

THE WALKING CITY, A HISTORY OF THE MONTGOMERY BOYCOTT

Author(s): Norman W. Walton

Source: *Negro History Bulletin*, APRIL, 1957, Vol. 20, No. 7 (APRIL, 1957), pp. 147-148, 150

Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44213098>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Association for the Study of African American Life and History is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Negro History Bulletin*

JSTOR

THE WALKING CITY, A HISTORY OF THE MONTGOMERY BOYCOTT

By NORMAN W. WALTON

PART IV

The Supreme Court had spoken—segregation on the buses was unconstitutional in Montgomery and in the state of Alabama. Many southerners were unable to accept the decision as the law of the land—they cried loudly and continuously that the Supreme Court invaded the natural rights of a State. In Montgomery reconsideration was asked by the city of Montgomery and the Alabama Public Service Commission, on the grounds that the Supreme Court's decision did not answer various "vital" law questions and that it had taken from Alabama the State's police power. On the matter, the President of the Alabama Public Service Commission hinted that the Commission would issue an order designed to "preserve peace and harmony" on the buses in Alabama. Reverend M. L. King noted that there was nothing totally new in the decision. King said, "We have had close (racial) contact in elevators, stores and banks for many years through custom."

The plea of the City of Montgomery and the Alabama Public Service Commission was in vain. On December 17, the Supreme Court refused to reconsider its decision banning racial segregation on local buses. It stated it was mailing the official notice to a special federal court in Montgomery, Alabama.¹

Eve of Desegregated Buses

It is interesting to mention, at this time, the attitude of some of the bus riding people of the city toward the Supreme Court's decision.

On December 18, a reporter attempted to sample the attitude of the people toward the decision. He rode the bus throughout the day and talked with the drivers and passengers about the decision. Many of them laughed as they affirmed the statement, "The Negroes got what they wanted." Others wanted to know what the White Citizen's Council was

doing about it, and questioned the use of "all that money they were getting from everyone." When an old Negro got on the bus and joked with the driver, the driver commented to the reporter, "Now there's another good Negro. Most of the old ones are."² Others felt that this was only the Negroes start toward integration; soon he would start pushing to get into schools. Then, it would be too late to stop them.

On December 18, 1956, the City Commissioners issued a segregation statement in which they expressed the attitude of the Commissioners on the issue. The statement was widely publicized. It declared:

This decision in the Bus case has had a tremendous impact on the customs of our people here in Montgomery. It is not an easy thing to live under a law recognized as constitutional for these many years and then have it suddenly overturned on the basis of psychology . . . 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 under God's creation and plan.³

The Montgomery Advertiser, on December 20, 1956, interpreted this statement to mean "The jig is up; it is up to the white citizens whether they ride buses in the new order." It was felt that the proposal to evade the decision, such as establishing a fleet of station wagons for white pick-up service — organized as a club and permissible under the city ordinance, would not be adequate. Further, it concurred in a statement made earlier by Reverend M. L. King, that the trains which pull in and out of Montgomery, the planes which fly over the city and the elevators are desegregated.⁴

In the meantime, Montgomery Negroes were preparing to go back on the buses as soon as the Supreme Court's order outlawing segregation on the buses, reached Montgomery. The MIA requested police protection in the "danger zones" which were referred to as the ends of bus runs and dark streets. Moreover, the MIA suggested that special police be secured to protect the buses during the hours after dark, and warned that violence in the city "will lead to a long and desolate night of bitterness which will bring shame to generations unborn."⁵

In addition to these safety measures the Negroes of Montgomery had been attending a "school" which instructed members how to return to integrated buses. Some of the suggestions by the school official were: Do not deliberately sit by a white person unless there is no other seat. If cursed, do not curse back. If pushed, do not push back. In case of an incident, talk as little as possible. If you feel you cannot take it, walk for another week or two.

On December 20, 1956, the bus integration order reached Montgomery.⁶ Separate writs of injunctions were served by U.S. Marshals, first on the Alabama Public Service Commission, then the Montgomery Police Chief, G. J. Ruppenthal and others. The Public Service Commission notified all other bus companies operating in Alabama that the injunction applied to Montgomery alone. And that all other companies must continue to enforce segregation. This appeared to have been a necessary move for the segregationists, because the Alabama Christian Movement For Human Rights in Birmingham, led by Reverend F. L. Shuttlesworth, had already written the Birmingham City Commission requesting an immediate end of "segregated buses in Birmingham."⁷

