At the Dark End of the Street

Danielle L. McGuire
“Sex is the principle around which the whole structure of segregation...is organized.”

--Gunnar Myrdal, 1944
Table of Contents

Prologue: At the dark end of the street

Chapter 1: They'd kill me if I told

Chapter 2: Negroes every day are being molested

Chapter 3: Walking in Pride and Dignity

Chapter 4: There's Open Season on Negroes Now

Chapter 5: It was Like All of us Had Been Raped

Chapter 6: A Black Woman's Body was Never Hers Alone

Chapter 7: Sex and Civil Rights

Chapter 8: Power to the Ice Pick

Epilogue: We All Lived in Fear for Years
Prologue
At the Dark End of the Street

On September 3, 1944, the Rock Hill Holiness Church, in Abbeville, Alabama, rocked late into the night. It was nearly midnight when the doors of the wooden, one-story church swung open releasing streams of worshippers, all African American, into the moonlight. After a night of singing and praying, Recy Taylor, Fannie Daniel and Daniel’s eighteen-year-old son, West, stepped out of the country chapel and strolled toward home alongside the peanut plantations that bounded the Abbeville-Headland highway. Taylor, a slender, copper-colored and beautiful twenty-four-year-old mother and sharecropper, noticed a rattletrap green Chevrolet pass them at least three times, young white men gawking from its windows.

“You reckon what they are up to?” Taylor asked.

Taylor and Daniel, a stout sixty-one year old woman, watched the car creep by one last time and roll to a stop a few feet ahead of them. Seven men, armed with knives and guns, got out of the car and walked toward the women.

Herbert Lovett, the oldest of the crew at twenty-four and a private in the United States Army, shouted, “Halt!”
When they ignored the order, Lovett leveled his shotgun. West tugged at his mother’s sleeve, begging her to stop. “They might shoot you,” he whispered.

As the circle of men closed in, Lovett waved his gun at Taylor.

“We’re looking for this girl, right there. She’s the one that cut that white boy in Clopton this evening,” Lovett said, adding that local Sheriff George H. Gamble had dispatched the group to find the alleged assailant.

“You’re wrong,” Fannie insisted, “she’s been to my house all day.”

The men crowded closer, nodding their heads in agreement. “Ain’t this her?” Lovett asked.

“Yep, this the one,” Joe Culpepper said, “I know her by the clothes she got on.”

“That’s her,” Luther Lee agreed. “Get her!”

Lovett lurched toward Taylor and grabbed her arm. Then he turned to West and asked if Taylor was his wife.

“No,” West replied, “she’s Willie Guy Taylor’s wife.” Undeterred, Lovett extended his hand to the teenager, ordered him to shake it, and promised not to hurt Taylor.

“We’re going to take her up here and see if Mr. Gamble knows her,” Lovett claimed. “If she’s not the one, we’ll bring her right back.”
As Lovett spoke, Taylor managed to wrest her arm from his grasp and bolted toward a stand of trees behind a cabin.  

"Come back! Come back!" Fannie yelled. "They going to shoot you. Come back!"

"Stop," Lovett shouted. He cocked the gun at the back of her head. "I’ll kill you if you run."

Lovett walked Taylor to the car and shoved her into the back seat. Three men piled in behind her, while four others squeezed into the front. The headlights switched off and the car crept away. After a few miles, the green sedan turned off the main highway, rattled down a red-clay tractor path into the woods and stopped in a grove of pecan trees. "Y’all aren’t carrying me to Mr. Gamble," Taylor shouted. The men in the back seat clasped her wrists and ordered her to be quiet. Lovett grabbed his gun and waved Taylor and his companions out of the car.

"Get them rags off," he barked, pointing the shotgun at her, "or I’ll kill you and leave you down here in the woods."

Sobbing, Taylor pulled off her clothes.

"Please," she cried, "let me go home to my husband and my baby."

Lovett spread an old hunting coat on the ground, told his friends to strip down to their socks and undershirts,
and ordered Taylor to lie down. Lovett passed his rifle to a friend and took off his pants. Hovering over the young mother, he snarled, “Act just like you do with your husband or I’ll cut your damn throat.”

Lovett was the first of six men to rape Taylor that night. When they finished, someone helped her get dressed, tied a handkerchief over her eyes, and shoved her back into the car. Back on the highway, the men stopped and ordered Taylor out of the car. “Don’t move until we get away from here,” one of them yelled. Taylor heard the car disappear into the night. She pulled off the blindfold, got her bearings, and began the long walk home.³

A few days later, a telephone rang at the NAACP branch office in Montgomery, Alabama. E. D. Nixon, the local president, promised to send his best investigator to Abbeville. That investigator would launch a movement that would ultimately change the world.

Her name was Rosa Parks.⁴

In later years, historians would paint Parks as a sweet and reticent old woman, whose tired feet caused her
to defy Jim Crow on Montgomery’s city buses. Her solitary and spontaneous act, the story goes, sparked the 1955 bus boycott and gave birth to the civil rights movement. But Rosa Parks was a militant race woman, a sharp detective, and an anti-rape activist long before she became the patron saint of the bus boycott. After meeting with Recy Taylor, Rosa Parks helped form the Committee for Equal Justice. With support from local people, she helped organize what the Chicago Defender called the “strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade.” Eleven years later, this group of homegrown leaders would become better known as the Montgomery Improvement Association. The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, often heralded as the opening scene of the civil rights movement, was in many ways, the last act of a decades-long struggle to protect black women, like Taylor, from sexualized violence and rape.

The kidnapping and rape of Recy Taylor was not unusual in the segregated South. The sexual exploitation of black women by white men had its roots in slavery. In 1691, Virginia legislators made interracial sex illegal and criminalized those who transgressed the racial boundary. Designed to prevent the “abominable mixture” of “Negroes,
Mulattoes, and Indians” with English or other European women, these laws awarded white men exclusive sexual access to white women, which preserved racial integrity in property and inheritance rights. Masters’ exploitation of bondswomen’s bodies strengthened their political, social and economic power, partly because colonial laws made the offspring of slave women the property of their masters. By restricting and punishing interracial marriage, but not fornication or childbirth out of wedlock, colonial laws gave slave owners a financial incentive to sexually exploit their female slaves. By placing limits on and policing white women and black men’s sexual and marital choices, while retaining power over black women’s bodies, white men maintained their position atop the racial and sexual hierarchy. After slavery fell, the laws governing interracial sex—and the practices that accompanied them—remained.

When African Americans tested their freedom during Reconstruction, former slaveholders and their sympathizers used rape as a “weapon of terror” to dominate the bodies and minds of African American men and women. Interracial rape was not only used to uphold white patriarchal power, but was also deployed as a justification for lynching black men who challenged the Southern status quo. In addition to
the immediate physical danger African Americans faced, sexual and racial violence functioned as a tool of coercion, control and harassment.\textsuperscript{8} Ida B. Wells, the gun-toting editor of the Memphis \textit{Free Press} who led a crusade against lynching in the 1890s, argued that white men accused black men of rape as part of a larger “system of intimidation” designed to keep blacks “subservient and submissive.” Worse, Wells argued at the turn of the century, white men used the protection of white womanhood to “justify their own barbarism.”\textsuperscript{9}

The ritualistic rape of black women by white men continued, often unpunished, throughout the Jim Crow era. As Reconstruction collapsed and Jim Crow arose, white men abducted and assaulted black women with alarming regularity. White men lured black women and girls away from home with promises of steady work and better wages; attacked them on the job; abducted them at gun-point while traveling to or from home, work or church; raped them as a form of retribution or to enforce rules of racial and economic hierarchy; sexually humiliated and assaulted them on streetcars and buses, in taxi cabs and trains, and other public spaces. As the acclaimed freedom fighter, Fannie Lou Hamer put it, “a black woman’s body was never hers alone.”\textsuperscript{10}
Black women did not keep their stories secret. African American women reclaimed their bodies and their humanity by testifying about their assaults. They launched the first public attacks on sexual violence as a “systemic abuse of women” in response to slavery and the wave of lynchings in the post-emancipation South. Slave narratives offer stark testimony about the brutal sexual exploitation bondswomen faced. For example, Harriet Jacobs detailed her master’s lechery in her autobiography to “arouse the women of the North” and “convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is.” When African American clubwomen began to organize anti-lynching campaigns during the late nineteenth century, they testified about decades of sexual abuse. On October 5, 1892, hundreds of black women converged on Lyric Hall in New York City to hear Ida B. Well’s thunderous voice. While black men were being accused of ravishing white women, she argued, “the rape of helpless Negro girls, which began in slavery days, still continues without reproof from church, state or press.” At the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, Fannie Barrier Williams told an audience of black and white clubwomen about the “shameful fact that I am constantly in receipt of letters from the still unprotected women of the South....” Anna Julia Cooper, a Washington D.C. educator,
author and respected clubwoman, echoed Williams’s testimony. Black women, she told the crowd, were engaged in a “painful, patient, and silent toil...to gain title to the bodies of their daughters.”

Throughout the twentieth century, black women persisted in telling their stories, frequently cited in local and national NAACP reports. Their testimonies spilled out in letters to the Justice Department and appeared on the front pages of the nation’s leading black newspapers. Black women regularly denounced their sexual misuse. By deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy, whether in the church, the courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King Jr., called the “thingification” of their humanity. Decades before radical feminists in the Women’s Movement urged rape survivors to “speak out,” African American women’s public protests galvanized local, national and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity. When Recy Taylor spoke out against her assailants and Rosa Parks and her allies in Montgomery mobilized in defense of her womanhood in 1944, they joined this tradition of testimony and protest.
Montgomery, Alabama was not the only place in which attacks on black women fueled protests against white supremacy. Between 1940 and 1975, sexual violence and interracial rape became one crucial battleground upon which African Americans sought to destroy white supremacy and gain personal and political autonomy. Civil rights campaigns in Little Rock, Arkansas; Macon, Georgia, Tallahassee, Florida; Washington, North Carolina; Birmingham and Selma Alabama; Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and many other places—had roots in organized resistance to sexual violence and appeals for protection of black womanhood.

And yet, analyses of rape and sexualized violence play little or no role in most histories of the civil rights movement, which present it as a struggle between black and white men—the heroic leadership of Martin Luther King confronting intransigent white supremacists like “Bull” Connor. The real story—that the civil rights movement is also rooted in African American women’s long struggle against sexual violence—has never before been written. The stories of black women who fought for bodily integrity and personal dignity hold profound truths about the sexualized violence that marked racial politics and African American lives during the modern civil rights movement. If we
understand the role rape and sexual violence played in
African Americans’ daily lives and within the larger
freedom struggle, we have to reinterpret, if not rewrite,
the history of the civil rights movement. *At the Dark End
of the Street* does both.

It is no surprise that buses became the target of
African American resistance in Montgomery during the 1955-
56 boycott. It was much easier, not to mention safer, for
black women to stop riding the buses than it was to bring
their assailants—usually white policemen or bus drivers—to
justice. By walking hundreds of miles to protest
humiliation and testifying publicly about physical and
sexual abuse, black women reclaimed their bodies and
demanded to be treated with dignity and respect. Coupling
new historical evidence with a fresh perspective, chapters
two and three reveal the history of the Montgomery campaign
as a women’s movement for dignity.

Issues of sexual violence were crucial to both the
civil rights movement and to the white supremacist
resistance. Segregationists responded to the nascent
African American freedom movement with a sexually charged
storm of resistance that had been gathering since the 1954
*Brown v. Board of Education* decision. As African Americans
returned to the buses and some schools began to desegregate, the Massive Resistance movement thundered through the South. Drawing on whites' deepest and darkest fears about integration and interracial sex, segregationists used economic intimidation, sexual violence and terror to derail the freedom movement. Between 1956 and 1960, black Southerners faced the forces of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council, and other extremist groups, sparking some of the fiercest struggles for manhood and womanhood of the modern civil rights movement. These battles, highlighted in chapter four, exposed the power of sex in maintaining the South's racial hierarchy and underscored the extent to which whites would fight to preserve it.

