplified the musical momentum that had helped propel the march.<sup>440</sup>

Ms. Jackson sang the hymn “How I Got Over” at the 1963 March on Washington in the nation’s capital, where Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.<sup>441</sup>

Ms. Simone performed “Mississippi Goddam,” her protest song written after the Ku Klux Klan’s bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, which killed four Black girls in 1963. The song’s first line declares, “Alabama’s got me so upset.” Ms. Simone often changed lyrics to reference recent events, invoking Alabama’s governor, George Wallace, and naming Selma as reasons that “made [her] lose [her] rest.”<sup>442</sup>

“We Shall Overcome” became known as the anthem of the civil rights movement. The song originated as a gospel hymn before it was adapted by workers striking at the American Tobacco Company in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1945. It was further revised and popularized at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Founded by Myles Horton in 1932, Highlander hosted interracial workshops on organizing for labor and civil rights that were attended by Rosa Parks, Dr. King, and John Lewis, among many others. It was there that Jamila Jones of the Montgomery Gospel Trio learned that “these songs not only could carry a message for the movement in Montgomery, but songs carry the message of the movement wherever.”<sup>443</sup>

The music of the movement reached audiences far beyond the mass meetings and marches. Freedom songs were heard throughout the country, in the White House, and in the halls of Congress.

In the midst of the brutality inflicted on civil rights marchers in Selma, President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke to a joint session of Congress in March 1965 and urged lawmakers to pass the Voting Rights Act. Speaking of the decades-long struggle for equal rights and racial justice and raising the “cries of pain and the hymns and protests of oppressed people,” he implored Congress to act because, he said, “[I]t is not just Negroes, but it is really all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.”<sup>444</sup>

The power and the influence of the music were underscored when the president affirmed to the nation: “And we shall overcome.”<sup>445</sup>

## Alabama Bars Black Voters

Ratified after the Civil War, the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed voting rights for all Black men. This empowered a new Black electorate to choose candidates—white and Black—who would defend the rights of formerly enslaved people, and it moved the country closer to being a true democracy.

Dozens of Black politicians were elected to the Alabama Legislature during Reconstruction between 1868 and 1876, and in 1870, Benjamin S. Turner became the first Black person elected to Congress from Alabama. Pro-Reconstruction presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant carried Alabama in the 1868 election—thanks to tens of thousands of Black voters. President Grant likely lost the majority of white voters nationwide, but hundreds of thousands of Black voters allowed him to carry the popular vote in addition to the Electoral College.<sup>446</sup>

But voting rights for Black people were violently resisted. On Election Day, November 3, 1874, local white residents in Eufaula, Alabama, determined to regain the political dominance they had lost during Reconstruction, used terror and intimidation to suppress Black votes, ultimately waging a violent, deadly massacre.<sup>447</sup>

That day, hundreds of Black men went to the downtown Eufaula polling site. Some Black voters were immediately arrested and jailed on fraud accusations. Around noon, several white men forced a Black man into an alley and threatened to arrest him if he did not vote against civil rights. As witnesses protested, a single gunshot was fired by an unknown individual, harming no one.

Soon afterward, a large mob of white men retrieved stockpiled guns stored nearby and fired “indiscriminately” into the crowd of mostly unarmed Black voters. Within minutes, 400 shots had been fired, killing at least six Black people, and possibly many more based on some estimates; as many as 80 additional Black people were left injured.

Many survivors fled, including an estimated 500 Black people who had not yet voted. Although the identities of many white perpetrators of the massacre were known, no white person was ever convicted.

The Eufaula Massacre and its aftermath showed Black residents that exercising their new legal rights—particularly by voting—made them targets for deadly attacks and made clear that they could not depend on authorities for protection. The result was mass voter suppression. While 1,200 Black Eufaula residents voted in the 1874 election, only 10 cast ballots in 1876.<sup>448</sup>

Responding to the wave of election violence waged by white mobs in the 1870s, former Union Gen. Philip Sheridan feared the possibility of the Confederate cause being taken up again, though in a new form. He stated, “I have so often heard expressions that the new rebellion was to be fought under the stars & stripes and in the north as well as the South—that the mistake made in 1861 was to have had their own flag.”<sup>449</sup>

Southern states continued to disenfranchise Black voters through poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and violent intimidation. Many Black people were killed because they voted or tried to vote. State laws disenfranchising people convicted of a felony also proliferated during this period, especially in Southern states with the largest populations of Black people. White Southern lawmakers were explicit about the need to suppress the Black vote.<sup>450</sup>