Desegregated Buses By Law

It is interesting to note that even

though many leaders of Montgomery and the South declared, "violence would break out if the buses were integrated," the first few days passed without violence. Two minor incidents were recorded as the integrated buses rolled the streets of the "Walking City." A Negro woman told of having been slapped by a white man after she alighted from a bus. Another incident was reported when a well-dressed Negro boarded a bus and took a front seat, and called out to other Negroes to do likewise. He was called a troublemaker by white passengers as he got off.⁸ The Montgomery Advertiser reported, "The calm but cautious acceptance of this significant change in Montgomery's way of life came without any major disturbance." Police Chief, G. J. Ruppenthal said, "It was just another Friday before Christmas for us." A sales girl, who took a seat beside a Negro woman, although there were seats available, commented, "I figure if they stay in their place and leave me alone, I'll stay in mine and leave them alone."⁹

Reverend M. L. King, Jr., President of the MIA, declared that we have just started to work for the dignity of man. He outlined three possible new goals to strive for as recreation opportunities, voting and education. He appealed to the Negroes to go back to the buses now that they were desegregated. Perhaps this stemmed from the fact that many Negroes were not riding the buses because of the increased fare, which became necessary during the boycott. King said, "I'd rather pay \$200 to ride an integrated bus than to pay one cent to ride a segregated bus."

R. J. Cartwright, manager of Mobile Bus Line, Inc., announced that the Mobile Transit System had ceased trying to enforce the city's bus segregation ordinances.¹⁰

Violence Wholesale

By December 28, 1956, a new pattern of intimidation was taking shape for the citizens of Montgomery. The first few days of peaceful compliance with the new law had given way to a reign of terror. City buses were being fired on throughout the city by snipers in poorly lighted sections of the city. It was reported

that a teen-age colored girl was beaten by four or five white men as she alighted a bus near her home. Tension, which had been somewhat relaxed for the Christmas holidays, was being regenerated throughout the city. The fat was thrown into the fire on December 28, 1956, when a pregnant Negro woman was shot in both legs while riding a bus. Doctors were afraid to remove the bullet for fear of losing the baby. However, the bullet was removed and she was released from the hospital January 27, 1957.¹¹ Many Negroes and whites refused to ride the buses. The Montgomery City Commission ordered the suspension of night runs by city line buses for a week. No runs could begin after five o'clock in the evening. The snipers had won.

In an effort to halt armed attacks on racially integrated city buses, additional policemen were added to the force. Police Commissioner, Clyde Sellers, said, "We feel that with the additional new officers, we will be able to maintain order."

Moreover, Governor James E. Folsom said that the highway patrol was "ready to swing into action" if needed to maintain "good order" in racially tense areas.

On January 21, 1957, the curfew was extended another week — the Commission declared an "emergency exists" and said the curfew is necessary to protect the health, life and property of the citizens of Montgomery.¹²

The psychological warfare continued among the people of Montgomery. Propaganda leaflets flooded the Negro and white communities. An effort to divide the Negroes was made by a group who began on January 3, distributing handbills in Negro neighborhoods urging Montgomery Negroes to rebel against M. L. King referred to as Luther. "We get shot at while he rides. He is getting us in more trouble everyday. Wake up. Run him out of town." Below are three of such circulars as they appeared on the streets of Montgomery. Although this material reads as though it was written by disgruntled Negroes, most of the colored people

called it a "white scheme to divide the Negroes."

(See Opposite Page)

The Negro of Montgomery appeared to have become hardened to this type of intimidation. They were not easily frightened. The once feared K. K. K. could hardly incite the Negroes or even make them uncomfortable. During the peak of the propaganda warfare in the city, it was reported that a little Negro boy was seen on a cold night, standing before a burning cross warming his chilled hands. A college teacher reported this incident. One day the K. K. K. paraded the streets of Montgomery. They were all over the city, in the streets, in the stores, on the square, on the buses, etc. A college professor gave two college students a ride, and to make conversation he asked, "Did you see the K. K. K. down town?" The girl looked shocked and answered, "No, are they down there?" "Yes," said the professor, "they are all over the place, they are dressed in white robes with red insignas." "Oh," exclaimed one of the girls, "I thought they were with the United Appeal." Here in Montgomery this type of intimidation, at least, had lost its sting.

The Movement Spreads

In Birmingham, Asa Carter was outlining his plan for the "Minute Men" who were pledged to maintain segregated buses. The machinery was simple. If a white woman was insulted on the bus she was to simply call a number and "Minute Men" would board the bus — not for violence but "for good race relations and to relieve the tension" which meant, as the Negroes interpreted it, trouble for them.¹³

The Negroes of Birmingham, seemingly jealous of the achievement made in Montgomery, continued their attack on the segregated buses. Already twenty-two Negroes, who had pledged to test the city's bus segregation laws, had been arrested and charged with violating the city's bus segregation ordinance. Attorney Arthur D. Shores, who had been with the Montgomery boycott, was to defend the Negroes. He, too, was being intimidated. On January 3,

