Primary Sources - Rosa Parks & the Montgomery Bus Boycotts

Source A: JoAnn Robinson, memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 1987 | Here, Jo Ann Robinson explains how she and others produced and distributed the leaflet calling for a boycott in time for thousands of African Americans to stay off the buses on Monday morning, December 5, 1955.

“I sat down and quickly drafted a message and then called a good friend and colleague…who had access to the college’s mimeograph equipment. When I told him that the WPC (women’s political council) was staging a boycott and needed to run off the notices, he told me that he too had suffered embarrassment on the city buses….Along with two of my most trusted senior students, we quickly agreed to meet almost immediately, in the middle of the night, at the college’s duplicating room. We were able to get three messages to a page…in order to produce the tens of thousands of leaflets we knew would be needed. By 4 a.m. Friday, the sheets had been duplicated, cut in thirds, and bundled….

Between 4 and 7 a.m., the two students and I mapped out distribution routes for the notices. Some of the WPC officers previously had discussed how and where to deliver thousands of leaflets announcing a boycott, and those plans now stood me in good stead…..

After class my two students and I quickly finalized our plans for distributing the thousands of leaflets so that one would reach every black home in Montgomery. I took out the WPC membership roster and called [them]….I alerted all of them to the forthcoming distribution of the leaflets, and enlisted their aid in speeding and organizing the distribution network….

Throughout the late morning and early afternoon hours we dropped off tens of thousands of leaflets. Some of our bundles were dropped off at schools. . . . Leaflets were also dropped off at business places, storefronts, beauty parlors, beer halls, factories, barbershops, and every other available place. Workers would pass along notices both to other employees as well as to customers….

By 2 o’clock thousands of the mimeographed handbills had changed hands many times. Practically every black man, woman, and child in Montgomery knew the plan and was passing the word along.”

Source B: Excerpt from Bayard Rustin’s Montgomery Diary, February 24, 1956 | Bayard Rustin, an African American civil rights activist, traveled to Montgomery to advise Dr. King and support the bus boycott. He kept a diary of his experiences throughout the civil rights movement.

February 24

42,000 Negroes have not ridden the busses since December 5.

On December 6, the police began to harass, intimidate, and arrest Negro taxi drivers who were helping get these people to work. It thus became necessary for the Negro leaders to find an alternative—the car pool.

This morning Rufus Lewis, director of the pool…explained that there are three methods in addition to the car pool, for moving the Negro population:

1. Hitch-hiking.
2. The transportation of servants by white housewives.
3. Walking.

Later he introduced me to two men, one of whom has walked 7 miles and the other 14 miles, every day since December 5.

“The success of the car pool is at the heart of the movement,” Lewis said at the meeting. “It must not be stopped.”
Montgomery, Ala., January 7th - The boycott of Montgomery bus lines by Negro riders entered its second month this week with no conciliation in sight.

As a result of the company’s loss of revenue in the boycott, the City Commission Wednesday raised fares 50 per cent: adult fares from 10 to 15 cents, school fares from 5 to 8 cents. The commission also authorized a 5 cent charge for transfers, which have heretofore been free.

Asking for the increase, the bus company cited losses averaging 22 cents a mile since the boycott began Dec. 5th. The losses would run even higher, company spokesman said, except for a curtailment in service that has reduced mileage by 31 per cent. Shortly after the boycott began, virtually all service to the Negro communities was abolished. Two routes, serving predominantly Negro areas, were abandoned entirely and other routes revised so as to exclude Negro neighborhoods among them.

**Negro Woman Convicted**

The boycott began with the arrest and conviction of Mrs. Rosa Parks, a Negro seamstress employed by a downtown department store. Mrs. Parks had refused to give up her seat when told to do so by the bus driver.

At the time the incident occurred, there were twenty six Negroes and ten white persons seated in the thirty-six-passenger bus. Law requires the bus driver to segregate the passengers by leaves it within his discretion where the line is to be drawn. Thus, on many routes serving Negro areas it is not uncommon to see Negroes occupying all but a few seats.

When the driver asked Mrs. Parks and three other Negroes to give up their seats, a number of white persons were about to board. There were already some white person's standing as well as a number of Negroes. The driver explained later in court that he was “equalizing” seating facilities. Mrs. Parks refused to yield her seat and was arrested for violation of a city segregation ordinance. Later the charge was changed to read a violation of a state law, which gives bus drivers the power to assign and reassign seating. The law makes it a misdemeanor for anyone to disobey the driver’s orders.

Mrs. Parks was found guilty in City Recorder’s Court and fined $10. Her attorneys filed notice of appeal. At a mass meeting in a local Negro church the night following the court hearing, Negro citizens were urged not to ride the buses. The following morning Negro patronage was down by an estimated 90 per cent. Today it is close to 100 per cent off.

**Conditions Laid Down**

Negro citizens, led by virtually all the city’s Negro ministers, have demanded that three conditions be met before they resume riding the buses. These are:

1. Adoption of a “first come first served” rule as is in effect in other Alabama cities such as Mobile and Huntsville. Under this plan Negroes would continue to load from the rear and whites from the front, but the seating once established, would remain fixed.
2. Greater courtesy on the part of the drivers. Negro bus riders have complained of rude, insulting treatment.
3. Employment of Negro drivers on routes serving predominantly Negro areas.

A bi-racial committee, appointed by the City Commission, has so far failed to resolve an of the differences. The company contends that it cannot adopt a “first come first served” policy and comply with the segregation laws. Negotiations have broken off, for the time at least.