A Black woman participates in a voter registration class in Greene County, Alabama, 1966. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

In 1901, Alabama approved a new state constitution. Its framers knew that, because the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments prohibited race-based disenfranchisement, discriminatory constitutional provisions intended to maintain white supremacy had to appear to be race neutral. To that end, the new constitution called for the appointment of three registrars from each county who had wide discretion when accepting registration applications and were chosen and trained to minimize registration by African Americans.<sup>451</sup>

The constitution's new registration rules also required voters to be able to read and write any section of the U.S. Constitution and to have been lawfully employed for the previous 12 months. Anyone who did not meet the employment specification could still register if he or his wife owned real estate and possessions worth at least \$300.<sup>452</sup>

Though these requirements would have severely limited the voting rights of both African Americans and poor white people in Alabama, the constitution

carved out exceptions for descendants of people who voted before the Civil War, which excluded almost every Black person.<sup>453</sup>

Alabama used criminal laws to target Black people to expand disenfranchisement. Disenfranchising people convicted of any crime involving "moral turpitude"—which applied to misdemeanors and even non-criminal acts—was adopted after the president of the constitutional convention argued the state needed to avert the "menace of Negro domination."<sup>454</sup>

Alabama was home to approximately 75,000 registered Black voters before the new constitution was enacted. Drafters estimated the new rules would dramatically reduce the number of eligible Black voters. Alabama delegates approved the constitution by a vote of 132-12.<sup>455</sup>

The constitution worked better than its drafters imagined, even after the Nineteenth Amendment made Black women legally eligible to vote in 1920.

**By 1940, fewer than 2,000 Black men and women were registered to vote in Alabama out of a total of over 500,000 eligible Black voters.<sup>456</sup>**

Voting rights played a central part in the activism of Montgomery's Black community for years.

In the early 1940s, Black attorney Arthur Madison and local leader E.D. Nixon led a drive with the goal of registering thousands of Black voters in Montgomery. When Mr. Madison filed a voting rights lawsuit against the Montgomery Board of Registrars who obstructed the drive, city officials had him arrested and disbarred in Alabama by coercing several of his clients to state that he had filed the suit without their permission. (The city would attempt the same tactic a decade later against Bus Boycott attorney Fred Gray.) Nevertheless, the threat of legal action

pressured the Board to begin accepting a small but greater number of Black applicants during the mid-1940s.<sup>457</sup>

In 1949, the Women's Political Council (WPC), a leading voice throughout the Boycott, was founded to promote voter registration among Black women. When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he established the Social and Political Action Committee to help register voters. The committee created a voting clinic to train parishioners to overcome the discriminatory practices of registrars.<sup>458</sup>

The voter registration efforts of the WPC, Alabama Progressive Democrats, and Citizens' Coordinating Committee had a demonstrable impact—the number of registered Black voters in Montgomery doubled between 1950 and 1955, from 813 in 1950 to 1,678 in 1955.<sup>459</sup>



In Selma, Black residents attend a church training in preparation for registering to vote, 1966. (Flip Schulke/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)



Black women in Selma wait in the rain to sign up for the voter registration test on February 17, 1965. (Associated Press)

But much more needed to be done to reach parity. Out of a total population of 22,210 registered voters in Montgomery in 1955, Black voters made up just 7.55%, despite comprising 37% of the city's population. By 1958, the number of Black people registered to vote statewide had increased to approximately 50,000, but that was still less than 10% of the Black voting age population.<sup>460</sup>

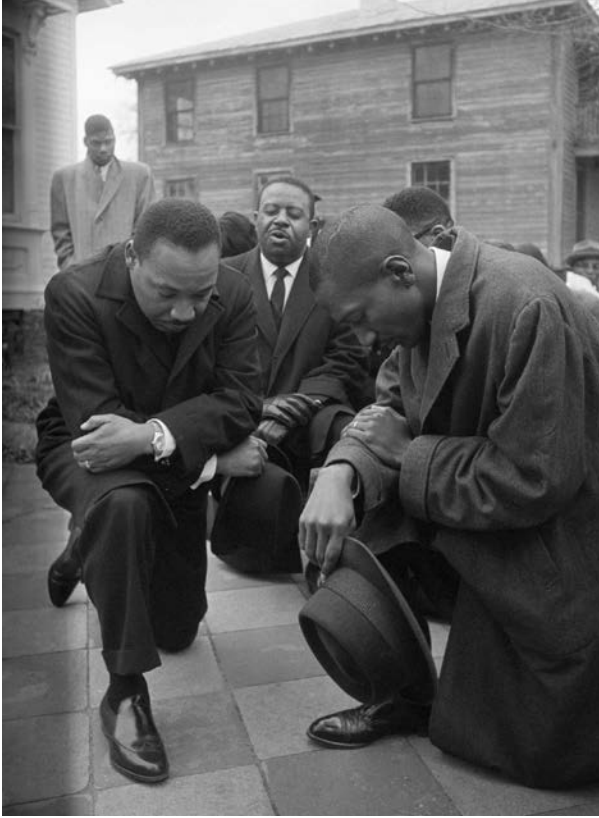
As Dr. King observed, registrars in Alabama continued to exercise immense power to deny Black citizens the right to vote. Registration offices created separate lines for Black and white voters and made sure the Black line moved slowly. Only 15 people might have been admitted each day, even when there were 50 people in line. Black applicants were often turned away multiple times after filling out the lengthy voter questionnaire.<sup>461</sup>