Often ignored by civil rights historians, a number of campaigns led to trials and even convictions throughout the South. These cases, many virtually unknown, broke with Southern tradition and fractured the philosophical and political foundations of white supremacy by challenging the relationship between sexual domination and racial equality.

Nowhere was this more apparent and more important than in Tallahassee, Florida, where Betty Jean Owens, an African American college student, stood in front of an all-white jury in 1959 and testified about being kidnapped and gang
raped by four white men. The extraordinary trial, the subject of chapter five, focused national attention on the sexual exploitation of African American women. For perhaps the first time since Reconstruction, black Southerners could imagine government as a defender of their manhood and womanhood. The Tallahassee case led to rape convictions elsewhere that year in Montgomery, Alabama; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Burton South Carolina. The 1959 Tallahassee rape was a watershed case that remains as revealing now as it was important then.

Like the Tallahassee case, the 1965 trial of Norman Cannon, a white man who abducted and raped a black teenager in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, had broad implications for both the Mississippi movement and the African-American freedom struggle as a whole. The verdict was recognized nationally as a major victory. It ought to be considered one of the bookends of the modern civil rights movement. And yet, the story has never been told. Most accounts of the Mississippi movement focus on racist brutality directed at men—from Emmett Till and Medgar Evers to Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney. Chapter six challenges the dominant historical narrative of the Mississippi freedom struggle by documenting black women’s resistance to racial and sexual abuse.
The 1965 Selma, Alabama campaign, like the Montgomery movement, has an important history rooted in sexualized violence that historians have not yet explored. Federal intervention and Congressional action on behalf of African Americans in 1964 and 1965—especially the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act—constituted the most dangerous threat to white dominion and left segregationists reeling. But the segregationists fired back with traditional ammunition of sexual slander and the “black beast rapist.” Chapter seven documents how white supremacists in Selma and across the South used the rhetoric of rape and “miscegenation” to resuscitate and revive massive resistance, underscoring the importance of sex and sexual violence to the maintenance of white supremacy. Civil rights activists were not only “outside agitators” or Communists intent on destroying the southern way of life, now they were sexual fiends. It was within this storm—and because of it—that the Ku Klux Klan murdered Viola Liuzzo, a white housewife from Detroit who embraced the black freedom struggle. Her detractors, of course, accused her of embracing black men.

An analysis of sex and sexualized violence in well-known civil rights narratives changes the historical markers and meanings of the movement. While the Voting
Rights Act is often referenced as the culminating achievement of the modern civil rights movement, the last legal barrier to black women’s bodily integrity and respectability fell in 1967, when the Supreme Court banned laws prohibiting interracial marriage in the landmark *Loving v. Virginia* decision. Only by placing the *Loving* decision within the long struggle for black women’s bodily integrity and freedom from racial and sexual terror, can it be properly recognized as a major marker in the African American freedom movement.

The struggle did not stop with that landmark victory. The right of African-American women to defend themselves from white men’s sexual advances was tested in the 1975 trial of Joan Little, a twenty-year old black female inmate from Washington, North Carolina, who killed her white jailer after he allegedly sexually assaulted her. The broad coalition of supporters who rallied to Little’s defense—from the National Organization of Women to the Black Panther Party—reflected the enormous social, political and economic changes wrought by the civil rights movement, the women’s movement and the emergence of the New Left and Black Power. But it also showed continuity with the past—the Free Joan Little movement mirrored the eclectic coalition that formed to demand justice for Recy
Taylor in 1944. They were both led primarily by African-American women and helped serve as catalysts for larger struggles. The stunning verdict announced by a jury made up of whites and blacks, signaled the death knell of the ritualistic rape of black women that had been a feature of Southern race politics since slavery.

Like the kidnapping and rape of Recy Taylor in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944; Betty Jean Owens in 1959; Rosa Lee Coats in 1965 and hundreds of other African American women throughout the segregated South, these brutal attacks almost always began at the dark end of the street. But African Americans would never let them stay there.
Chapter One
They’d kill me if I told

The road to Abbeville, a rural county seat ninety miles southeast of Montgomery, was familiar territory for Rosa Parks. Her father, James McCauley, a handsome, barrel-chested builder and expert stonemason, was one of eleven children reared by Anderson and Louisa McCauley in the hardscrabble town. The sprawling McCauley clan squeezed into a tiny, wood-frame home with dirt floors. Similar cabins provided shelter for the bulk of Abbeville’s two thousand souls—mostly sharecroppers and tenant farmers who scraped a living out of the peanut and cotton fields that quilted the countryside.¹⁶

While Rosa’s grandmother, Louisa McCauley, maintained the homestead and tended to her growing family, her husband and oldest sons built big, beautiful homes throughout Alabama’s Black Belt, a band of inky, fertile soil stretching across the middle of the state.¹⁷ The region was known for its bumper cotton crops and punishing plantations. As skilled laborers and contract workers, the McCauley men maintained a sense of independence that few African Americans could claim. Despite the promises of a progressive New South, the legacy of slavery in the Black
Belt was palpable. Tenant farming and debt peonage dominated the economy and the ghosts of the “peculiar institution” haunted the rolling landscape, where the children and grandchildren of slaves and slave owners eyed each other with fear and familiarity.¹⁸

That familiarity was visible in James McCauley’s pale almond skin and dark, wavy hair. The grandson of a fair-skinned slave woman and a “Yankee soldier,” his light coloration mocked the new segregation laws that white legislators passed at the turn of the century.¹⁹ City workers nailed wooden signs proclaiming “Colored” or “Whites Only” between seats in streetcars and above doorways in theaters, restaurants, and boardinghouses. Toilets, water fountains, telephone booths, waiting rooms and ticket windows were all similarly marked. In Birmingham, Alabama, Jim Crow laws barred whites and blacks from being together in “any room, hall, theatre, picture house, auditorium, yard, court, park or other indoor or outdoor place.” Black nurses could not care for white patients and black students dare not use “white” textbooks. In Texas, circuses were segregated and ‘Caucasians’ and ‘Africans’ could not watch a boxing or wrestling match together. Some states prohibited black and white workers from laboring together in the same room, while others
barred blacks from certain trades altogether. For the most part, the McCauleys pursued their daily affairs without giving much thought to these laws.

One Sunday, in the spring of 1912, James McCauley decided to go hear his brother-in-law preach at the white-framed Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pine Level, Alabama. Across the pews, he saw a striking woman with diaphanous skin, high cheekbones, plum lips, and flowing waves of dark, shiny hair. She was twenty-four-years-old, had attended Payne University in Selma, Alabama, and taught school nearby. Her name was Leona Edwards.

Like many black Southerners, McCauley and Edwards shared a family history that involved interracial couplings ranging from tragic love to brutal rape. Leona was the daughter of Rose Percival, born a slave; and Sylvester Edwards, whose milky-white complexion and straight brown hair was the product of an illicit relationship between a white plantation owner and his slave mistress. After his mother and father died, Sylvester became an object of mistreatment in the plantation household. The white overseer beat him mercilessly, starved him, and refused to let the boy wear shoes. Years of cruelty hardened Sylvester until he felt what his granddaughter Rosa would describe as an “intense, passionate hatred for white people.”
After slavery ended, despite his disdain, Sylvester often passed for white. After shaking Sylvester’s hand and speaking to him as an equal, whites occasionally discovered he was “black” and became angry or embarrassed. In a kind of tragicomic retribution for years of mistreatment, Edwards enjoyed watching whites squirm over the unspoken absurdities of the color line. Though he used his apparent whiteness to his advantage when necessary, he remained pugnacious toward whites, and taught his three daughters to be especially wary of white men. Leona inherited both her father’s pigmentation and his pride—she became a teacher so she would never have to cook or clean for whites.22

It didn’t take long for Leona and James McCauley to fall in love. They were married “right there in Pine Level” on April 12, 1912, and moved to Tuskegee, Alabama, home of Booker T. Washington’s famed Tuskegee Institute. Their daughter Rosa was born roughly nine months after the wedding. Leona hoped her itinerant husband would land a job at Tuskegee and settle down, but the “citadel of black intellectual life” was not as appealing to James as it was to his wife.23 He saw himself as a rambling man, more interested in making good money than putting down roots. His long trips away from home left Leona depressed and tearful, alone with her new baby. When James decided he
wanted to move back to Abbeville to be closer to his family, Leona had no choice but to leave Tuskegee and abandon her dream of racial uplift.

Rosa was two years old when they moved in with her father’s extended family in Abbeville. Surrounded by playmates, she quickly became the center of attention. Over time, however, the dirt floors and crowded beds were too much for Leona, who was not particularly fond of her in-laws. James announced in 1915 or 1916 that he planned to move north, joining the millions of African Americans fleeing the South in search of better jobs and the promise of freedom. Leona decided to stay behind. She and little Rosa left Abbeville and returned to her parents’ farm in Pine Level, where Sylvester Edwards taught his granddaughter, who the world would come to know as Rosa Parks, “not to put up with bad treatment from anybody.”

When Rosa Parks returned to Abbeville almost thirty years later to investigate the rape of Recy Taylor, she was, in a sense, coming home. Though she had not seen her father in years, she remained kin to a sizeable portion of the black community there. She could count on the McCauleys for a hot meal, a warm bed, and all the local gossip. News
of the gang rape of Mrs. Taylor had reverberated through the sharecroppers’ cabins and the tattered gray shacks in the colored section of town. Taylor, her husband, and their three-year-old daughter, Joyce Lee, rented one of these cabins at the bottom of a rust-colored hill just outside of town. Here, Parks scribbled notes as she listened to Taylor testify about the vicious attack. Her time was limited. Sheriff Lewey Corbitt, known among blacks in Abbeville as a mean man with a propensity for violence, drove repeatedly past the house. Finally, he burst into the cabin and ordered Parks out of town. “I don’t want any troublemakers here in Abbeville,” he said. “If you don’t go,” he said, “I’ll lock you up.”

Parks gathered up her notes and carried Taylor’s story back to Montgomery where she and the city’s most militant black activists organized a campaign to defend Recy Taylor. Ten years later, this group of homegrown leaders would take history in their hands and become heralded as the Montgomery Improvement Association, eventually vaulting its first president, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to international prominence. But when the coalition first took root, King was still in high school in Atlanta. The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, often depicted as the opening scene
of the civil rights movement, was the last act of a decades-long struggle to protect black women, like Recy Taylor, from sexual violence and rape.

Alone on the dark highway after her assailants dumped her out of the car, Recy Taylor pulled off the blindfold and got her bearings. In the moonlight, she recognized the silhouette of Judge Charlie Nordan’s barn and knew which way to turn. Staggering along the edge of the road, she saw the deputy sheriff’s car whiz past. As she approached Three Points—the intersection of three main roads near the center of Abbeville—she saw another familiar vehicle. Will Cook, the former chief of police and a local shopkeeper, pulled his automobile to the side of the road. Taylor’s father, Benny Corbitt, called to his daughter, the oldest of seven children, and she crawled into the car. As the dark, open space of the highway receded behind small storefronts, Taylor saw her husband, Willie Guy Taylor, and her friends Fannie and West Daniel, huddling with two police officers in front of Cook’s store.28 It was nearly three in the morning.

