

LESSON

Bus Boycott: Historical Documents Highlight Integration Milestone

This collection of primary resources and corresponding activities sheds light on the endurance of peaceful protesters in Montgomery, Ala., who overturned an unjust law.

Grade Level 3-5, 6-8, 9-12

Topic: Race & Ethnicity, Rights & Activism

Subject: Reading & Language Arts, Social Studies, History

Social Justice Domain: Justice

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks sparked a revolution by sitting still. Her simple act of defiance against racial segregation on city buses inspired the African American community of Montgomery, Ala., to unite against the segregationists who ran City Hall.

Over the course of a year, the Montgomery Bus Boycott would test the endurance of the peaceful protesters, overturn an unjust law and create a legacy that continues to inspire those who work for freedom and justice today.

The following activities can be used to supplement lessons about the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

ACTIVITY 1: Herbert Block Cartoon

News headlines throughout the world heralded the happenings in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus. And, political cartoonists took pen to paper to share their views on a southern town's revolution against racial prejudice. One such political cartoonist was Herbert Block.

Block was only nineteen when he "joined the major leagues of newspaper cartoonists" in 1928. His father suggested his pen name by combining his name; thus, Herblock was born. Herblock's career spanned the Great Depression to the new millennium. Herb Block's "instincts are common-sensical," according to the late Katherine Graham, former Chair of the Washington Post Company.

Look at this cartoon, where a white man is angry as a black man, walking away, refuses to ride the city bus. The image is halfway down the page and titled "Tote dat barge! Lif' dat boycott! Ride dat bus!"

Brainstorm a list of what you see in the cartoon. In your list, how many items are symbols? What does each symbol represent?

- What adjectives would you use to describe the emotion found in the cartoon?
- How do the actions of the white man differ from that of the black man?
- What is the cartoonist's message?
- Is there a bias in the cartoon? (Bias takes many forms, such as political, racial, ethnic or religious intolerance.)
- Who would agree/disagree with the message?

ACTIVITY 2: Montgomery City Code Document

The Montgomery City Code outlines the law as it stood in 1955 and was cited by prosecutors as the reason Rosa Parks broke the law. Read the code and answer the following questions:

- Why was separation of the races required (Section 10)?
- Was it hypocritical that the city code allowed "Negro nurses" to sit in the "white section" of the bus if they were attending white people who needed their care (Section 10)?
- How was it that Rosa Parks was arrested on charges of non-compliance of obeying the orders of a bus driver (Section 11)?
- If city codes such as this one existed today, how would you go about changing them?
- On public transportation where you live, does separation of people occur without there being a written law? Do invisible lines and social boundaries exist? If so, what are they and why do they exist?
- Re-write the city code to comply with the 1956 Supreme Court ruling on bus segregation. How would Sections 10 and 11 be written to conform to the law?

ACTIVITY 3: "Bus Boycott Conference Fails to Find Solution" Article

Dr. King met with bus line officials for four hours in an attempt to find common ground. Yet, as reported in this December, 1955 article bus line officials remained firm in their stance to follow the city code.

- Why would Dr. King's proposal of "first come, first served" on bus seating seem so radical in 1955 Alabama?
- Dr. King commented that the group was not trying to change the segregation laws. Why would he take this position?
- Why would the bus company not hire black drivers?

Jack Crenshaw, legal counsel for the bus line, commented, "We do not contemplate and have no intentions of hiring Negro drivers. The time is not right in Montgomery, but who can say what will happen in 10 years."

- Why did he believe the time was not right in Montgomery?
- Why did a member of the bus boycott delegation take issue with him by replying, "We don't mean 10 years, we mean this year"?

ACTIVITY 4: "Negroes' Boycott Cripples Bus Line" Article

This January, 1956, *New York Times* special report details the impact of the successful bus boycott on the city's economy. (*The New York Times*. Reprinted with permission.)