There were no Black elected officials in Montgomery County.<sup>462</sup>

The situation in many other counties in Alabama was even worse. In Macon County, where Black people outnumbered white people seven to one, and where an energetic voter registration campaign had been undertaken in the Black community, white officials used gerrymandering to dilute the Black vote.<sup>463</sup>

The Alabama legislature redrew the boundaries of the town of Tuskegee in 1957 so that nearly all Black voters fell outside city limits and were barred from voting for municipal officials.<sup>464</sup>

Dallas County had one of the lowest Black voter registration rates in Alabama. Half of the population of Selma—the county seat of Dallas County—was Black, but due to discriminatory voting practices only 335 of its 15,000 Black citizens—around 2%—were registered to vote.<sup>465</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy pray with a group of activists who were denied the right to vote at the Dallas County Courthouse and subsequently arrested in Selma on February 1, 1965. Afterwards, they peacefully marched to the local jail. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

Despite the entrenched resistance to Black suffrage, the community's spirit of activism propelled them to speak out and demand their rights. One local leader, S.W. Boynton, testified in Congress in 1955 about the discriminatory practices in the county and the violence used to enforce them.<sup>466</sup>

It took two years for Congress to act on his recommendations, but on September 9, 1957, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. The law established the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and set an important precedent for subsequent civil rights laws. The new division's first project was to investigate racial discrimination in voter registration and elections in Montgomery, where it held its first hearings in 1958.<sup>467</sup>

However, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was not as strong as its advocates initially envisioned, and when the federal government attempted to sue Macon County, a federal judge in Alabama ruled that the Justice Department was not authorized to sue state officials under the law.



Children and young people march for voting rights on February 5, 1965. (AP Photo/Bill Hudson)

To address some of this law’s deficiencies, on May 6, 1960, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1960. The new law required documentation of voter registration practices and data collection sufficient to evaluate claims of racial discrimination—and it created a body of evidence that was used to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>468</sup>

This evidence proved critical. For example, on November 20, 1962, a federal judge issued an injunction against the Montgomery County Board of Registrars barring them from practicing racial discrimination after the Justice Department found that, between January 1956 and June 1961, the board had accepted 96.6% of white people who attempted to register to vote and rejected 75.4% of Black people.<sup>469</sup>

Throughout this era, white segregationist leaders fiercely resisted efforts to investigate and redress discriminatory voting registration practices. Alabama’s attorney general said that allowing federal investigations into voting discrimination was “the first step toward the creation of a police state.” Local officials refused to release records to federal prosecutors charged with investigating their practices.<sup>470</sup>

## Disenfranchisement in Selma

While the struggle over records was mired in the courts, activists in Selma began a campaign of voting rights demonstrations in 1963. A white judge responded by prohibiting groups of three or more people from assembling in public or meeting to plan civil disobedience campaigns.<sup>471</sup>

In November 1964, Selma activist Amelia Boynton persuaded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to join the voting rights campaign in her city. In January 1965, Dr. King announced plans for large-scale voting rights demonstrations in Selma. Selma police responded by arresting hundreds of Black voting rights activists. Selma’s Black community, in turn, held peaceful marches to protest these unjust arrests. On February 18, 1965, during a peaceful march in Marion, Alabama, around 30 miles from Selma, to protest the arrest of civil rights leader James Orange, an Alabama state trooper fatally shot Jimmie Lee Jackson.<sup>472</sup>



Eight-year-old Samuel Newhall is watched by sheriff’s deputies as he advocates for voting rights in front of the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, 1964. His sign reads “One Man. One Vote. Register Now.” (Matt Herron)



The hearse carrying Jimmie Lee Jackson's body was followed by some 700 people on the day of his funeral, March 3, 1965, in Marion, Alabama. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

Outrage over the police killing of Mr. Jackson energized activists in Selma, and hundreds of women, men, and children turned out in their Sunday best on March 7, 1965, to protest the murder and the denial of their right to vote. They planned to march from Selma to the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery. Gov. George Wallace said the march "cannot and will not be tolerated" and commanded Alabama state troopers to block it.<sup>473</sup>

Led by 25-year-old John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Rev. Hosea Williams of the SCLC, the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and found themselves facing a line of state and local police armed with billy clubs, whips, and tear gas and poised to attack.

