

# **Jo Ann Gibson Robinson:**

The Lady Who Began the Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to 1956 is one of the pivotal events in the early stages of the modern-day Civil Rights Movement. It was the first successful large-scale demonstration against segregation in the deep South. This success invigorated the African-American community and showed their will, determination, and their financial importance. The boycott also launched Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association and leader of the boycott, onto the national stage as the unofficial leader and spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement. Although the fame and importance of the boycott is widely known among grade school students and adults alike, popular history has largely forgotten the essential role of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. In his forward to her memoir, Professor David Garrow writes of how she played a “crucial but little-heralded role in bringing about the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”<sup>1</sup> Robinson not only organized and initiated the boycott, but she also worked alongside Dr. King and other leaders in numerous capacities to help ensure the success of the boycott.

Born on April 17, 1912, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson was the twelfth and last child of Owen and Dollie Webb Gibson of Culloden, Georgia—a small town approximately thirty miles west of Macon, Georgia. Her early childhood was spent on her parents 98-acre farm just south of Culloden. She fondly remembered her early childhood years in Culloden, and always referred to it as her home.<sup>2</sup> At the age of six, tragedy struck the family when her father died. A few years later, her mother sold the farm and moved with her younger children to Macon. After graduating valedictorian from her high school, Robinson went to Fort Valley State College, becoming the first in her family to attend college, to pursue a career in education. This path eventually led her to Montgomery, Alabama in the summer of 1949 where she joined the English department at Alabama State College.

After completing her first semester as an English professor, Robinson had a traumatic experience aboard a city bus that proved to be focal in guiding her political activism. On the morning of the Saturday before Christmas, Robinson boarded a bus with only two other passengers in order to travel to a friend’s house so they could ride to the airport together. Excited about the chance to spend the Christmas break with family in Cleveland, Ohio, she sat down in the fifth row of the bus. She soon realized the bus had not begun to move and the driver was yelling out her to move. Startled and confused, she did not move. The driver quickly got up from his seat to confront her. In her memoir, Robinson recalls how the driver yelled and stood over her with his hands “drawn back as if he were going to strike me.”<sup>3</sup> She quickly ran to the door and stumbled off the bus. This experience left her terrified, humiliated, and with tears in her eyes. It also caused her to make the integration of the city buses a top personal priority.<sup>4</sup>

In 1950, Robinson, became the president of the Women’s Political Council of Montgomery (WPC), an African-American professional women’s civic group founded in 1946. Serving in this new role, Robinson continued onward with the group’s purpose of “inspiring

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Personal Letter from Robinson to Dr. David J. Garrow, page 2. December 26, 1984. This is an unpublished letter so I included it along with this document.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their thinking...to register and vote, and in general to improve their status as a group.”<sup>5</sup> She continually met with local government officials to discuss issues brought forth by the African-American community. Throughout her tenure as president, she continually reflected on her own horrifying experience with the city bus system and worked with other members of the WPC to prepare for a bus boycott “when the time [is] ripe and the people [are] ready.”<sup>6</sup> To Robinson, the time seemed to be inching closer in 1953 as the WPC received hundreds of complaints from Montgomery’s African-American men and women about their treatment aboard the city’s segregated buses.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by and four days after the US Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Robinson sent a letter, on behalf of the WPC, to the mayor of Montgomery in regards to the city’s bus policy. In this letter, she made three significant requests for change:

- The policy of only allowing African-American riders to sit in the back be changed to allow them to start seating in the back and to continue to move forward as needed.
- To allow African-Americans to enter the bus through the front door instead of paying and then entering through the rear door.
- For buses to stop at every corner in African-American residential neighborhoods.

