MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT AND FREEDOM RIDES 1961

By: Angelica Narvaez
Before the Montgomery Bus Boycott

- Charles Hamilton Houston, an African-American lawyer, challenged lynching, segregated public schools, and segregated transportation.
- In 1947, the Congress of Racial Equality organized “freedom rides” on interstate buses, but gained little attention.
- In 1953, a bus boycott in Baton Rouge partially integrated city buses.
- Women’s Political Council (WPC)
  - An organization comprised of African-American women led by Jo Ann Robinson.
  - Failed to change bus companies' segregation policies when meeting with city officials.
Irene Morgan v Commonwealth of Virginia (1946)

- Virginia's law allowed bus companies to establish segregated seating in their buses
- During 1944, Irene Morgan was ordered to sit at the back of a Greyhound Bus
  - Refused and was arrested
  - Refused to pay the fine
- NAACP lawyers William Hastie and Thurgood Marshall contested the constitutionality of segregated transportation
  - Claimed that Commerce Clause of Article 1 made it illegal
  - Relatively new tactic to argue segregation with the commerce clause instead of the 14th Amendment
  - Did not claim the usual “states rights” argument
**Irene Morgan v Commonwealth of Virginia (1946)**

- Supreme Court struck down Virginia's law
  - Deemed segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional
  - "Found that Virginia's law clearly interfered with interstate commerce by making it necessary for carriers to establish different rules depending on which state line their vehicles crossed"
  - Made little to no impact on desegregation/integration
  - Private bus companies still allowed bus drivers to seat people wherever they pleased, meaning buses were still segregated

- Impact
  - Morgan is considered the precursor to Rosa Park
  - It was not until the Freedom Riders 1961 that this decision was acknowledged
  - Became the first legal case regarding segregated interstate travel
  - Helped gradually pave the way for desegregation
Montgomery Bus Boycott

- Lasted from Dec 5, 1955 to Dec 20, 1956
- A grassroots movements aimed to desegregate city buses
- African-Americans boycotted Montgomery city buses in an attempt to bring about integration
- Considered the starting point of the African-American Civil rights Movement
  - The first unified demonstration taken by the African-American community that brought national attention to civil rights issues
- Marked the beginnings of the mass protests favoring civil rights
- Prompted the rise of influence of MLK and the Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
Lead Up to Rosa Parks’ Civil Disobedience

- Claudette Colvin, a 15 year old African-American girl, was arrested for refusing giving up her seat to a white woman
  - First person arrested for this type of civil disobedience

- E.D. Nixon, Jo Ann Robinson, Rosa Parks, Rufus A Lewis, and MLK met with city officials to talk about segregated seating in city buses

- Aurelia S. Browder and Mary Louise Smith were arrested for refusing to give up their seats

- By the time Rosa Parks was arrested, many people carried out acts of civil disobedience
Rosa Parks Background

- Born February 4, 1913, Tuskegee, Alabama and died October 24, 2005, Detroit, Michigan
- Attended Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, a relatively liberal school
- Learned about injustice of slavery and about the long challenging path to emancipation through her maternal grandparents
- Came from a family with a long history of civil rights

Civil Rights Background
  - In 1932, Parks and her husband, the founder of Montgomery NAACP chapter, secretly raised money for the Scottsboro Boys
    - She visited and gave them food while in jail
  - Advocated for voter registration
  - Attempted to register to vote
  - Refused to re-enter a bus through the rear door after paying the driver, James F Blake (the driver of the bus she would later refuse to give up her seat)
  - Joined the NAACP in 1943 and elected as secretary of the Montgomery chapter
    - Her job was to record violent acts like murder, rape, and voter intimidation, making her a common target for harassment
  - Joined Montgomery Voters League
Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

- On Dec 1, 1955, Parks was arrested and jailed for refusing to forfeit her seat to a white man when told to do so.
- On Dec 2, 1955, the WPC orchestrated a one day boycott on Dec 5, the day of her trial.
- The distributed over 50,000 leaflets to promote it in less than 24 hours.
- She caught the attention of MLK who wanted to present her as the symbol of the fight against inequality.
- Many people carried out this act of civil disobedience, but she gained fame due to her association the NAACP and MLK.
Impact of Rosa Parks