John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Rev. Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference lead voting rights marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965. (Spider Martin)



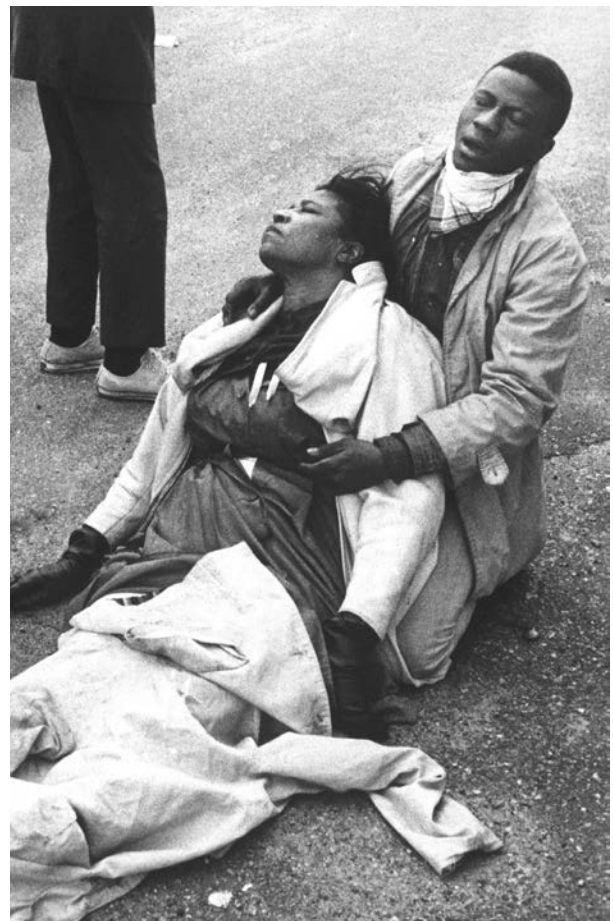


An Alabama state trooper beats John Lewis, 25, with a baton and fractures his skull. (Associated Press)

Before marchers could kneel, pray, and turn around, police brutally attacked, charging them on horseback, wielding weapons, and chasing down fleeing men, women, and children. Dozens of civil rights activists, including children, were hospitalized with severe injuries.

The merciless violence by state officials against unarmed Black people on what became known as “Bloody Sunday” became international news.

Horrifying images of the violence were broadcast on national television, shocking many viewers and helping to rouse support for the civil rights cause.



Amelia Boynton Robinson, unconscious after being beaten by Alabama state troopers, is held by a fellow civil rights activist. (Bettmann via Getty Images)

Activists organized another march two days later, and many supporters from across the country heeded Dr. King's call to come to Selma. In the wake of the violence, Fred Gray immediately petitioned the federal district court in Montgomery to order federal protection for the marchers, who were even more determined to march to Montgomery. But the court had not yet ruled by Tuesday. So activists decided to stage a second march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where they would hold a prayer meeting before returning to their home base at Brown Chapel AME Church. This creative solution became known as "Turnaround Tuesday."<sup>474</sup>

On March 9, 1965, the Rev. James Reeb, a 38-year-old white Unitarian minister who traveled from Boston to Selma for the voting rights march, was beaten to death outside a restaurant by a group of white men who opposed his civil rights work.<sup>475</sup>

## To Montgomery

The judge who weighed and eventually approved the marchers' requests in Selma against this violence was U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. He had joined the court in 1955 and issued landmark decisions in favor of desegregation and Black voting rights. A year after he was appointed to the bench, he was a member of the three-judge panel that ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* that segregation on public transportation is unconstitutional.<sup>476</sup>

As a result, the judge and his family were targeted with death threats, a cross burning, and a bombing. On December 21, 1956, after the Supreme Court upheld his ruling in *Browder*, a cross was burned on Judge Johnson's front lawn.<sup>477</sup>