Recy Taylor had no way of knowing that Fannie Daniel had immediately reported the abduction to Cook, who must
have felt the fear and urgency in the older woman’s voice. Her son’s description of the green Chevrolet assured Cook’s assistance. He “knew at once,” he said, who owned it. Cook fired off a series of orders to get the investigation underway, sending Fannie and West to rouse George Gamble, the Henry County Sheriff; then driving to Benny Corbitt’s house to notify him about the abduction of his daughter. Benny grabbed a pistol and slid it into his waistband, and ran outside. First he went to Price’s lumber, where white men had taken black women before, and searched desperately between the stacks of wood. When he could not find her there, he began walking through town. Finally, he headed east, toward “lover’s lane” a wooded area outside town where white teenagers were known to congregate after hours. His shirt was soaked with sweat when he finally spotted the silhouette of his daughter staggering on the roadside. Her clothes were tattered and torn and she was shaking with sobs.29

After such a brutal gang rape, Taylor must have been in extreme pain and shock. There was no telling what physical injuries she sustained, how many bruises would mar her skin the next morning. The psychological wounds were bound to last a lifetime. That she could walk a distance
after the attack indicates only a dogged determination to return home alive.

When Taylor stumbled into the arms of her husband, he was standing outside Cook’s store. Taylor’s family and friends crowded around her, listening quietly as she told them what happened. She told Sheriff Gamble that she could not name any of her assailants, but her description of the car pointed to one suspect. “There’s only one car in the county that fits that description,” he said. Telling Taylor to stay put, he quickly walked to his car.

Thirty minutes later, the Sheriff returned with Hugo Wilson, his father, and their big green sedan. Taylor identified the car and pointed to Wilson as one of the rapists. Fannie and West Daniel backed Taylor up. West identified Wilson’s car as the one “that the white boys were in when they stopped me, my Mama and Recy Taylor.” Wilson, he said, pointing to the young white man, “made Recy Taylor get in the car and drove off with her.” Sheriff Gamble took Wilson to the jailhouse and Willie Guy Taylor walked his wife home.30

Under questioning from Gamble at the Henry County jail, Wilson admitted picking Taylor up and, as he put it, “carrying her to the spot,” and gave up the names of his accomplices. Dillard York, Billy Howerton, Herbert Lovett,
Luther Lee, Joe Culpepper and Robert Gamble, he said, “all had intercourse with her.” Wilson swore that they did not use force. “We all paid her.”

Wilson’s defense was certainly plausible; it was not uncommon for white Southerners—even diehard segregationists—to visit black prostitutes under the cover of darkness. African Americans called white men who surreptitiously searched for coerced or consensual interracial intercourse, “alleybats.” Still, Gamble must have known Wilson was not telling the truth. He himself had seen Taylor distraught, disheveled and trembling. Three eyewitnesses identified Wilson as the driver of the car used in the armed abduction. Sheriff Gamble could have justified arresting Wilson without difficulty. At the very least, he might have called the other men Wilson named and brought them in for questioning. Instead, Gamble sent Wilson home with a $250 bond and instructions to have his parents sign and return it at their leisure. The Sheriff did not call the other men in, issue any warrants, or make any arrests.

If Sheriff Gamble hoped the case would quietly disappear, he was disappointed. Rosa Parks had only been a member of the Montgomery NAACP for a year when she met with
Recy Taylor in 1944, but she was already a seasoned activist. Her quiet demeanor hid a steely determination to battle white supremacy. Rosa’s grandfather taught her to stand up for herself and others and introduced her to the boisterous exhortations of the Jamaican-born black nationalist, Marcus Garvey, when she was in grade school. Garvey’s condemnation of white supremacy and his calls for a “Back to Africa” movement were common topics of conversation in the Edwards household. Garvey’s fearless race pride rallied millions into the ranks of his Universal Negro Improvement Association. From its auspicious beginning in 1916 to its stark demise nine years later, the UNIA was the biggest and brashest organization for black human rights in the world. Garvey’s call for a “new world of Black men, not peons, serfs, dogs, or slaves” resonated with Edwards, who refused to be cowed by white men, even when they wore hoods and carried guns. Perhaps her grandfather took young Rosa to Tuskegee in 1923, where Garvey enjoyed a warm reception from students and faculty, and impressed African American ministers from Birmingham.

Sylvester Edwards became his granddaughter’s political mentor at a time when Garvey’s rise coincided with a national resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist organization dedicated to “100 Percent Americanism” and the
supremacy of white Anglo-Saxon Christians. Though they hid behind masks when committing acts of terrorism, businessmen, police officers, civic leaders and state politicians North and South proudly proclaimed their loyalty to the hooded order. By 1924, the KKK counted four to six million members nationwide. Alabama boasted 115,000 men and women in 148 separate klaverns. Even Governor Bibb Graves held a membership card.35

After World War I, the Alabama Klan unleashed a wave of terror designed to return “uppity” African Americans to their proper place in the segregated social order. The war to “make the world safe for democracy” had upended the racial status quo in the South. The promise of a better life in the North encouraged thousands of domestics and sharecroppers to flee low-paying jobs and the constant threat of racial violence, launching the Great Migration. Meanwhile, many black soldiers returned to the South expecting their military service would be rewarded with better treatment. “Whites didn’t like blacks having that kind of attitude,” Rosa Parks recalled years later, “so they started doing all kinds of violent things to black people to remind them that they didn’t have any rights.” “I heard a lot about black people being found dead and nobody knew what happened,” she said. “Other people would just
pick them up and bury them.” In 1919, the Alabama Klan lynched four African Americans in Montgomery in less than twelve hours. In Ensley, klansmen flogged a black doctor who treated white patients; the Klan murdered two black men in Shelby County who decided to quit their low-paying farm jobs; and in Houston County, an angry horde of hooded vigilantes shot and killed a black man as he waited on a platform for a northbound train.

Sylvester Edwards refused to be the Klan’s next victim. Cradling his double-barreled shotgun as the robed rebels paraded on the street outside his home in Pine Level, he positioned himself between the front door and the yawning fireplace. Rosa remembered kneeling beside his chair as he waited, rocking slowly back and forth. “I don’t know how long I would last if they came breaking in here,” he said to Rosa, “but I’m getting the first one who comes through the door.” Rosa sat with her grandfather each night, waiting for the danger to pass. “Whatever happened,” she said later, “I wanted to see it. I wanted to see him shoot that gun. I wasn’t going to be caught asleep.”

By the time she was ten years old, Rosa was as defiant as her grandfather. “I saw Franklin,” she announced to her grandmother one summer day, referring to a notorious white bully. “He threatened to hit me,” she said. “I picked
up a brick and dared him to hit me.” Her grandmother scolded her and insisted that black children could not “talk to white folks that way.” “You’ll be lynched before you’re twenty years old.” The sharp reprimand hurt young Rosa’s feelings, but it did not curtail her feisty behavior. “I felt that I was very much in my rights to try to defend myself if I could.” When another white boy on skates whizzed past and tried to push Rosa off the sidewalk, she pushed him back. The boy’s mother saw the infraction and threatened to have Rosa arrested. “He pushed me,” Rosa snapped, “and I didn’t want to be pushed.”39 “It had been passed down almost in our genes,” she said later, “that a proud African American can simply not accept bad treatment from anybody.”40

As a young woman, Rosa McCauley was drawn to Raymond Parks, a spirited and brazen barber who lived in Montgomery, soon after she met him in the spring of 1931. At first, his light complexion turned her off and she rebuffed his flirtations. “I thought he was too white,” she admitted; “I had an aversion to white men.” But when she found out that Parks was a charter member of the Montgomery NAACP who carried a pistol in his pocket so that he could stand up to whites without fear, she relented and agreed to a date. Over the next year, they spent hours sitting in the
rumble seat of his little red Nash, talking about injustice in Alabama. “He was the first man of our race, aside from my grandfather,” she said, “with whom I actually discussed anything about the racial conditions.”

Raymond and Rosa had plenty to talk about. Rape and rumors of rape preoccupied Alabamians during the Depression years, and stories of racialized sexual violence echoed out from Alabama to the rest of the world. It is likely Rosa and Raymond discussed the brutal rape of Murdus Dixon, a twelve-year-old black Birmingham girl raped at knifepoint in the early 1930s by a white man who hired her as a domestic. Police refused to arrest the man and the case languished until it finally disappeared from public conversation.

By the spring of 1931, most conversation in Alabama centered on what had happened in the small town of Scottsboro. On March 25, hundreds of white men in dusty overalls, with shotguns slung over their shoulders, crowded around the crumbling two-story jailhouse. Inside were nine African American boys, none older than twenty, who had been kicked off a Memphis-bound freight train and arrested after roughhousing with a handful of white hoboes. But when Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, two white women working as prostitutes, were also taken off the train, they accused
the black youths of rape. By late afternoon, their accusation had been transformed into a lurid tale. Rumors spread that nine “black brutes” had “chewed off one of the breasts” of Ruby Bates. By the time the young men were brought to the Scottsboro jail, an incensed mob had already decided they were guilty. “Give ‘em to us,” someone shouted, as the mob pushed toward the jailhouse door. “Let those niggers out!” “If you don’t,” another threatened, “we’re coming in after them.” Fearing a mass lynching, the sheriff asked Governor Bibb to send in the National Guard.43

Denied a lynching, white Scottsboro clamored for a quick hearing and a quicker execution. The “nigger rape case,” as locals called it, began the day after the arrests. Within two weeks, the young men had been tried, convicted, and sentenced to die in Alabama’s electric chair. The instant trial and harsh sentences aroused anger and protest around the country. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the United States issued a statement calling the ruling a “cold blooded ‘illegal’ lynching.” The Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, a group of black clergymen from Chattanooga, Tennessee, raised fifty dollars for their defense and the Alabama Interracial Commission passed a resolution calling for a careful review of the facts. In the months after the trial, the International
Labor Defense, the NAACP, trade unions, leftist groups, and outraged individuals flooded the Governor’s office with letters of protest.

In Montgomery, Raymond Parks joined other black activists in secret meetings to raise money for the Scottsboro defense. “It gnawed at him to see those innocent kids were framed,” Rosa said. “He’d say, ‘I’ll never sleep until they’re free.’” After Rosa and Raymond were married in 1932, they hosted gatherings of local Scottsboro defenders in the front room of their little shotgun house in Montgomery’s Centennial Hill neighborhood near Alabama State College. “Whenever they met,” Parks recalled, “they had someone posted as lookout and someone always had a gun.” At one meeting, the men sat around a small card table covered with guns plotting to save the youths from the electric chair. “This was the first time I’d seen so few men with so many guns,” Parks remembered fondly. “I didn’t even think to offer them something to drink...I don’t know where I would have put any refreshments. No one was thinking of food anyway.”

Rosa Parks spent the rest of the evening on the back porch with her legs folded into her chest, her chin resting gently on her knees. After the men left, Raymond lifted his wife from the porch and assured her everything was all
right. Even though the immediate danger had passed, she was sad and angry “about the fact that black men could not hold a meeting without fear of bodily injury or death.” It would take Parks and other activists, mainly the International Labor Defense and the NAACP, almost twenty years to free the Scottsboro boys. When the last of the nine men walked out of prison in 1950, Scottsboro was “synonymous with Southern racism, repression, and injustice” and Montgomery was heading for the history books.45

In the early 1940s, Rosa and Raymond Parks hosted Voters League meetings, where they encouraged their friends and neighbors in Montgomery to register to vote, even though it was a dangerous proposition. These clandestine meetings, like the Scottsboro gatherings, introduced Parks to Alabama’s underground network of black activists who worked for racial justice during the dark days of the Depression.46 That support network became indispensable when Rosa Parks tried and twice failed to register to vote. Unlike whites, blacks had to pass a literacy test to prove their intellectual fitness to vote. County registrars routinely failed the South’s most-educated blacks and passed illiterate whites as a way to maintain lily-white voter rolls. Parks persisted, however, and finally received her registration certificate in 1945, after taking the
qualifying exam three times. She was so sure she passed the third test that she copied her answers on a separate sheet of paper in case the registrar claimed she failed. She kept that copy, she said later, so she could “bring suit against the voter registration board.”