- Catalyzed the Montgomery Bus Boycott
- Her actions inspired others to resist segregation
- Arranged transportation for some who participated
- She was humble and well-mannered
  - Many people (even middle class whites) could relate to her, making it harder to justify segregation
- Spoke around the state/nation about the boycott
- Regarded as one of the most influential leaders of the civil rights leader
- Some consider her as the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement” as she became the symbol for equality and fair treatment
- “I didn't consider myself breaking any segregation laws . . . because he was extending what we considered our section of the bus."
- "I felt just resigned to give what I could to give what I could do to protest against the way I was being treated."
First Day of Boycott

- December 5, 1955
- About 40,000 African-Americans boycotted the city buses
- So effective to the point that the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed to prolong it
  - They were immediately inspired by the community's unity, spirit, and resilience
Montgomery Improvement Association

- On December 5, 1955 Montgomery civil rights leaders like MLK, Ralph Abernathy, and E.D. Nixon formed the Montgomery Improvement Association
- MLK was elected president at 27 years old
- Its purpose was to organize and supervise a longer boycott, one that would last as long as their demands were met
- “Founded on the Christian principles of nonviolence and kindness toward one's enemies”
Montgomery Improvement Association

- Thousands of people gathered at a mass meeting arranged by the MIA at Holt Street Baptist Church
  - Gained national attention through the press
  - Garnered attention for the topic of racial segregation and the fight for civil rights
  - Became evident that Christianity (religion) would be a very influential force in the movement

- MLK made a speech that advocated for equal rights and peaceful protests
  - Rose to national notability as a civil rights leader

- MIA collected money to provide financial support to those participating in the boycott as they had to find other means of transportation
  - All donations were anonymous to avoid harassment and retaliation

- Became one of the foundations for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference
African-American Demands on Boycott

- Civil rights leaders, most of whom were part of MIA, met with city officials to make demands

- Demands
  - Pledge from the city and bus companies that African-Americans will be treated with respect
  - City code would prohibit reserved seating
    - First come for serve policy in which whites will fill in from the front to the back of the bus while blacks would do so back to front
  - African-American drivers will be hired for routes with mostly African-American passengers

- “We are not asking for an end to segregation. That’s a matter for the legislature and the courts. . . All we are seeking is justice and fair treatment in riding the buses” (King Jr.1955).

- MIA would continue boycott until their demands were met
Sustaining the Boycott

- Other means of transportation had to be provided for the boycott participants
  - Civil rights leaders organized carpools
  - Some walked or biked to their destinations
  - African-American taxi drivers only charged a 10-cent fare (the same as bus fare)

- Many civil rights mass meetings were held to keep people motivated to continue the boycott
  - Large mass effort by the African-American community
  - Gained national and national attention
    - More than 100 reporters visited Montgomery
    - Helped motivate those involved
    - The boycott flooded with support from across the country
Resistance to Montgomery Boycott

- MLK and E.D. Nixon’s homes were bombed
- Rosa and Raymond Parks often received death threats
- MLK was tried and convicted under an anti-boycott law in State of Alabama v M.L. King Jr.
  - Only brought more support and attention nationally
- Some Caucasians believed the boycott was not voluntary
  - People were forced by “goon squads”
  - Police were sent to bus stops to apprehend them, but none were found
- African-Americans were harassed and targeted by authorities
  - Many were jailed for false accusations in attempts to break up carpools
  - Penalized African-American taxi drivers
  - Carpool systems that the MIA set up were dissolved under legal orders by the court
  - Churches associated with the boycott were targeted (bombed)
Resistance to Montgomery Boycott

- George Wallis
  - Alabama governor who was deemed one of the biggest advocates for segregation

- Ku Klux Klan
  - Used (extreme) violence to prevent integration
  - Shot and beat people with bats, pipes, rocks
  - Bombed homes and churches

- Mayor Gayle of Montgomery
  - Declared that anyone defying Montgomery’s segregation laws would be arrested
Final Impact of Boycott

- 75% of passengers were African-American and 99% of the community boycotted.
- The loss of revenue was so significant that if the boycott continued the city would have lost too much money.