The Johnson family was forced to unlist their telephone number after receiving near-constant threatening phone calls, and U.S. Marshals guarded their home for nearly 15 years. But Judge Johnson refused to be intimidated. He ruled to desegregate the Montgomery bus and train terminals, airport, city parks, and schools, and to prohibit discriminatory voting practices such as poll taxes. One month after Judge Johnson again ordered Alabama schools to desegregate, a Klansman planted a bomb at his mother's home, mistaking her house for his. The bomb exploded, shattering her kitchen windows and the windows of a neighboring home.<sup>478</sup>

While activists in Selma were preparing a third march, activists in Montgomery were working to secure from Judge Johnson an order allowing the march to proceed—with legal authority and protection.

On March 15, SNCC led a peaceful march from Alabama State toward the Capitol. Montgomery County Sheriff's Mounted Posse—a mostly volunteer reserve force—blocked the marchers and beat Black community members in Montgomery's Jackson and High district, the center of the city's Black business life. The following day, around 600 members of SNCC held another peaceful demonstration three blocks from the Alabama State Capitol to push for the injunction. Claiming they were parading without a permit, the mounted officers beat the marchers with clubs, ropes, and canes. A reporter for The New York Times described the attack:

A posseman dressed in green clothes and a white 10-gallon hat stepped up on foot and, while the horses partly hid him from view, began clubbing the demonstrators. Several still refused to move, and the man's nightstick began falling with great force on their heads. There was a moment of freakish near-quiet when the yells all seemed to subside at once, and in that instant the man in green struck hard on the head of a young man. The sound of the nightstick carried up and down the block.<sup>479</sup>



Alabama sheriff's deputies. (Photo © Bob Adleman)

One officer rode a motorcycle into the crowd, hitting a marcher. At least eight demonstrators were hospitalized as a result of the attack. A city official later claimed law enforcement carried out the attack due to a "mixup of signals."<sup>480</sup>

Undeterred, the next day, Dr. King led nearly 4,000 demonstrators on a march to the Montgomery County Courthouse to condemn the police attack. In response, city officials agreed to permit future

demonstrations in Montgomery. Judge Johnson soon after authorized the Selma to Montgomery March to take place, with state troopers ordered to protect the marchers.<sup>481</sup>

Meanwhile, white residents held a pro-segregation march through Montgomery streets, wielding signs with messages such as "Fire N----- Workers" and "Who Needs N-----s?"<sup>482</sup>



A white woman and her daughters wave Confederate flags at voting rights marchers en route to Montgomery. (Matt Herron)



The marchers enter Montgomery. (Matt Herron, color by Marina Amaral)



## On March 21, 8,000 voting rights activists set out from Selma on the 54-mile walk to Montgomery.<sup>483</sup>

To support the marchers, organizers secured hundreds of provisions, including air mattresses, blankets, tents, clothing, ponchos, walkie-talkies, food, and cooking equipment. Authorities shut down two lanes of highway, and around 4,000 U.S. Army and Alabama National Guard troops were ordered to protect the marchers from attack. When they set off, the column of marchers stretched over a mile long.<sup>484</sup>

During the March, white onlookers on the side of the road jeered the voting rights supporters. John Lewis wrote that “profanities from passing traffic were pretty constant.” Many more Black supporters along the route cheered, provided the marchers with refreshments, or joined the walk themselves.<sup>485</sup>

Mr. Lewis remembered: “The weather was miserable, but no one complained. No one got tired. No one fell back...The incredible sense of community—of communing—was overwhelming.”<sup>486</sup>

On the final day of the March, due to a death threat against Dr. King, several other Black men dressed in suits identical to his and marched alongside to misdirect any potential attackers.<sup>487</sup>

During the five-day journey, the crowd swelled, and around 25,000 people had joined the marchers by the time they reached Montgomery on March 25, 1965.<sup>488</sup>

When the marchers reached the State Capitol, Dr. King delivered his “Our God Is Marching On” speech, telling tens of thousands, “There never was a moment in American history more honorable and more inspiring,” and calling the March a “shining moment in the conscience of man.”<sup>489</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses the crowd at the Alabama State Capitol on March 25, 1965. (Matt Herron)



Rosa Parks addresses the crowd at the Alabama State Capitol on March 25, 1965. (Matt Herron)



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists look on. (Wikimedia Commons)

White vigilante violence continued to target activists. Angry white residents murdered a white woman who supported the civil rights marchers. Viola Liuzzo was shot dead as she returned to Montgomery after driving marchers back to Selma after Dr. King's speech. The men were acquitted in state court and convicted only after federal charges were brought.<sup>490</sup>