It was after her second attempt to register, in 1943, that Rosa Parks first collided with a burly white bus driver named James F. Blake. Blake was known around town as a “vicious bigot” who targeted black women for mistreatment, calling them “bitches” and “coons.” When Parks refused to re-enter Blake’s bus from the rear door after paying up front, a humiliating Jim Crow practice, he threatened to throw her off the bus. She refused. “I [don’t] see the need of getting off and getting back on,” she protested, “when people were standing in the stepwell.” Besides, she added, “how was I going to squeeze in anyway?” Parks’s behavior infuriated Blake. He lunged at her, grabbed her by the coat sleeve and pulled her toward the door. “I know one thing,” she warned as he dragged her out, “you better not hit me.” As she was about to disembark, she pretended to drop her purse and quickly sat down in the front seat to retrieve it. Her spurt of defiance enraged the bus driver. “Get off my bus,” Blake roared as she finally stepped into the street. As the bus pulled away
from the curb, Parks vowed to never ride on Blake’s bus again.\(^{48}\)

Rosa Parks joined the Montgomery NAACP chapter shortly after the 1943 bus incident with Blake. At the first meeting she attended, she was elected branch secretary.\(^{49}\) The humble title obscured the importance of the job, which required Parks to spend much of her time traveling down dusty Alabama roads interviewing people and documenting acts of brutality, unsolved murders, voter intimidation and other racial incidents. Her belief in racial equality and her ingrained sense of self worth helped Parks become known as someone who could be trusted with delicate or dangerous information. “Rosa will talk to you,” folks quietly assured victims of racial violence.\(^{50}\)

Having been politicized and deeply affected by the injustice in the Scottsboro case, Parks was especially interested in interracial rape cases.\(^{51}\)

Rosa Parks carried Recy Taylor’s story from Abbeville to Montgomery, where she helped organize her defense.\(^{52}\) E.D. Nixon, a union man who headed the Alabama Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Rufus A. Lewis, who directed both a local funeral home and the football team at Alabama State;
and E. G. Jackson, who served as editor of the Alabama Tribune, all signed on to help. With support from national labor unions, African-American organizations and women’s groups, Rosa Parks and her local allies formed the Alabama Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. By the spring of 1945, they had recruited supporters around the country and had organized what the Chicago Defender called the “strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade.”53

When the Henry County Grand Jury took up Recy Taylor’s case on October 3 and 4, 1944, no one expected equal justice, but Taylor’s family and friends hoped for an honest hearing. Once there, Taylor discovered that none of the assailants had actually been arrested. That meant the only witnesses present when the all-white, all-male jury came together during the fall session were Taylor’s loved ones, none of whom could provide the names of the white men who assaulted her. Aside from identifying Hugo Wilson and his car the night of the attack, Sheriff Gamble never arranged a police lineup, so Taylor could not point to her attackers in court. He claimed he placed Hugo Wilson and his accomplices under a $250 appearance bond, but court
records indicate that the bonds were issued late in the afternoon, a day after Taylor’s hearing. Circuit Solicitor Keener Baxley, whose son Bill would eventually become Attorney General of Alabama in 1971 and pardon the last Scottsboro defendant, appeared to go through the motions of a legitimate trial. It was clear that the proceeding was a farce designed by Baxley and others to protect themselves from outside criticism and to remind black women that they could not rely upon even the most basic protections under the law.

By creating a faint shadow of judicial procedure, white leaders could dismiss complaints of racial discrimination by arguing that Recy Taylor received every consideration the law allowed. White Alabamians were so sensitive to national and international outrage over the near lynching and subsequent trials of the Scottsboro nine, that state and county leaders had to at least give an appearance of equal justice. Baxley and Gamble knew exactly what they were doing. Without an indictment from the grand jury, Taylor’s case would never make it out of Henry County. There would be no further hearings and they expected that the matter would eventually die.

For nearly a month after the grand jury met, Baxley and Gamble’s strategy appeared to be working. Taylor and
her husband quietly returned to their jobs and daily burdens, resigned to the bitter truth that her assailants roamed freely through town. They did not have much of a choice. After reporting the rape, Taylor received multiple death threats. The night after the attack, for example, white vigilantes firebombed Taylor’s home while the family slept, setting the front porch on fire. Taylor’s husband rushed outside and quickly put out the flames, saving his wife and toddler. They moved in with her father and six siblings the next morning and Taylor stayed close to home. “I haven’t gone up into the town since it happened,” she told a reporter later. “I’m afraid they’ll kill me. They said they’d kill me if I told on them.” The entire family took precautions as well. “Nobody would walk at night,” Taylor’s brother, Robert, recalled. “Everybody tried to make sure that they done what they had to do in the daytime.” And each night, after everyone was tucked safely into bed, Benny Corbitt climbed a tree in his back yard. Cradling a double-barreled shotgun and a sack of shells, he guarded the cabin until the sun broke on the horizon, and then went inside to sleep.

As the crisp fall days passed, however, the story of the brutal rape and the phony hearing spread across the
state and then the nation, passed on in union halls, churches, NAACP chapters, barber shops, pool halls and juke joints, through the underground networks of African American activists, and along the infrastructure built by the defenders of the Scottsboro youth. Bolstered by a rising black militancy fueled by the global war against fascism, black activists in Alabama and their allies in national labor unions and Leftist and liberal organizations joined in coalition to defend Taylor and demand punishment for the white men who kidnapped and raped her.⁵⁸

Many of these activists came together at the Negro Masonic Temple in Birmingham, the nerve center of Alabama’s black political community. Here, militant members of the Birmingham and Montgomery NAACP chapters swapped organizing strategies with sharecroppers and steel-fisted union men whose battles for better wages and human dignity in the 1930s had laid a solid foundation. Editors and reporters from Alabama’s black newspapers, mainly the Alabama Tribune and the Birmingham World, could interview members of the middle-class, progressive, and Communist-infused Southern Negro Youth Congress [SNYC], or catch up on regional news with the leading lights of the Alabama branch of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare [SCHW], the South’s most prominent interracial liberal organization. Labor
organizers passing through Birmingham could stop in to make a connection, gather information, or have a friendly chat. Together these eclectic groups and individuals turned the Masonic Temple into a hive of activity. They coordinated campaigns, investigated police brutality, condemned the poll tax, pushed for the ballot, and fought for human rights.59

The SNYC, an outgrowth of the left wing, New York-based National Negro Congress, was just eight years old in 1944, but it was perhaps the most promising civil rights organization in Alabama at the time.60 At first, the SNYC attracted mostly young, college-educated black southerners, but it quickly gained attention and support from prominent African-American leaders with national political reach. The list of SNYC board members included conservatives like Charles Gomillion and F. D. Patterson, the dean and president of Tuskegee University; Percy Sutton, a Tuskegee Airman and well-known lawyer; Atlantans Rev. Martin Luther King Sr. and Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College; Ralph Abernathy, a powerful young preacher in Montgomery; Modjeska Simpkins, an outspoken and fearless NAACP leader in South Carolina; and Nannie Burroughs, a nationally known educator and women’s club leader from Virginia. This
broadly-based coalition helped publicize the SNYC’s activities.61

In Alabama, the SNYC leadership included black women, many of whom practiced a tradition of collective organizing rooted in sharecroppers’ struggles to win the most rudimentary rights from white landlords in the early 1930s.62 Other members were middle-class, college educated black women who saw the SNYC as providing more opportunities for women than traditional black organizations. Esther V. Cooper, a feisty organizer and women’s rights advocate, was only twenty-three-years old in 1940 when she helped lead the Birmingham chapter of the SNYC. Just before she moved there, Cooper wrote a master’s thesis at Fisk University devoted to the “special issues that confronted working-class black women,” especially domestics and sharecroppers.63 Dedicated to cultivating black female leadership throughout Alabama and building bridges with existing women’s networks, she was the SNYC’s Executive Secretary by 1942.

Rosa Parks and the SNYC women were natural allies. By leveraging their relationships with CIO-affiliated unions, Communist networks, and local and national civil rights organizations, Parks, Cooper and their cohorts helped spread Recy Taylor’s story from the back roads of Alabama
to the street corners of Harlem. Reaching out to friends and affiliates around the country, they sought publicity, funding and legal assistance.64 By the end of October, Taylor’s story had traveled all the way to Pennsylvania where the widely read and respected black newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier, ran it on October 28, 1944.

Strategically placed beneath a banner headline that declared “Treatment of Negro Called Greatest Evil in America,” the succinct front-page article, “Alabama Whites Attack Woman; Not Punished,” highlighted sexual violence as one of those evils.65 The prominent article and provocative headline reflected the Courier’s “Double V” strategy. During the war years, the black press, led by the Pittsburgh Courier, urged African Americans to adopt “double victory” as a wartime battle cry. “The first V [is] for victory over our enemies from without,” a Courier reader argued in a letter to the editor. “The second V [is] for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.”66 Readers responded to the black press’s drumbeat to “Defeat Mussolini and Hitler by Enforcing the Constitution and Abolishing Jim Crow,” devouring 200,000 copies of the Courier each week. The Courier was not alone
in its success; wartime readership of black newspapers increased nearly 40 percent.\textsuperscript{67}

The \textit{Courier} article made the rape of Recy Taylor a national example of Southern injustice. It immediately sparked nationwide interest. Eugene Gordon, a prominent black Communist and writer for the \textit{New York Daily Worker}, followed up on the \textit{Courier’s} lead by traveling to Alabama to interview Taylor.\textsuperscript{68} Gordon’s November 19 article, “Alabama Authorities Ignore White Gang’s Rape of Negro Mother,” reported that since the attack, “Alabama justice has been blind, deaf, and mute.” Gordon blasted segregationists’ longstanding defense of white womanhood and their manipulation of interracial rape to justify violence against black men. Pointing to the most recent example, Gordon argued that “every southern newspaper played up the rape of the unnamed wife of a white soldier in Florida,” but failed to report the crime against Recy Taylor. Worse, he fumed, Southern editors stood silent as the alleged black rapists of a white woman “were burned to death in Florida’s electric chair,” while Taylor’s assailants weren’t even questioned. “The whole country must be aroused to action,” Gordon thundered, “against this and other similar outrages against Negro womanhood.”\textsuperscript{69}
In New York City, black activists embroiled in their own grassroots struggles against segregation, police brutality and housing discrimination, read Gordon’s article and were outraged. They heeded his call to arms by flocking to Harlem’s Hotel Theresa on November 25 for a mass meeting. Called by the New York branch of the SCHW, and the SNYC’s parent organization, the National Negro Congress, the meeting hoped to draw attention to the double standard of justice in the South and “find ways and means of centering nationwide attention on Mrs. Taylor’s case and forcing legal action” in order to “lay a basis for ending this southern practice of degrading Negro womanhood.”

Their allies in Alabama provided crucial assistance.

Over one hundred people, representing middle-class mainstays like the YWCA, the NAACP and the National Council of Negro Women, as well as leftist labor unions like the CIO and the Negro Labor Victory Committee, came to the emergency meeting. Audley Moore, a spirited black nationalist, who had a long history of defending black women from sexual violence, came as the Harlem representative of the International Worker’s Order. Prominent black Communists like Benjamin J. Davis, Jr. and James W. Ford, as well as leftist and Communist-affiliated organizations like the International Labor Defense, filed
into the hotel and found seats. Reporters from the leftist
*Daily Worker*; the New York tabloid *PM*; the progressive west
coast paper, the *California Eagle*; and Adam Clayton Powell
Jr.’s weekly, *The People’s Voice*, clustered around the
dais, pencils and notepads at the ready. Alabama SNYC
delegates provided local information about the Recy Taylor
case.