- Why would an organized bus boycott put economic strain on the city?
- What was the bus line's reaction to the boycott's second month of success?
- Three other African-Americans complied with the bus driver's demand that they move to give their seats to whites. How might you have felt had you given up your seat while Mrs. Parks held firm in her conviction to keep her seat?
- Mrs. Parks was originally arrested for violating a city segregation ordinance but the charge was later changed to read "a violation of a state law, which gives bus drivers the power to assign and reassign seating." Why would prosecutors wish to change the charge?

ACTIVITY 5: "Negroes' Most Urgent Needs" Historical Document

Negroes' Most Urgent Needs was submitted to the Montgomery City Council in 1955 prior to the Montgomery bus boycott.

Transportation, housing, public parks and fair hiring practices are a few areas in which representatives demanded answers. Review the list of the "most urgent

needs."

- What similarities and differences are there between "Negroes' Most Urgent Needs" and "Bus Boycott Conference Fails to Find Solution"?
- Have we, as a nation, attained what African-Americans demanded in 1955 Alabama? Why or why not?
- What would your list of "most urgent needs" be to improve your school or community?
- How would you organize a non-violent protest today? What strategies and resources would you use that were not available in 1955?

ACTIVITY 6: "Negro Minister Convicted of Directing Bus Boycott" Article

This March, 1956, *New York Times* article details one legal battle leading to the desegregation of Montgomery's bus lines. (*The New York Times*. Reprinted with permission.)

- Dr. King was found guilty under a 1921 statute forbidding the "hindering of a lawful business without 'just cause or legal excuse.'" Why would prosecutors wish to convict Dr. King? Why would Dr. King and his attorneys appeal the case?
- Judge Eugene Carter, who ruled on the case, was a member of the Dexter Avenue Methodist Church and a member of the church's board, which decreed "Negroes who came there should be asked to worship in their colored churches." Do you feel a man who believed that blacks should worship separately from whites would be just in his courtroom decisions or interpretation of the law?

ACTIVITY 7: "What Did the Supreme Court Actually Mean?" Article

An April 26, 1956, editorial takes to task those who, according to the writer, prematurely interpreted the U.S. Supreme Court decision as ending segregation on public transportation.

- What is the position of the editor? Why did he take such a stand?
- Is the issue at hand one of bus desegregation or the abolishment of "separate but equal"?

ACTIVITY 8: "Integrated Bus Suggestions" Document

Released after the US Supreme Court ruling, Integrated Bus Suggestions was written to the African-American community from the Montgomery Improvement Association of which Dr. King was president.

- Why was the message not to "boast" or "brag" about the victory of achieving integrated buses?
- What role did the churches play in supporting and continuing the bus boycott? Why was the churches' role critical to the success of the bus boycott?
- Why did the suggestions carry with them a religious tenor and tone as well as ending in "God Bless You All"?
- Why do you believe that the Montgomery Improvement Association added the suggestion: "If you feel you cannot take it, walk for another week or two. We have confidence in our people"?
- Find specific examples in the memo reflecting the non-violent approach to integrating public transportation. Why was the continuation of a non-violent behavior crucial to successfully integrating buses?
- Groups reacted differently to the US Supreme Court decision ending bus desegregation. How did the African-American community feel? How did white Americans react?

ACTIVITY 9: "Bus Integration in Alabama Calm" Article

Dr. King's approach of non-violence was effective in integrating Montgomery's public transportation as reported in this December 26, 1956, *New York Times* article. (*The New York Times*. Reprinted with permission.)

- Why was it an historical moment for African-Americans to enter through the front door of the bus?
- The White Citizens Council in Montgomery had claimed that if bus desegregation occurred that it would "bring riots and bloodshed," which did not happen. Write a memo to the White Citizens Council outlining why "riots and bloodshed" did not happen. What role did non-violence play in the successful integration of bus lines?
- Dr. King was accompanied by a white minister, Rev. Glenn Smiley, when sitting on newly integrated buses. What was the significance of two ministers sitting together? What message did it send to those who saw them sit next to each other?
- How did Dr. King's emphasis on "Christian love" support the non-violence of African-Americans who endured "sneering remarks" by some white passengers?
- A white passenger commented, "I can see this isn't going to be a white Christmas." What did he infer? How did the African-American handle the

unkind comment?

x



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