Several months later, in August 1965, Jonathan Daniels, a white seminary student who traveled from Boston to Alabama to help with Black voter registration in Lowndes County, was murdered by a deputy sheriff in Hayneville.<sup>491</sup>

Due to the courageous activism in Selma, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law in August,

with Rosa Parks, Dr. King, John Lewis, and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy present. The law curtailed policies created in the years following the Civil War to bar African Americans from exercising their right to vote, including by banning literacy tests and instructing the U.S. attorney general to mount legal challenges against state and local poll taxes, which would be ruled unconstitutional nationwide by the Supreme Court in 1966. And the Voting Rights Act required jurisdictions like Alabama, with the worst records of discrimination, to "preclear" new voting laws with the federal government.<sup>492</sup>

All Alabama senators and representatives voted against the Voting Rights Act.<sup>493</sup>

# CONCLUSION: 1965 AND BEYOND

“ So you honor the dedicated pilots of our struggle who have sat at the controls as the freedom movement soared into orbit...You honor the ground crew without whose labor and sacrifices the jet flights to freedom could never have left the earth. Most of these people will never make the headline and their names will not appear in *Who's Who*. Yet when years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvelous age in which we live—men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, and a more noble civilization—because these humble children of God were willing to suffer for righteousness' sake.<sup>494</sup>

— The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, 1964

**T**he decade from 1955 to 1965 brought historic and enduring change to Montgomery, the United States, and the world. The struggle for civil rights and racial equality demanded enormous sacrifices from tens of thousands of people and involved extreme violence and tragic losses of life.

It also created a powerful movement grounded in discipline, courage, and hope. The legacy of this decade can be found in societal transformation and protective legislation, the benefits of which continue to shape our nation and world today.



Montgomery's Black residents walk to work in the rain during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Grey Villet/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock)

## “A New Philosophy Was Born”

On December 5, 1955, “a new philosophy was born” in Montgomery, Alabama—one that bridged divides of class, education, religion, and age, and sustained more than a year of continuous mass action. In the face of persistent retribution and violence, Montgomery’s Black community defiantly and “squarely faced its age-old oppressors.” In the first act of the Montgomery decade that changed the world, the 382-day Montgomery Bus Boycott ended legally sanctioned racial segregation and humiliation on public transportation.<sup>495</sup>



The Montgomery Bus Boycott stood as a model for future civil rights efforts. The legal challenges first employed during the Boycott campaign became part of an essential playbook for strategically dismantling the legal architecture of racial segregation. The radical assertion of dignity by thousands of Black Montgomeries served as a renewable source of strength and inspiration for the civil rights movement’s “epic battles that electrified the nation and the world” over the following years.<sup>496</sup>

In Montgomery, Black citizens’ collective effort proved that a commitment to unity, love, and nonviolence could triumph over the many instruments of hatred, violence, and racial injustice. Communities worldwide subsequently launched their own nonviolent movements against racial oppression.

The ensuing hard-fought campaigns in the 1950s and ‘60s to uproot the legally entrenched system of racial hierarchy emulated and advanced the achievement of the thousands who boycotted. Again, deeply rooted and at times violent opposition attempted to block progress and, again, it failed.

Black citizens defied proclamations from the Alabama State Capitol of “segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever!” In Montgomery and across the South, they utilized nonviolent protest and legislative and judicial avenues to redress the indignities of Jim Crow that had been maintained for a century.<sup>497</sup>

Twenty-year-old Doris Wilson of Selma celebrates as she marches to Montgomery. She said, “I’m walking for my freedom.” Due to her participation in the March, Ms. Wilson lost her job, she and three siblings went to jail, and her father was denied public assistance. (Matt Herron)



Lowndes County residents watch the Selma to Montgomery March with joy. The county was 80% Black but not a single Black person was registered to vote in 1965. (Matt Herron)



A young man protests school desegregation in Montgomery, 1963. (Flip Schulke)

Enduring brutal beatings from segregationists, students conducting sit-ins showcased their steadfast commitment to nonviolence, and Freedom Rides led by student activists traveled through Montgomery and brought nationwide attention to the injustices of racial segregation.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination and segregation in public accommodations. Montgomery's public schools, parks, hotels, restaurants, theaters, airport, police force, sporting events, and interstate transportation were finally desegregated.<sup>498</sup>

In 1965, tens of thousands mobilized to secure equal voting rights for Black Americans. Marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, peaceful protesters were brutally beaten with clubs and whips by police and deputized white citizens on what became known as Bloody Sunday. Undeterred, they marched again. Over five days, voting rights activists traversed 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery, catapulting the movement for equal access to the ballot into the national consciousness.