The assembly of such an eclectic group of activists
yielded incredible results. After being briefed on the
“Abbeville Affair,” participants agreed to partner with the
Alabama branches of the SNYC and the SCHW to form the
“Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor.” They
chose delegates who would immediately travel to Abbeville
to investigate the crime and report their findings at the
Sixth All-Southern Negro Youth Congress conference to be
held in Atlanta the following week. There, they planned to
create a “Negro-rights, Negro-white unity campaign
throughout the South.” When the call for donations came,
activists dug into their pockets and contributed close to
one hundred dollars. They agreed to use the money to flood
the South with fliers decrying white attacks on black women
and promised a publicity campaign aimed directly at the
Governor of Alabama, Chauncey Sparks. As one newspaper
article put it, "the phrase ‘protection of Southern womanhood’ had life and meaning injected into it." \(^{76}\)

Almost immediately, letters and postcards trickled in to Governor Sparks’s office. Known as the “Bourbon from Barbour,” Chauncey Sparks won the governorship in 1942 by promising to “padlock the state treasury” and keep the federal government’s nose out of Alabama’s business. \(^{77}\) Though he eventually started spending money on schools, agricultural programs, and hospitals, he was no Franklin Roosevelt liberal. A tight-lipped and pragmatic conservative, he was also an ardent white supremacist like other Big Mule Democrats in Alabama. In 1946, he helped lead a campaign to ratify the Boswell Amendment, which made it all but impossible for most African Americans and poor whites to register to vote. He was George Wallace’s first mentor and benefactor. In the fall of 1945, Sparks offered the skinny twenty-six-year-old a job as an assistant in the Attorney General’s office, giving rise to Wallace’s storied career. \(^{78}\)

By mid-December, 1944, hundreds of letters protesting the rape of Recy Taylor poured in from all over the country and stacked up on Sparks’s desk. \(^{79}\) “I’ve heard a great deal of how the South prides itself on protecting its womanhood,” Mrs. Gretchen Coon told Governor Sparks. “How
do you square this vaunted theory with the practice and the kind of justice evidenced in Abbeville on September 3rd and subsequently? A “friend of the South” tried to appeal to Sparks’ sense of racial duty, pointing out the irrational defense of white supremacy while doing nothing to prevent whites from having sex—coerced or otherwise—with black women.

“You are justly and earnestly striving for the purity of your race, yet you openly permit a great many of your men to freely cohabit with women of the Negro race. This is encouraged by your laws. Ironically enough, the Negro man does not seem as desirous of cohabiting with the white woman as the white man is pleased with cohabitation with Negro women…. The failure to indict the white men [who assaulted Recy Taylor] says to the white youth of the South that it is alright to have sexual intercourse with the Negro…. [the rapists] in Abbeville Alabama…have made your lofty and noble principles of race and good clean society a joke.”

Charles Collins, Executive Secretary of the Negro Labor Victory Committee, a leftist labor union, agreed. “The rapists are known, identified, and yet allowed to go unpunished in your state,” Collins argued. “This brazen denial of the simple rights of humanity, exposes, more than ever, the emptiness of the white supremacy advocates who employ the charge of ‘rape’ in order to attack the Negro people.”
Unsubstantiated charges of the rape of white women by black men had been part of the Southern political culture for decades. Rumors of rape were rooted in Reconstruction-era stereotypes in which white Southerners portrayed black men as the mythological incubus, a beast that attacks women while they sleep, to disfranchise African Americans and justify racial violence. Between 1880 and 1920, Southern Democrats fueled rumors of “black beast rapists” defiling pure, white womanhood in an effort to “redeem” Dixie from the grip of Republican rule. Most often these campaigns amounted to one-sided racial pogroms, as white supremacists used white fears of black male sexuality to seize political control of the state and subjugate African Americans. Even after the white supremacy campaigns secured state legislatures and sanctioned Jim Crow, rumors of black on white rape conveniently surfaced whenever African Americans asserted their humanity or challenged white supremacy. “Any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro,” as southern historian W. J. Cash put it, “constituted in a perfectly real manner, an attack on the southern white woman.”

During the 1940s, virtually any self-assertion among African Americans conjured images of “amalgamation” and fears of “social equality,” a euphemism for interracial
In a rant against wartime black activism, Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, perhaps the most acrimonious segregationist in Congress, argued that “every Negro in America who is behind [civil rights] movements…dream[s] of social equality and inter-marriage between whites and blacks.”

Howard Odum, a prominent sociologist from the University of North Carolina, argued that white fears of interracial sex sat at the center of wartime racial tension. In his 1943 study, _Race and Rumors of Race_, Odum documented the “weird, wild stories,” whites told each other about blacks. Whites, he said, worried that demands for black equality heralded a bloody insurrection, similar to Nat Turner’s murderous slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831. “Negroes are buying up all the ice picks,” whites told one another, “waiting for the first blackout” to attack. Many whites believed that blacks were also hoarding guns, stashing them in coffins and church basements, waiting for the right moment to “turn the tables” and “overrule the South.”

The most incendiary race rumors were about black men’s insatiable lust for white women. According to Odum, these near-hysterical stories reflected white beliefs that rising
black activism indicated African Americans’ “bold intention to achieve the hated “social equality.””

Everyone had their own version of this story.

“Negro Men were all planning to have white wives,” whites whispered to one another in wartime North Carolina. “And when all the white men have gone to war,” they said, “the white women will be left for the Negro men.” Another tall tale traded among friends in Georgia told of a black man who warned a white couple that they “better be necking now because after the war we’ll be doing the necking.” In Louisiana, whites warned schoolgirls to never walk alone since there was apparently an “outbreak of Negroes attacking white women.”

Unsubstantiated rumors of black men attacking innocent white women sparked almost 50 percent of all race riots in the United States between Reconstruction and World War II. In 1943 alone, there were 242 violent interracial clashes in 47 cities. Beaumont, Texas was typical of small manufacturing towns reeling from changes wrought by the war. As blacks and whites from surrounding areas poured into the gulf-coast town for defense jobs, racial tension increased. Lack of housing and health care, overstretched social service providers, and overcrowding on buses and public transportation each threatened the segregated social
order. But it was the rumors that a black man brutally raped, beat and stabbed an eighteen-year-old white telephone operator in Beaumont on June 5, 1943, coupled with reports of a plan among black soldiers to “invade the city in search of unprotected white women,” that triggered a riot in the tinderbox town.\textsuperscript{95}

When a twenty-four-year-old white woman claimed she was attacked by a black man in her “victory-garden” a few days later, a mob of over 2,000 white men, mostly bulky stevedores, rampaged through the black neighborhood, beating pedestrians and burning businesses. In their wake, they left hundreds injured and three dead, and destroyed over two hundred buildings.\textsuperscript{96} The Beaumont riot was hardly unusual; racial disturbances in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898, Atlanta in 1906, Springfield, Illinois in 1908, Omaha, Nebraska and Washington DC, in 1919, Tulsa Oklahoma in 1921 and Mobile, Alabama in 1943 were all sparked by rumored incidents of rape or manufactured ‘rape epidemics’ involving black men and white women.\textsuperscript{97}

Rumors about the mistreatment and rape of black women by white men started plenty of brawls throughout the South, too, but none caused as much violence and bloodshed as the rumor that made Detroit explode in the summer of 1943. Four
days of rioting left thirty-eight people dead, nearly seven hundred injured, and an estimated $2 million in property damage. During World War II, Detroit, like Beaumont, teetered on the edge of racial cataclysm. Five hundred thousand black and white migrant workers poured into the Motor City, clashing over defense jobs, housing, and access to transportation, public parks, and education. On June 20, 1943, the temperature soared past ninety degrees and thousands of Detroit’s working class residents sought relief on the beaches of Belle Isle. Throughout the day, isolated scuffles broke out between black and white picnickers, who competed for grills and tables. These minor skirmishes erupted into a full-scale riot after rumors that a white Southerner threw a black mother and her baby off the Belle Isle Bridge sent hundreds of black men streaming into the streets to defend and protect black womanhood.

The rumor that sparked the Detroit riot was one of many sexual stories detailing the widespread mistreatment of black women during the 1940s. The most oft-repeated tale insisted that “white soldiers in the South were mistreating Negro women.” One rumor told of a white M.P. who “had beaten the wife of a Negro soldier in a Georgia camp.” Another story, from Mississippi, described the beating of black soliders while police attacked their wives and
girlfriends. There were also plenty of stories circulating about black women who had been arrested and beaten by policemen after protesting mistreatment on buses. As a kind of cultural narrative, rumors of rape and sexualized violence had enormous symbolic power and political potency. Whites used outrageous racial rumors and rape scares to justify strengthening segregation and white supremacy. Meanwhile, the stories of sexual subjugation and racial terror that circulated among African Americans exposed white hypocrisy about interracial sex and spurred demands for equal justice and bodily integrity. Given the tenuous social and political environment into which the Recy Taylor story quickly spread, it was bound to spark similar fears and anxieties, if not violent clashes.

Perhaps few understood this better than members of the United States military. Thirty-three soldiers from “somewhere in Belgium” put down their guns and picked up pens to sign a petition addressed to Governor Sparks. They demanded he use his gubernatorial powers to intervene in the case. “Failure to act in any such case,” the soldiers argued, “is a matter of grave concern to everyone believing in the principles of American democracy—the principle of the equality of all before the law, regardless of race,
color or religion; particularly to those of us who face a ruthless enemy to preserve that democracy.” The failure to hold white men accountable was irresponsible: “we are engaged in a war for freedom,” they insisted, “which requires the united support of all Americans, Negro and White.” 101

In a letter to Governor Sparks, Eugene Henderson, an African American merchant seaman, noted the irony of America’s role as defender of democracy abroad while it denied justice at home. “I have risked my life many times to deliver supplies to our armed forces and our allies,” he said. “My morale drops when I learn that a woman of my race has been brutally raped by six white men and nothing done about it.” Why, Henderson asked, “isn’t Negro womanhood as sacred as white womanhood?” 102 Ernest Scott, President of the Transport Workers of America, echoed Henderson’s sentiments, and feared that the “effect of such lawlessness on the morale of our men in the armed services…cannot but be bad…the least we can do for our servicemen and women is to assure them that while they are fighting our country’s battles… their families back home are safe.” 103

Enough black troops were upset by the gang rape of Recy Taylor that Charles S. Seely, the editorial director of the Army News, felt compelled to urge Governor Sparks to
act. “If this pamphlet reaches any considerable number of Negroes in our armed services, and I have no doubt it will,” he warned Sparks, “it will greatly affect their efficiency.” “This of course will be very bad for the war effort,” he argued, “for it is senseless to fight fascism abroad if fascistic influences are to be protected here at home.” Seely asked Sparks for a statement “that assures Negro soldiers that you will see to it that the ‘degenerate and ruthless persons who attacked Mrs. Taylor are brought to justice and severely punished.’” If Sparks would commit to a similar statement, Seely argued, he could “publish it in all three of our papers.” This way,” he insisted, “it will reach a great many of the million or so American Negroes who are fighting for democracy” and “help keep up the morale of the Negroes in our services.”