Final Phases

- On Feb 1956, MIA filed a lawsuit in US District Court for four women (Colvin, Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, Mary Louise Smith) and on behalf of those who suffered from segregation and other injustices within the transportation systems.
  - *Browder v. Gayle*
  - Wanted to make segregation pertaining to interstate travel unconstitutional.
- On June of the same year, the lower courts deemed segregated seating in buses unconstitutional because it violated the 14th Amendment (Equal Protection Clause).
- Supreme Court upheld decision and ordered buses to be integrated.
- December 20 1956, the court officially ordered Montgomery officials to desegregate city buses.
Final Impact of Boycott

- **On Civil Rights Movement**
  - The victory of the Montgomery boycott paved the way for equality and desegregation/integration
  - Gave hope that everyone will be treated equally despite race
  - Showed that a unified African-American community could challenge Jim Crow laws
  - Slightly lessened their fear of the Klan as they proved their immense strength together
  - Grew more fearless in the face of brutality

- **On MLK**
  - Brought him in the national spotlight as he advocated for non-violent protests
  - Became one of the leading civil rights leader
  - Catalyzed the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957
After the Boycott

- After the buses were integrated, Caucasians and African-Americans sat together with peacefully, albeit some tension.

- Segregationists used deadly violence in response:
  - Shot a 15 year old girl
  - Bombed homes including Reverend Abernathy's
  - Bombed churches

- The city was essentially still segregated with the exception of buses.

- However, it still showed that a unified African-American community could challenge Jim Crow laws.
Lead Up to Freedom Rides of 1961

- The Freedom Rides of 1961 was modeled after the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947
  - Similar objectives and events as the Freedom Rides

- In 1946, the decision in Morgan v Virginia, marked segregation in interstate travel as unconstitutional.
  - This inspired the Journey of Reconciliation as they wanted to test the enforcement of the decision

- Boynton v Virginia (1960)
  - Bruce Boynton, an African-American law student, sat in a whites only seat while in a restaurant stop during his interstate travel
  - Refused to get up when ordered to, claiming that he was an interstate bus passenger
  - The Supreme Court decided that “conviction of an interstate bus passenger for refusing to leave the premises of a segregated restaurant [violates] the Interstate Commerce Act” (Oyez).
  - Segregation was prohibited in Interstate travels and facilities associated with them like bathrooms, restaurants, etc.

- Freedom Riders wanted to test these decisions, especially the one from Boynton v Virginia.
Freedom Ride of 1961

- A group of 13 black and white Americans rode around buses across the segregated United States (Deep South) in an attempt to integrate bus terminals and its corresponding facilities.

- A way to exert pressure on all levels of government to desegregate interstate transportation

- Passing through the Deep South where racism was the most prevalent showed their strength
  - Symbolic of the lengths people were willing to take for equal rights

- They were recruited by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

- Black freedom riders used “whites-only” facilities like restrooms and counters to enforce non-segregation decisions by the courts

- There were two “groups”: one who rode Greyhound buses and the other Trailways

- They were met with deadly and violent hostility from local white supremacists and segregationists
Rationale for Freedom Ride

- James Farmer, CORE’s director, hoped Kennedy would give more attention to civil rights issues unlike administrations before him
- Wanted to put pressure on federal government to advocate for and enforce anti-segregation laws
- Obtain more attention for the civil rights cause
- Issues were mostly dealt with on a local or state level, almost never federally
Impact of Cold War Support

- Cold War overshadowed the Civil Rights Movement
- The Kennedy administration and the public were more concerned about the following:
  - Nuclear war/proliferation
  - Soviet sphere of influence
  - Rising tensions in Vietnam
  - Space Race
  - McCarthyism
  - Communist infiltration
  - Cuba
- Most white Americans dreamed of living a suburban life, meaning they would rather not involve themselves in racial problems
- For the White House, the Civil Rights Movement was an afterthought
Outcome of the First Greyhound Freedom Ride

- As the Greyhound pulled up on a bus stop in Anniston, Alabama, dozens of men armed with metal pipes surrounded the bus.
  - Many threw rocks, 2 tires were slit, and Anniston police were warned to stay away by officials

- The driver drove the damaged bus away from the terminal before stopping on the side of a highway due to a flat tire
  - When he inspected the tires, the Freedom Riders were left to defend themselves

- Then, a mob of about 40 men surrounded the bus and subsequently bombed it

- As the Freedom Riders escaped the burning bus, they were beaten until a patrolman stopped the violence
Trailways Bus

- Attacked in Anniston as well
- A mob of Klansmen attacked journalists, Freedom Riders, and bystanders with pipes, bats, and chains
- James Peck (one of the Riders) was beaten so badly that he had to get over 50 stitches
Significance of Violent Incidents

- These events were recorded and discussed in major newspapers, garnering national and international attention.
- The acts of violence by the mobs helped the Riders gain sympathy and support from people across the nation.
Kennedy Administration Reaction (First Freedom Ride)

- Before the Freedom Rides started, the FBI and Attorney General Robert Kennedy expected violence.