At the end of the Selma to Montgomery March, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a tired but triumphant crowd on the steps of the Capitol in Montgomery. In the same place where Jefferson Davis took the oath of office to become president of the Confederacy that waged war against the United States to preserve slavery, Dr. King said proudly:

“They told us we wouldn’t get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, ‘We ain’t goin’ let nobody turn us around.’”<sup>499</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. leads fellow marchers in freedom songs during the March from Selma to Montgomery, 1965. (Matt Herron)



# Opposing Economic Exploitation



Elmore Bolling c. 1945 (Josephine Bolling McCall)

The civil rights movement is remembered primarily for its focus on desegregation and voting rights. But economic injustice was always a central dimension of the struggle. Dr. King believed that “the inseparable twin of racial injustice is economic injustice,” and that the struggle against both crossed racial lines.<sup>500</sup>

For hundreds of years, Black people faced obstacles to economic progress because of racial violence, segregation, and other forms of discrimination. These practices had a clear impact in 1950s Montgomery, where there were major disparities in income and living conditions between Black and white residents. In 1950, the median income for a white family in Montgomery was \$1,730, compared to \$970 for a Black family. Sixty-three percent of Black women and 48% of Black men worked as laborers and domestic workers. Some 94% of white families had a flush toilet, compared to only 31% of Black families.<sup>501</sup>

Statewide, the racialized economic order was violently enforced. Black people who achieved economic success in the era before the civil rights movement often faced violent retaliation. On December 4, 1947,

Elmore Bolling, a Black businessman, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, was shot to death by a white mob near Lowndesboro, Alabama. Mr. Bolling owned and managed a trucking business and farm with the help of his wife and seven children, and had a reputation for treating his employees with kindness and generosity. He was targeted and murdered by the mob in retaliation for his economic independence and success. Only one perpetrator was arrested, and he was released on bond and never held accountable.<sup>502</sup>

Activists risked not only their physical safety, but also faced real threats to their families’ financial well-being. Rosa Parks and her husband Raymond were among many civil rights activists who were fired from their jobs for speaking out against injustice and inequality. Black Montgomerians nonetheless dedicated their careers to fighting racial and economic injustice.<sup>503</sup>

# The Voting Rights Act

These efforts, pursued over the course of a decade, culminated in legislation that President Lyndon B. Johnson called “one of the most monumental laws in the entire history of American freedom.” The passage of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965 renounced decades of Black political suppression.<sup>504</sup>

The Voting Rights Act outlawed literacy tests, paved the way for the elimination of poll taxes, and curtailed other discriminatory barriers created to disenfranchise Black voters. It prescribed federal oversight by U.S. Civil Service examiners “to enforce the guarantees of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution,” and ensure that qualified Black citizens could successfully register to vote without intimidation or threats of violence.<sup>505</sup>

It also required states and counties where less than 50% of qualified voting-age Black residents had actually voted, and that used one or more discriminatory “tests or devices,” to “preclear” any proposed changes to their voting laws with the federal government.<sup>506</sup>

The effects of the Voting Rights Act were felt almost immediately in Montgomery and throughout the

South. The year before the act’s passage, fewer than 20% of qualified Black people in Alabama were registered to vote compared to nearly 70% of qualified white people. As a consequence of the Voting Rights Act, Black turnout in the 1966 Alabama Democratic primary reached 80%; the majority of Black voters had newly registered in the previous year.<sup>507</sup>

More than half of eligible Black Alabamians registered to vote within two years of the act’s passage. Federal examiners oversaw voter registration processes and ensured that 9,000 new Black voters in Montgomery County had access to the ballot box in 1967. Ten years after the Voting Rights Act, the number of Black voters in the Deep South increased by more than a million people, including around 200,000 in Alabama.<sup>508</sup>

The Voting Rights Act increased political representation for Black people and other marginalized groups. Statewide, five Black people in Alabama were ultimately elected to public office in 1966, the first in half a century. In 1970, Fred Gray, the attorney who successfully litigated *Browder v. Gayle*, and Thomas Reed became the first Black people elected to the Alabama legislature since Reconstruction. By 1975, the number of Black people elected to office in the Deep South soared from virtually none to around 1,000.<sup>509</sup>

Jane Jackson takes the voter registration oath in Canton, Mississippi, on August 15, 1965. (Matt Herron)





Activists march from Selma to Montgomery on March 21, 1965, leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. (Matt Herron)

In the last 50 years, thousands of Black people have been elected to local, state, and federal office. In 1992, Earl F. Hilliard became the first Black person elected to Congress from Alabama since Reconstruction. In 2008, a Black man was elected president of the United States. In 2019, Montgomery elected the first Black mayor in the city's 200-year history. These milestones were possible because of what happened in Montgomery between 1955 and 1965.<sup>510</sup>

## Voting Rights Struggle Continues

Just as the achievements of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were met with massive resistance, the Voting Rights Act's success in facilitating racial parity in the political process has similarly engendered backlash that continues 60 years later.