As the “Abbeville affair” threatened America’s war effort, Governor Sparks worried about the negative publicity the assault would have on his state. Mr. and Mrs. Scott McCall told Sparks that the rape of Recy Taylor “was as bad as what we would expect from the Nazi’s.” Julius Crane, the Vice President of the United Shoe Workers of America, demanded Governor Sparks take “immediate steps” to try Taylor’s assailants “before Alabama is placed on Hitler’s list as a possible postwar refuge.” Perhaps Crane
knew that Fort Rucker, a military base just outside Abbeville, was already home to German prisoners of war, who were often treated better than African American citizens. Letters and petitions continued to pour in from concerned Alabamians and Sparks worried that he faced "another Scottsboro," as one correspondent after another called it. The Governor knew that in places like Birmingham, Mobile and Montgomery, where fierce labor competition, union battles, and rabid racism created a volatile climate, the failure to prosecute Recy Taylor’s assailants could easily cause an explosion. Of course, prosecuting them also carried risks, but Taylor’s defenders seemed considerably better organized than her antagonists. Just before Christmas, Eugene Gordon from the *Daily Worker* teamed up with E. G. Jackson, Montgomery activist and editor of the popular black newspaper, the *Alabama Tribune*, to confront Sparks. Inside the imposing white marble capital, where Jefferson Davis pledged his loyalty to the Confederacy in 1861, Governor Sparks reluctantly agreed to launch an investigation. Sparks hedged, making no commitments to a just outcome. Still, Gordon and Jackson sensed the Governor’s responsiveness to outside pressures. In an article about their meeting, Gordon reported that "the Governor...agreed with his Attorney General that they
wanted no publicity. They wished to make their investigations and decide on what action to take, all without the *Daily Worker* or the Negro press saying anything about the fact that the state’s highest officers were interested."\(^{109}\)

If the Governor hoped to keep his decision a secret, members of the Committee for Equal Justice proclaimed the news far and wide. Talk of Sparks’s interest propelled local leaders into action, many of whom formed local branches of the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. “I found people in Birmingham, Montgomery and other Alabama cities and towns,” Gordon noted, “talking about the case as a result” of the official investigation. “Young people,” he boasted, “were asking their churches to get in on the case.”\(^{110}\)

In Montgomery, Rosa and Raymond Parks joined E. D. Nixon, Rufus A. Lewis, Johnnie Carr and her husband Arlam Carr Sr., both longtime NAACP members; E. G. Jackson and Mrs. Irene West, the wife of Montgomery’s only black dentist; to raise money for Taylor’s defense. They organized mass meetings, canvassed neighborhoods, signed petitions and sent postcards to the Governor and Attorney General.\(^{111}\) These networks—these very people—would lift Martin Luther King Jr., to international prominence a
decade later, after their leading organizer was arrested on a Montgomery bus. The protection of the dignity of black women’s bodies, begun in a long twilight struggle in causes like the Abbeville crusade, would alter the arc of human history, making the word “Montgomery” an enduring metaphor for the power of nonviolent direct action.

Montgomery was not the only city with a local chapter of the Committee for Equal Justice. By January, the Worker reported that the “Taylor Case is Now Nationwide” with branches in sixteen states and Washington D.C. Distinguished activists, artists, and political leaders added their names to the growing board of advisors. Such luminaries included W.E.B. DuBois; Mary Church Terrell, a suffragist and founder of the National Association of Colored Women; Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a popular clubwoman and respected educator; Ira De A. Reid, a sociologist and assistant director of the newly formed Southern Regional Council; John Sengstacke, the publisher of the Chicago Defender; Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes of Harlem Renaissance fame; Lillian Smith, author of the controversial interracial love story, Strange Fruit; and Broadway impresario Oscar Hammerstein II. Such an illustrious roster raised eyebrows—especially among
anticommunists who suspected the Committee for Equal Justice was nothing but a front for the Communist Party.

J.B. Matthews, one of the most well known professional anticommunists who worked for the House Un-American Activities Committee and named names for the Hearst Corporation, warned the FBI that the Committee For Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor [CEJRT] contained over “400 names” and was the “chief large-scale agitation of the communists in the South at the present time.” The Communist Party, he said, was engaged “in one of their typical agitational campaigns to exploit the incident of Mrs. Taylor’s rape, just as they agitated for many years on the subject of the Scottsboro case.” While Matthews was correct that some members of the CEJRT were Communists or “fellow travelers,” it was not a front for Communism. But its glaring spotlight on white men who raped black women did smack of subversion. Exposure of this historic relationship threatened to unravel the racial and sexual status quo that held the segregated social order together. For Montgomery’s black activists, the prospect of striking at the heart of the matter was invigorating.

“With the people, black and white, North and South mobilized for a fight for justice around Mrs. Taylor,” E. D. Nixon told Earl Conrad, a reporter for the Chicago
Defender, “we now have the strength and power to do something with it.” Nixon lamented that cases “like this or cases almost as serious as this are so frequent down here that we almost take them as a matter of course. It’s a question of choice sometimes—which we can concentrate on for a fight.”

Nixon was Montgomery’s most outspoken black activist. According to Roy Wilkins, he was “straight as a ramrod, tough as a mule and braver than a squad of marines.” In addition to leading the Montgomery NAACP, Nixon served as head of the Alabama Voters League. In 1944, he led nearly 800 African Americans on a march to the registrar’s office, demanding the right to vote. His fearlessness and constant agitation caught the attention of the city’s white newspaper, the Montgomery Advertiser, which referred to him later as the “NAACP Mau Mau Chief.” As president of the Alabama branch of the nation’s largest all-black labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Nixon was connected to militant unionists who knew how to organize. Led by the powerful and imposing A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was one of the most successful labor unions during the 1940s. In 1941, Randolph threatened to bring his army of sleeping car porters to Washington unless President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ended
segregation in defense industries. Fearing global embarrassment on the eve of America’s entry into World War II, Roosevelt capitulated and signed Executive Order 8802, creating the Fair Employment Practice Committee. Randolph recognized Nixon’s indomitable energy and political talent early on and served as his mentor for many years.

E. D. Nixon told the 
_Defender_ reporter that he had “a dossier of fifty cases of rotten violence against Negroes in Alabama in the past couple years—we hardly know where to begin in approaching this question.” Since Rosa Parks lived next door to Nixon, served as his personal secretary, managed his union office, and did field work for the Montgomery NAACP, she almost certainly prepared the file Nixon referenced. E. G. Jackson, editor of the 
_Alabama Tribune_, sat next to Nixon as the reporter from the 
_Defender_ took notes. Nixon provided grisly details of what he called “one horror tale after another of white male degradation of the Negro women of Montgomery and lower Alabama.” “We have numerous reports from our women,” Jackson said, “of assaults by white taxicab drivers.” “The cabbies take them into their cars at the railroad depot, but before taking them home, drive them outside the town, and subject them to attacks.” Jackson and Nixon told the 
_Defender_ that what happened to Recy Taylor was hardly
unusual—it was part of a ritual of rape in which white men in the segregated South abducted and assaulted black women with alarming regularity and stunning uniformity. “We Negro men feel powerless,” Jackson confessed, “the weight of hundreds of years hangs over us like so much iron…we would be superhuman if we alone could lift it off of our shoulders.”

During the 1940s, reports of sexual violence directed at black women flooded into local and national NAACP chapters. Women’s stories spilled out in letters to the Justice Department and appeared on the front pages of the nation’s leading black newspapers. The stories told how white men lured black women and girls away from home with promises of steady work and better wages; attacked them on the job; abducted them at gun-point while traveling to or from home, work or church; and sexually humiliated and harassed them at bus stops, grocery stores and in other public places. John McCray, a spirited advocate for black voting rights in South Carolina and editor and publisher of the Lighthouse and Informer, the Palmetto State’s most important black newspaper, argued that it was a “commonplace experience for many of our women in southern
towns...to be propositioned openly by white men. You can pick up accounts of these at a dime a dozen in almost any community."\textsuperscript{117}

The stories followed a ritualistic pattern. In January 1940, John H. Davis, a white man from Fayetteville, North Carolina, lured sixteen-year-old Mary Poole from her home by promising her a job “as a nurse girl for his wife.” Instead, as she put it, he “drove her to some woods” and “forced her to submit.” As he drove away, abandoning her in the woods, he tossed her change of clothes out of the car window.\textsuperscript{118} In May 1942, Sadie Mae Gibson, a twenty-three-year-old black schoolteacher in Decatur, Alabama was walking home one sunny afternoon when Dan Olinger, a white teenager, forced her into a clump of bushes and at rifle point raped her.\textsuperscript{119} Two months later, as Rosa Lee Cherry, a black high school student, walked home from church in Little Rock, Arkansas, three uniformed police officers threatened to throw her in jail unless she got in their patrol car. They drove her behind a railroad embankment and sexually molested her. She escaped after promising to “get them another girl.”\textsuperscript{120}

Lila Belle Carter, a sixteen-year-old girl from Pine Island, South Carolina, never escaped. She was abducted in October 1945, on her way to the store for some rice. After
a white insurance collector raped her, he murdered her and left her lying face down in a puddle of mud. While most victims did not share Lila Belle Carter’s fate, the method her assailant used—abduction—was quite common. Nannie Strayhorn, a thirty-two-year-old mother of two from Richmond, Virginia accepted a ride home from two white police officers in October, 1946. Instead of taking her home, officers Carl Burlson and Leonard Davis drove to an isolated area outside town and took turns raping her at gunpoint. In Clio, Alabama in 1948, a white man offered Janie Mae Patterson, an eleven-year-old girl, some money in exchange for help finding a well to slake his thirst. She eagerly climbed into his car and promised to show him the way. Instead of following the girl’s directions, he drove to a mill about five miles away, “took a blanket out of his car” and then “ravished the girl.”

The sexual violence enacted and enforced rules of racial and economic hierarchy. When Herschel Gasque and Charles Berryhill, two white farmers brandishing guns, knocked on Mrs. Mamie Patterson’s door in Tuscumbia, Alabama in February 1948 to “collect a debt from [her] husband,” she refused to divulge his whereabouts. When she demanded that they leave, they pushed Patterson aside and barreled into her house, where they found her husband
hiding. Gasque and Berryhill, a “200-pound former professional wrestler,” brutally beat Patterson’s husband, then turned their pistols on her and slowly backed her outside into their car. In retaliation for Patterson’s defiance, the white men drove the mother of six into the woods, where “they both raped [her]” and told her to “perform abnormal acts.”

In order to reclaim their bodies and their humanity, African American women called on a tradition of testimony and truth-telling that stretched back to slavery. “We colored women are tired of such things,” Mrs. Joy B. Jones proclaimed in a 1947 letter to NAACP founder, Arthur Springarn. She attached a news clipping that described the sexual molestation of a black girl by a white businessman in Macon, Georgia. “Seems like all the money we pay in organizations,” Jones argued, “doesn’t remedy the matter. This man should be given the same conviction that a colored man would have got.”

Failure in the courts did not stop black women from speaking out decades before the Women’s Movement. These testimonies helped bring attention to the issue of sexual violence and often ignited local campaigns for equal justice and civil rights. When James Lee Perry, a “well-to-
do white oil dealer" from Meridian, Mississippi raped Ruby Atee Pigford, a black teenager, he never expected her to report the crime. Even if she did, he could be fairly confident that white authorities would not take her complaint seriously. Perry lured the girl away from home by promising her a babysitting job that paid seventy cents an hour—good money at the time. After picking her up on August 7, 1947, Perry drove Pigford to a nearby roadhouse, instead of taking her to his home. Angered by her refusal to accompany him into the bar, he beat her until she was unconscious. He then raped her, tied her to the bumper of his car, and dragged her bound body through town. He dumped her, bruised and battered, outside her home later that evening.¹²⁷

She told her parents what happened and they told their friends. By the next day, African Americans throughout town demanded punishment for the crime. Edward Knott, Jr., the secretary of the Meridian, Mississippi NAACP, wired the story to the Pittsburgh Courier and airmailed a letter to the national NAACP office. Assistant Special Council, Marian Wynn Perry, responded immediately. "We have discussed the case here in this office in light of the conditions in Mississippi and action which is possible there," she said. "It is our suggestion that as much
publicity as possible be given to the case.” Perry knew that accusing a white man of raping a black woman in Mississippi, the most violent state in the South was dangerous, if not deadly.