Shores returned to his home to find a seven foot metal man of the land of OZ leaning against his home. He called the police.¹⁴

The movement for the dignity of the Negro continued to spread throughout the South. Reverends Martin L. King, C. K. Steele and F. L. Shuttlesworth, Negro leaders, called a meeting on January 10, in Atlanta to "coordinate and spin the campaign for integrated transportation in the South." The conferences were called because "we have no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle—and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding."¹⁵

A few days later, the Negro ministers of Atlanta began a "love, law and liberation" movement to end racial seating barriers on the buses. Here, about 100 Negro ministers pledged to test the Atlanta bus segregation law by riding the bus on a non-segregated basis. Many of them did and six Negro ministers were arrested.¹⁶

In Tallahassee, the City Commission knocked out the racial segregation section of the city bus franchise and substituted a passenger assignment ordinance. Under the new plan the bus driver would issue tickets to riders assigning them to seats. The passengers would be required to occupy these seats under penalty of \$500 fine or 60 days in jail. They could, of course, have their fare refunded.

The Bomb's Explode

Although the movement was spreading, the Negroes in Montgomery, the core of the struggle, were reaping the whirlwind of the decision. On January 10, 1957, the city was shocked by six bombings which left four Negro Churches and two pastor's homes seriously damaged. The homes of Reverend Robert Graetz and Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the Bell Street Baptist Church of which Reverend U. J. Fields, was pastor, Hutchinson Street Baptist Church, the Negro First Baptist Church, and the Mount Olive Baptist Church were victims

of this devilish act.¹⁷ During the early morning hours, Negroes and a few whites mingled together to view the damages; tension increased as they came together. Some spoke militant words at whites who came to view the scene of broken glass, fallen bricks and splintered wood. At Abernathy's home Negroes pushed by police and entered the house to give aid to Reverend Abernathy's wife and small baby who were in the house at the time of the bombing. While the crowd was assembled at the Abernathy home the First Baptist Church was bombed. By now tension was almost at the breaking point. Nobody was doing much talking — indeed there was not much to be said. One old man remarked, "When they bomb the house of the Lord we are dealing with crazy people." Another replied, "I am ready for whatever comes now." One got the impression from the attitude of the crowd that assembled Negroes were not afraid but appeared to be disgusted.

The Governor, James E. Folsom, made a pre-dawn inspection of the bombings. He commented that he didn't think they wanted to kill anyone, but stated, "Any person or group of persons that would bomb the house of the Lord endangers the life of every man, woman and child in Montgomery."¹⁸ Governor Folsom said that a \$2,000 reward would be offered for information leading to the arrest of persons guilty of the violent action.

The Montgomery City Commission suspended all bus service for an indefinite period of time for the "protection of life, limb and property of the people of Montgomery."¹⁹

This city of about 110,000 people was without public transportation. However, there was some discussion by two city attorneys and U.S. District Judge, Frank M. Johnson, Jr. about a suggested new all-white bus system for Montgomery. Earlier in the year, the City Commission had refused to license a Negro bus jitney service on the grounds that Montgomery City Lines was offering adequate service.²⁰

The Rebel Club, a white group, requested a franchise to operate a

non-profit bus line for transportation of members only. No mention of race was made in the memorandum filed with the City. The group proposed to charge each member \$1 for a membership fee and fifteen cents for each ride.²¹

On February 27, 1957, the question of whether the city of Montgomery could license an all-white bus line was still not settled because a three-judge Federal Court refused to rule on the matter. However, two of the judges expressed the opinion that it would be unlawful to operate the bus line on a segregated basis.²²

There are evidences to show that many sober thinking whites could not sanction violence to maintain segregation. The Men of Montgomery, a powerful white group, called on the citizens to stop violence, "Violence by white or colored, cannot be tolerated. . . . We urge that no stone be left unturned to bring these cowards to justice and that they be punished to the fullest extent of the law."²³

The *Alabama Journal* warned the people that "dynamite is not the answer." It stated no one knew whether the dynamite is being used by "those opposed to race mixing or by those who shed more crocodile tears, seek more money, more sympathy from Northerners, but ask the people to 'stick to legal procedure.'"²⁴ Others thought it was a disgrace to democracy to let a cowardly element in any community prevent buses from operating. Negro ministers pledged to hold service as usual in some of the bombed Negro Churches. Reverend Ralph Abernathy said, "We will pray that the President of the U.S. will say just a word to us. It would help us so much." However, Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy said that night service at his First Baptist Church had been halted "because we feel it might endanger the lives of our congregation." Reverend U. J. Fields, who held service in the borrowed basement of another Church, said, "Some of those in responsible positions had contributed to violence by advocating opposition to integration. Reverend Robert Graetz preached a sermon entitled, "How Often Shall We Forgive."²⁵