In this letter, Robinson also emphasized that the African-American community consisted of nearly three-fourths of those who patronized the buses. This economic power could have a devastatingly negative impact on the entire system if a boycott ensued.<sup>8</sup> Although this letter ultimately fell upon deaf ears, it is still significant in that it was the first formal request for a change to the city’s bus policy, as well as a clear indication that the community was moving closer to being ready for a potential boycott. Feeling this increase in frustration and motivation for change, Robinson and the women of the WPC began increasing their planning for a city-wide bus boycott.<sup>9</sup>

Rosa Parks’ arrest on December 1, 1955 proved to be the event that sparked the protest. Upon hearing of her arrest, local African-American labor leader, E.D. Nixon, called other local leaders to organize a meeting on December 2 to determine if there was support for a potential one-day boycott to take place on December 5, the day of Parks’ trial. One of those leaders, civil rights attorney Fred Gray, in turned called Robinson to inform her of the developments.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> Keisha N. Blain, “This unheralded woman actually organized the Montgomery bus boycott: Jo Ann Robinson is unfortunately overlooked by history,” Timeline, <https://timeline.com/this-unheralded-woman-actually-organized-the-montgomery-bus-boycott-db57a7aa50db> (accessed February 27, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Historical Thinking Matters, “Letter From Robinson to the Mayor,” <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosaparks/0/inquiry/> (assessed February 27, 2020). This is an excerpt of the letter. For the full letter, you can see page iix of Robinson’s memoir.

<sup>9</sup> National Museum of African American History and Culture: The Smithsonian, “Jo Ann Robinson: A Heroine of the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/jo-ann-robinson-heroine-montgomery-bus-boycott> (accessed February 27, 2020).

Historian J. Mills Thornton, III writes that Robinson seized the opportunity and “essentially took matters out of Nixon’s hands.”<sup>10</sup>

Robinson went onto campus the night of December 1, and with the help of two of her students, mimeographed 52,500 leaflets calling for the one-day boycott. The leaflet reads in part:

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...This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate...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...<sup>11</sup>

After finishing the copies at approximately 4 A.M. Friday morning, December 2, the three began mapping out the best distribution routes. Once she finished with her morning classes, Robinson and other members of the WPC distributed the leaflets throughout the community in the early afternoon of December 2. Due to Robinson’s initiative and organized distribution of the leaflets throughout the African-American community, Thornton writes that “by the time the seventy-five or so leaders convened [to discuss the possibility of a one-day boycott], they found themselves faced with a fait accompli; the boycott had already been called by Mrs. Robinson’s leaflets.”<sup>12</sup> History will never know if those leaders would have endorsed the boycott if Robinson had not copied and distributed the leaflets. However, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of her actions due to the fact that the man who presided over the meeting, L. Roy Bennett, president of the black Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, staunchly opposed the idea and initially tried to deny any discussion on the topic.<sup>13</sup>

Members of the December 2 meeting also organized a meeting for the evening of December 5 to determine the next course of action based on the events of the day. The one-day boycott on December 5 proved to be a tremendous success with over ninety percent of the African-American community staying off of the city buses.<sup>14</sup> Capitalizing on this incredible momentum, along with the anger from Parks’ conviction, African-American leaders decided to continue to bus boycott. They created the Montgomery Improvement Association to organize and lead this movement, and they selected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be its president.

Robinson role did not end here. She became a member of the Executive Board of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Per Dr. King’s request, she edited the monthly *MIA Newsletter* to keep the community abreast of all key developments, she served on the negotiating committees with the mayor of Montgomery and the Governor of Alabama, and she also served as a faithful carpool driver throughout the boycott. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The*

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<sup>10</sup> J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Thornton III, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Stanford University: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Montgomery Bus Boycott,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/montgomery-bus-boycott> (accessed February 27, 2020).

*Montgomery Story*, Dr. King praised Robinson's relentless dedication to the boycott by writing, "apparently indefatigable, she, perhaps more than any other person, was active on every level of the protest."<sup>15</sup>

While popular history often associates the Montgomery Bus Boycott with Dr. King and Rosa Parks, unsung heroes like Jo Ann Gibson Robinson must not be forgotten. Before Dr. King arrived in Montgomery as the new pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and long before Ms. Parks decided to remain seated on the bus, Robinson was the one who made the integration of the city buses a priority for the Women's Political Council. She, on behalf of the WPC, penned the letter to the mayor in which she formally requested policy changes. Most importantly, Robinson took the initiative to create, copy, and lead the distribution of the leaflets to the African-American community that began the boycott. Although Robinson, throughout her life, remained humble and "generally hesitant to claim for herself the historical credit that she deserves for launching the Montgomery Bus Boycott," history must remember her efforts.<sup>16</sup> It is largely through these efforts that the first successful example of a mass nonviolent demonstration began, and also set in motion events that helped launch Dr. King's career onto the national stage.

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, xv.

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