In Mississippi, African Americans understood that their lives “could be snuffed out on whim.”\textsuperscript{128} Aside from the daily indignities of segregation, between 1943 and 1949, white men in Mississippi castrated, mutilated, and lynched two fourteen-year old black boys for playing tag with a white girl near the town of Quitman; murdered a dairy farmer, who had used self defense when his white employer attacked him; killed Revered Isaac Simmons and cut off his tongue for refusing to sell his land; whipped Leon McTate to death for allegedly stealing a saddle; and beat Malcolm Wright to a bloody pulp because they didn’t like the way he drove a wagon.\textsuperscript{129}

“The only chance you have to secure redress for this terrible attack,” the NAACP Assistant Counsel asserted in the rape and dragging of Ruby Pigford, “is by publicity and pressure within the State of Mississippi, and you, of course, who are in Mississippi, will know how much can be done.” Perry encouraged Knott and other concerned citizens to get the local black newspaper, the \textit{Jackson Advocate}, and its editor, Percy Greene, on board. She also promised
assistance from the national office, which eagerly protested lynching, but rarely got involved in rape cases. After signing off, Perry sent a picture of a bloodied and battered Ruby Pigford in her hospital bed to the Pittsburgh Courier for an exclusive report.\textsuperscript{130} Perry seemed to understand that justice in the Pigford case, like so many others, was unlikely. The only feasible way to hold white men accountable for raping black women—since Southern courts would not—was to draw outside attention to the crime.\textsuperscript{131}

“If the state of Alabama does not handle [the Recy Taylor] case in the way it ought to,” E.G. Jackson thundered from the pulpit of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in December 1944, “if the right-minded citizen[s] of the state do not demand indictment in this situation, then...the Negro people will welcome and invite all of the assistance that they can get from the North.”\textsuperscript{132} It was no idle threat. The Chicago Defender called the attack on Recy Taylor “Dixie’s most blatant rape case.” When the Defender argued that the CEJRT had launched the “strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade,” they meant that Rosa Parks’s trip to Abbeville had grown into the most
successful national campaign for racial justice since the Scottsboro trials, where Parks had first learned how to organize.

Prominent white Alabamians took the growing movement seriously. Like Parks, they, too, remembered Scottsboro. Mrs. Margaret H. Moss, President of Alabama’s Federation of Women’s Clubs, wrote to Governor Sparks for advice. Fretting about the effect the “northern press” and “outsiders” could have on her beloved state’s reputation, she offered the Governor some advice. “Some years ago, when visiting my brothers in Washington,” she wrote, “I found that many people knew little of the conditions in our state beyond ‘Stars Fell on Alabama’, the football team and the Scottsboro case.” Fearful of “another misrepresentation of Alabama” caused by the “delay and inaction of government in the Abbeville affair,” she asked Sparks for a statement promising equal justice. That way, she said, “I can be armed with something to say when rumors and mistaken information come to me.” For example, she said, “I am told, that the assistant attorney general is quoted as saying that “he hates niggers and would as soon run over one in his car as to speak to one.” “I am also told,” Moss continued, “that the case is being discussed in the Negro National Press and committees are being formed in a number
of other states to see the matter through. This all sounds so unnecessary.” At least, she added, we agree “the less publicity the better.”

Governor Sparks hoped that promising a separate investigation would hold back protests, but it did not stem the tide of petitions and letters pouring into the Governor’s office, especially after the Pittsburgh Courier ran the erroneous headline, “Sparks To Press Charges Against Rapists Following Protests” in a front page article two days before Christmas. As time wore on without any major arrests or trials, Sparks became the protestors’ number-one target.

Instead of targeting Sparks, who followed through on his promise to launch an investigation, the Committee for Equal Justice should perhaps have directed national attention to G. D. Halstead and Keener Baxley, the less visible, but in this case, more powerful County and Circuit Solicitors, whose intransigence kept the case bottled up. In order to get a sense of what was going on in Henry County, Sparks sent his private investigators, J. V. Kitchens and N.W. Kimbrough, to Dothan, Alabama on December 9, 1944 to interview Halstead, Baxley and Sheriff George H. Gamble. While Baxley readily admitted that, “in his opinion the crime was committed as alleged by the victim” he
feigned ignorance about how to move forward. “No further facts could be ascertained,” he claimed, “because the victim stated...that she did not know any of the boys that she claimed to have ravished her.” Halstead seconded Baxley’s defense. He “had come to a block,” he said, and did not know “how any additional information could be obtained.” “It would be free-lancing,” Halstead insisted, “as no one else knew any of the facts in this case” and “neither of the witnesses had identified the boys who were alleged to have ravished Recy Taylor.” When the investigators reminded them that Recy Taylor had identified Hugo Wilson as one of her assailants and owner of the car used in the attack, Baxley grew visibly upset. We “would not consent for any of them to be interviewed,” Baxley stammered. Baxley’s bluster did not scare Kimbrough and Kitchens, who had not come to ask permission.

In Abbeville the next day, Sheriff George Gamble, who claimed to have started an investigation immediately after the crime was alleged, told the investigators that he placed Hugo Wilson under a five hundred dollar bond. He also assured them that he arrested “all of the boys except Wilson” two days after the assault. Taking the investigators aside, Gamble warned them that the “victim was nothing but a whore around Abbeville” and had “been
treated for some time by the Health Officer of Henry County for venereal disease.” Gamble claimed he even had to put Taylor in jail “once or twice...upon written request from the County Health Officer.” To further discredit Taylor and discourage the investigators from pursuing the case, Gamble added that Taylor’s husband, “would not work and lay around Abbeville practically all the time.” He even threatened to throw him “in jail and charge him with vagrancy.”

Will Cook, the former police chief and white storeowner who said he launched a search for Taylor after she was abducted, told the investigators the same story Gamble had just peddled. After detailing his role in the search that night, Cook smeared Taylor as a prostitute. She “was nothing but a whore around Abbeville,” he insisted. She worked at Fort Rucker, a nearby Army training base, he said, “but they ran her away from there [after she] had given a number of soldiers...the clapp.”

Other whites with whom Kimbrough and Kitchens spoke contradicted Gamble and Cook’s stereotypical description of the Taylors. Mr. W.H. Carr, Recy Taylor’s neighbor and occasional boss, told investigators that Recy and her husband “were good workers.” In more than three years, he said, he had “never seen any strange Negroes hanging around their home.” They “always stayed in their place,” Carr
said, and had “never been involved in any disturbances of any kind.” Other white men in Abbeville corroborated Carr’s characterization of Recy Taylor as an upstanding, respectable woman who abided by the town’s racial and sexual mores. Marvin White, L.D. Smith, Robert Sowell and M.B. Clark, all honorable white men in the community, stated that they knew Taylor and “knew nothing detrimental as to her character.” Most folks, they said, “consider her above the average Negro as to her conduct as a Negro woman in the community.” Major L.A. Hamilton at Fort Rucker told the investigators that there was nothing in Taylor’s file “regarding any misconduct of any nature.”

Kimbrough and Kitchens soon found proof that Sheriff Gamble was lying. Searching through the bonds filed at the Henry County Circuit Court, they discovered that Gamble never placed any of the assailants under arrest; not even Wilson, who admitted having sex with Taylor. After confronting Gamble with the conflicting information, the sheriff stonewalled. “It’s a bad case,” he said.

Despite Gamble’s intransigence, Kimbrough and Kitchens returned to Abbeville with the Assistant Attorney General, John O. Harris, on December 18, 1944. When they arrived, they contacted Sheriff Gamble whose story quickly changed in front of the Governor’s deputy. Gamble told the
Assistant Attorney General that he “never arrested [Taylor] or committed her to jail for any offense.” Nor did he ever have “any trouble with her or her husband.” Taylor’s reputation, Gamble now claimed, “is as good as any Negro’s in that community.” While Gamble still insisted he had arrested the assailants, Kimbrough and Kitchens decided to go directly to the source and ask the suspects what happened the night they picked up Recy Taylor.

Almost all of them told the same story. Four of the seven men admitted having intercourse with Taylor, but argued that she was essentially a prostitute and a willing participant. They took up a collection to pay her, they said. All but two of them said Taylor got into the car on her own volition and that there was no force or coercion used. Hugo Wilson, who Taylor and other witnesses identified on the night of the crime, said he had had nothing to do with her, denied being present and claimed to know “nothing in the world about it.” Recy Taylor, he added, was a “damned liar,” and so were the Sheriff and anyone else who claimed they saw him that night. Herbert Lovett, who cradled a shotgun during the attack on Taylor, claimed he “was never arrested” and “knew nothing of the affair.” Furthermore, he said, he was not with any of the other suspects that night and did not know why his friends
“would want to bring him into something of which he knew nothing and was innocent.”

Willie Joe Culpepper’s version of events corroborated Recy Taylor’s testimony in considerable detail. Culpepper said that he and the other men “were talking about getting a woman” on that September night and “rode out on the highway toward Dothan.” “We saw two women and a man walking along the highway,” he said, and decided to pull over. “All of them except one got out of the automobile,” Culpepper said. Herbert Lovett, he added, took his shotgun “down the road and was talking to Recy Taylor.” A few moments later, Culpepper said, “Recy Taylor came to the automobile with Lovett behind her with the shotgun in his hand.” After turning off the highway, Culpepper recalled that Taylor yelled, “Yo’all are not carrying me to Mr. Gamble.” When they stopped beneath a patch of trees, Lovett forced her out of the car at gunpoint and made her undress. “She was crying and asking them to let her go home to her husband and her baby,” Culpepper said. When it was over, he said, “someone…put a blindfold on Recy’s face, got her in the car and put her out near a street light.” Culpepper added nothing about paying her, but when asked directly by the detectives he quickly corrected himself. “Yes,” he said,
“they paid her money.” He could not remember who took up the collection, however, or how much she received.144

With the suspects’ statements, Culpepper’s admission of coercion, signed affidavits from at least three eye witnesses, and Sheriff Gamble’s recantations and lies, Governor Sparks had enough ammunition to order a second grand jury hearing. He appointed Assistant Attorney General Harris to lead the charge. After meeting with Harris to go over the case, members of the Committee for Equal Justice gathered to debate hiring a new attorney. According to Pauline Dobbs, a SNYC worker present at the meeting, Harris seemed “more concerned about the representative...sent by the Daily Worker to investigate the case” and the “deluge of letters and telegrams received from northern pressure groups” than he was about the “guilt of the criminals or the crime itself.” The whole “purpose of presenting the case to the grand jury in Abbeville,” Dobbs noted, “was to give the defendants light sentences in order to close the case.”145

Dobbs was right to worry. The Attorney General failed to convince the jurors of Henry County that there was enough evidence to indict the seven suspects when he presented Taylor’s case on February 14, 1945. With at least one confession and corroborating testimonies among the
suspects, not to mention the Sheriff’s blatant attempt to stuff the entire affair under the carpet, it seemed like a relatively easy case to close. But the all-white, all-male jurors sat stony-faced and silent. For a second time, they refused to issue any indictments.

News coverage of the second trial hearing was more hostile to Taylor. The Dothan Eagle repeatedly referred to Recy Taylor as “the Taylor woman” and dismissed her testimony—arguing that she was essentially a prostitute. The Birmingham News expressed concern, but not for justice or Recy Taylor. Instead, editors worried that the outcome would only aid “those disposed to think ill of Alabama because of the Scottsboro case.” The Recy Taylor case, the News noted, “was certain to become a cause celebre” and “that is why all Alabamians should be interested.” Already, the editors proclaimed, “this ugly business has drawn national attention.” The ghosts of Scottsboro haunted every discussion. Residents of Henry County “ought to know by this time what agitation for justice by disadvantaged persons can do to bedevil the life of the state.”