In 2010, Shelby County, Alabama, northwest of Montgomery, filed a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Sections 4(b) and 5 of the Voting Rights Act and seeking an injunction against their enforcement. Section 4(b) provides a formula to determine which counties and states with records of racially discriminatory voting practices are required to "preclear" with the federal government under Section 5.<sup>511</sup>

In 2013, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* effectively ended federal oversight of state elections. Even though Congress had overwhelmingly voted to renew the Voting Rights Act in 2006, the Court ruled that the criteria used in Section 4(b) to identify counties with demonstrated histories of discriminatory voter registration processes were no longer constitutional. Despite acknowledging that the parity achieved between the registration rates of Black and white voters was solely a result of the Voting Rights Act, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for the majority: "Racial disparity in those numbers was compelling evidence justifying the preclearance remedy and the coverage formula...There is no longer such a disparity." States and counties with the worst records of discrimination are no longer required to preclear changes to voting laws.<sup>512</sup>



Residents from Alabama await the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013. (Chip Somodevilla via Getty Images)

Reversion to discriminatory practices designed to disenfranchise minority voters and dilute their political influence was immediate. Previously restricted states began introducing legislation requiring photo identification, ending same-day voter registration, closing polling places, and curtailing early and mail-in voting. States redrew congressional maps on the basis of race, resulting in racial gerrymandering and the dilution of Black political power.<sup>513</sup>

These challenges contradict arguments that the advancement and protection of civil rights is no longer necessary. In her dissent in *Shelby County*, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote, "The sad irony of today's decision lies in its utter failure to grasp why the VRA [Voting Rights Act] has proven effective. The Court appears to believe that the VRA's success in eliminating the specific devices extant in 1965 means that preclearance is no longer needed. With that belief, and the argument derived from it, history repeats itself."<sup>514</sup>

In 2026, efforts to restrict and further minimize the political power of people of color have intensified and many Black voters now contend with an uncertain future.

## The Beloved Community

The civil rights movement is unfinished. Many Black and brown people remain burdened by a presumption of dangerousness or guilt. Efforts to remedy past discrimination in the workplace and academic institutions have been dismantled and eliminated, restoring a presumption of incompetence that gets directed at some people based on their race or gender. Polarizing rhetoric seems to be emboldening thousands to once again assert white supremacy, racist conduct and language, and a retreat from civil rights gains. Yet, the vision that emerged from the Montgomery Decade that changed the world is still strong.

Dr. King articulated the concept of the Beloved Community in Montgomery which successfully guided the movement through the numerous obstacles meant to derail its progress. Originating with the philosopher Josiah Royce and popularized by Dr. King, the Beloved Community imagines a true embrace of the principles of love, justice, nonviolence, and shared humanity.<sup>515</sup>



Young civil rights activists sing freedom songs. (Photo © Bob Adleman)

John Lewis, the late congressman and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader who was beaten nearly to death on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, urged that a responsibility for the Beloved Community compels the nation to “move our feet, our hands, our hearts, our resources to build and not to tear down, to reconcile and not to divide, to love and not to hate, to heal and not to kill.”<sup>516</sup>



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Charles Evers, Dr. Ralph Bunche, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Harry Belafonte, and thousands of marchers carrying their bedrolls and belongings on the way from Selma to Montgomery. (Matt Herron)

In contemporary struggles, a moral obligation to others persists, and in the endeavor to secure full dignity for all people, the work continues. The example of the many who worked as the “ground crew” of the freedom movement continues to reveal that, with great courage, each individual has the potential to work towards and achieve lasting change despite seemingly insurmountable odds. The thousands who suffered, sacrificed, and united during the Montgomery Decade from 1955 to 1965 realized tremendous gains toward a more racially just society, a more representative democracy, and a more perfect union—a struggle that continues today.

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We are grateful to share this report and information with all of you. Please visit EJI's Legacy Sites and Montgomery Square to experience the full power of this report and content.

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