- Robert Kennedy was vaguely alerted by a local sheriff that potential violence might ensue.
  - Therefore, he notified the authorities, ignorant of their neglect.

- After the violent attacks, the White House grew frustrated of the Freedom Riders, the KKK, local police, and the state governor.

- JFK did not publicly blame any group for the incidents, but privately he wanted the Riders to stop.

- James Farmer hoped the administration would allow them to continue, but they did not.

- Bus companies refused to drive Freedom Riders, forcing them to cease the movement.
  - They were flown to New Orleans (their original last stop).
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

- Created in 1960 to give younger black Americans a voice in the Civil Rights Movement
- Organized by those involved in sit-in protests
- They were advised by Ella Baker (a civil rights organizer) to remain autonomous from SCLC, MLK and his non-violent ideologies
- Considered the more radical organization in comparison to NAACP and SCLC
- Their most prominent involvement is the organization of the second Freedom Rides
  - This became the driving force behind their rise to prominence
Second Freedom Ride

- Even though CORE did not organize the movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) directed a second Freedom Ride.
  - This time the Riders were prepared to die for their cause as they were already aware of the level of violence involved.
  - Wrote their wills before leaving.

- With the (reluctant) help of the Kennedy’s administration, the second Freedom Riders travelled from Nashville to Montgomery.

- In Montgomery, the Freedom Riders were attacked.

- That same night, violence ensued in a rally led by civil rights leaders like MLK, Reverend Abernathy, and John Lewis.
  - Participants, including the Riders, were attacked with rocks and tear gas.

- Robert Kennedy had to send in 500 unarmed deputized federal marshals.
  - President Kennedy called the governor (Governor Patterson) to persuade him to send in the Alabama National Guard, which he did.
Kennedy Administration Reaction (Second Freedom Ride)

- President Kennedy, outraged, ordered Diane Nash, the SNCC co-founder, to stop the Riders
  - She refused as she was too dedicated to the movement

- Ultimately, JFK’s administration ordered Greyhound to provide a bus and a driver to the Riders or be punished for violating a federal law

- Later he made a deal with a Mississippi Senator in which Freedom Riders would have protection if they were to be arrested
Outcome of the Second Freedom Ride

- President Kennedy suggested a “cooling off” period, but the Riders dismissed this as they finally gained the attention of the White House and even the international community.

- Governor Patterson was forced to provide protection for the Riders until they arrived in Mississippi.

- SNCC invited MLK, but he refused (for a second time).
  - He lost credibility and respect in the eyes of the organization because they believed he was afraid.

- Due to fear of escalation of violence, the Kennedy Administration negotiated with the Senator James of Mississippi:
  - Riders would receive protection, if they can be arrested for disrupting peace.
  - They were sent to Parchman Prison, an infamously harsh prison.

- About 300 Riders surrounded the prison to put pressure on the administration and show their support for the movement and the Riders.
Achievement of Freedom Rides

- Due to pressures from the public, the Riders, and the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission banned segregation on interstate travel.
- Many facilities gradually desegregated, despite garnering relatively little public attention.
- JFK’s administration threatened legal action against those who disobeyed the decision.
  - This time the decision would not be neglected like the ones from *Morgan v Virginia* and *Boynton v Virginia*.
- According to CORE, by the end of 1962, interstate travel segregation had ended.
Shortfall of Freedom Rides

- Did not meet James Farmer’s predominant objective: to gain support for civil rights issues from the federal government
- Caused a split in the Civil Rights Movement
  - Decentralized grassroots activism by the SNCC versus the centralized and organized NAACP and the SCLC
  - Many from the former saw the latter as too slow and careful for actual progress
Significance of Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Freedom Riders

- Paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Freedom Summer
- Showed the Jim Crow laws could be abolished through the actions of dedicated communities
- Even though violence from white supremacists occurred in both events, African-Americans did not retaliate
  - Made it easier for some to sympathize with them
  - Made the Civil Rights Movement more credible and respected for some
  - Showed that they will not let violence and brutality stop them
  - Helped civil rights issues rise to the spotlight
Bibliography