The Assistant Attorney General told the Dothan Eagle there was nothing more that could be done. “This case has been presented to two grand juries in Henry County,” he said, and “both grand juries have not seen fit to find an
indictment.” Harris argued that he made a “full
disclosure...and no facts or circumstances connected with
this case have been suppressed.”

Members of the Alabama Committee for Equal Justice
were disheartened by Harris’s statement, which implied that
the state no longer planned to intervene on behalf of Recy
Taylor. It all seemed a little too tidy. E.G. Jackson, E.D.
Nixon and Rosa Parks worried that the state’s public
resignation put Taylor and her family in imminent danger.
Esther Cooper of the SNYC checked in on Recy Taylor after
the trial. Taylor “shows in her face the terror of her
experience,” Cooper said. Taylor told Cooper that their
mail often arrived already opened and that she was afraid
to go into town. Fearful of white retaliation, Parks,
Nixon and other members of the Alabama Committee for Equal
Justice moved Taylor and her family to Montgomery, where
they provided an apartment and secured a job for her
husband. Clara Hard Rutledge, who was one of a handful of
liberal white women in Montgomery who supported the Taylor
case and the bus boycott ten years later, helped to
organize other sympathetic whites. She told Earl Conrad,
the reporter for the Chicago Defender, that the “only
possible approach at the present time is letters to the
Governor.” Local members of the Alabama Committee for
Equal Justice followed Rutledge’s advice and redoubled their efforts to persuade Governor Sparks to intervene. Henrietta Buckmaster, a historian and the new chairwoman of the national Committee for Equal Justice, also urged supporters across the nation to contact Sparks and send money to the Committee: “We can bring these criminals to justice,” she proclaimed, “because the Recy Taylor case is the people’s case.”

Alexander Nunn, the white editor of the Progressive Farmer, a conservative magazine, watched the case “with apprehension,” and worried that the failure to indict would hurt Alabama in the long run. In a letter to Governor Sparks, Nunn encouraged him to send the attackers to jail. “We had a similar case,” Nunn wrote, “though not so disgusting, in my home county of Lee several years ago and the white man, a taxicab driver, was set free at that time. I said then and I say to you now, that for the good of both races, I think I would punish even more quickly and severely, white men for criminally attacking Negro women than I would Negro men.” Lest Sparks mistake him for a wishy-washy liberal, Nunn reminded him that, “no one in this state would be more severe on a Negro in such cases than I would.” Sparks replied that his hands were tied: “Nothing further can be done without a grand jury.
indictment. As you know, the grand jury of any county is all-powerful in the matter of criminal investigation and prosecution. No trial can be had until a grand jury returns an indictment."  

While letters still urged Sparks to intervene, by springtime it was apparent that “people’s case” was going nowhere.

As time passed without an indictment, Henrietta Buckmaster and members of the Executive Board of the Committee for Equal Justice quietly agreed to shift their attention away from the Taylor case and “broaden the scope of [their] work.” At the end of March, the CEJRT issued a press release for a different rape case: “Another young Negro girl has been raped under circumstances of almost incredible brutality. This committee was organized to fight for equal justice for Recy Taylor, but we can not ignore another such case.” The press release referenced a recent case in which three white men in Decatur, Georgia, kidnapped and raped a seventeen-year-old black high school girl. Unlike the Taylor case, a grand jury indicted the assailants, but an all white jury acquitted the three men at their criminal trial on March 23, 1945, after deliberating for only six minutes.

In a letter to board members on April 2, 1945, Buckmaster acknowledged defeat in the Recy Taylor case. It
is time, she said, to “put all [our] forces behind the
demand for punishment of the rapists of a 17 year old Negro
girl in Decatur.”155 Shortly thereafter, they sent out fliers
screaming, “The Terror Spreads!” In Memphis, Tennessee, the
Committee announced, “two Negro girls were forced into a
police car, taken for a ride in the country and criminally
assaulted by two uniformed policemen.” And in
Bennettsville, South Carolina, “a respectable Negro woman
was ordered off the streets by four white men and forced to
pay a five dollar fine.” By referring to these very
different incidents as “terror,” the CEJRT signaled its
intent to wage war not only upon the ritual of rape, but
also the everyday assaults African American women faced.

In a pamphlet promoting the committee’s broader
approach, Buckmaster argued that despite the lack of a
legal conviction, the successful mobilization of activists
across the nation on behalf of Recy Taylor represented a
major victory. “Our hope of a free new world,” she said,
“our passionate conviction that the day has almost come
when women everywhere may raise their children without fear
and love their husbands with assurance and be the
individuals to which their highest hopes and capacities
entitled them. This is what we’re fighting for.” “When we
say “Equal Justice for Recy Taylor,”” Buckmaster wrote, “we
are also saying Equal Hope, Equal Joy, Equal Dignity for every woman, child and man the wide world over....Is that too much to ask?"

The announcement of the Committee for Equal Justice’s new aims came on the eve of the greatest red scare in American history. Coupled with the legal dead-ends it hit in Alabama, the Committee’s ability to mobilize local people and rally nationwide support slowed as Southern segregationists combined white supremacy and vicious red-baiting to attack African American activism as a communist plot to destroy “the Southern way of life.” These bitter attacks forced the more radical leaders of the Alabama branch of the CEJRT, like the SNYC women, to seek shelter in other states or less tainted organizations, where they continued to press for racial justice. Mainstream black activists who were involved in the campaign for equal justice for Recy Taylor, but were otherwise not affiliated with the Communist Party, like E.D. Nixon, Rosa Parks, E.G. Jackson, Rufus Lewis, and Johnnie Carr in Montgomery, distanced themselves from their more radical allies. In later years, they would use the international Cold War as a political lever to expose the deep canyon between the United States’ boasts of freedom and democracy and the brutal reality of segregation. But when the Red Scare
began, they did what was necessary to survive politically and continue their assault on Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{157}

Although the struggle to secure justice for Recy Taylor did not succeed in the short-term, it was the largest and best organized of many efforts to draw attention to the ruthless heart of the racial caste system. Decades later, when radical feminists finally made rape and sexual assault political issues, they walked in the footsteps of generations of black women. If they did not always know this, it was hardly the fault of African American women in the South, who testified both in the nation’s courts and its newspapers that their bodies were not their own. The Recy Taylor case brought the building blocks of the Montgomery bus boycott together a decade earlier, and kept them in place until it became Rosa Parks’ turn to testify. When that boycott took off, no one called it a women’s movement, though many observers then and since have noted the centrality of women in its ranks. Even Dr. King credited “the zeitgeist” when asked to comment on the strange, spontaneous combustion of the bus protest. But the Montgomery bus boycott was not a prairie fire or a rising tide, or a gear that tumbled in the cosmos. It was another in a series of campaigns that began when Rosa Parks rode up
to Abbeville in 1944 to gather the facts in the Recy Taylor case, so that black women could tell their stories.

Indeed, many of the African Americans who cut their political teeth defending black women like Recy Taylor, who were raped by white men in Alabama in the 1940’s, brought their experiences and organizational insight to other struggles for dignity and justice in the 1950s and 1960s. Like E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks in Montgomery, they often became pillars of the modern civil rights movement.

The national campaign to defend Recy Taylor highlighted the power of sexual stories to mobilize communities and build coalitions. African Americans throughout the country risked their lives and livelihoods on behalf of black women’s right to bodily integrity. This cut to the heart of people’s lives. It was deeper than voting rights, deeper than the poisons of stigma and exploitation, though those cruelties were also fundamental to the racial caste system.

While the survivors of sexualized violence rarely received justice in southern courts, black women like Recy Taylor who were raped by white men in the 1940s, used their voices as weapons against white supremacy. Their testimonies were a form of direct action. Taylor’s refusal to remain silent helped expose a ritual of rape in
existence since slavery, inspired a nationwide campaign to defend black womanhood, and gave hope to thousands suffering through similar abuses. Because of the campaign for equal justice for Recy Taylor, sexual violence and interracial rape became the battleground upon which African Americans sought to destroy white supremacy and gain personal and political autonomy. That battleground is where the modern civil rights movement began, though its roots were as deep as the Atlantic slave trade.

As World War II came to a bloody close, another war was about to begin on the buses in Montgomery, Alabama.
Chapter Two
“Negroes every day are being molested”

After spending a hot July day studying at Alabama State Teachers College in Montgomery, Ella Ree Jones decided to catch the earliest bus home. She felt ill all morning and was in no mood for a fight. She boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus, the same one Rosa Parks would make famous thirteen years later, and quietly slipped into a seat opposite the rear door, in the section reserved for Colored passengers. The bus filled to capacity as it rumbled through downtown Montgomery. Glancing into his rear view mirror, the bus driver noticed one white man standing. At the next stop, he turned and glared at Jones.

“Girl, get up and let this passenger sit down,” he said.

“I am sick,” Jones replied. “And I don’t feel able to stand up for that man to sit down.” “Besides,” she added, “I am over half-way to the back of the bus.”

Unwilling to engage in a debate about the subtleties of segregation, the driver became agitated. “Do you want to stand up,” he shouted, “or do you want me to put you off?”

“Neither,” Jones said.
Suddenly, the bus lurched to the curb and the driver scurried out. He made sure he locked the back door before he called the police.\textsuperscript{158}

The trapped black and white passengers collectively held their breath. Granted police powers, bus drivers enforced segregation with an iron fist. Many kept blackjacks and pistols under their seats, wielding them whenever their authority was challenged. It was not unusual for black passengers to defy drivers, whose penchant for cruelty angered even the most accommodating customers, but it carried enormous risk.\textsuperscript{159} The complaint records of the Birmingham buses are riddled with reports of drivers beating, shooting, and even killing black passengers.\textsuperscript{160} When Jones ignored the driver’s direct order, everyone on the bus knew she sat in the path of peril.

As the driver waited for the officers to arrive, a white man carrying carpenter’s tools walked over to Jones and pulled out a shiny, sharp saw. Standing over her with the saw drawn back, he told the student he had a “notion to slap [her] brains out.” Just then, the driver returned, flanked by two Montgomery police officers. Pointing toward Jones, the driver sneered, “I’m going to teach you to do what the white man tells you to do.” The officers lunged and pulled the student out of her seat and down the back
steps, scattering her school supplies. They grabbed her arms, twisted them until she screamed and pushed her toward the waiting police car. When one officer loosened his grip long enough to open the back door, she clawed his face with her fingernails. “He threatened to kill me then,” she recalled later. “They cursed me all the way to City Hall.”

When they arrived at City Hall, the officers dragged Jones behind the building and beat her with a pipe until she was, as she put it, “too weak to get off the ground without help.” She struggled to stand, but they kicked her repeatedly. As she writhed on the ground, one of the officers grabbed Jones’s head between his hands and propelled it into the brick wall. She collapsed and crumbled to the ground. Clenching her arm, an officer pulled her toward the back steps, then “twisted his hand into [her] hair and picked [her] up off the ground by [her] hair.” Finally on her feet, the officers pushed Jones up the stairs, poking her with a walking stick until she was in a jail cell. “What am I being charged with?” Jones asked before the officer slammed the door. “Suspicion,” he said.  

The police held Jones overnight, denied her medical attention, and took her to court the next morning where she was fined $28.00. Standing before a judge in a bloodied
and torn dress, she demanded to know the reason for the exorbitant fine. "Case closed," the judge said and dismissed Jones with a flick of his wrist.

The next day, Jones filed a complaint with the national NAACP. Thurgood Marshall, a young attorney working for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, was appalled by the beating and the trumped up charges. Despite his age, Marshall was the most celebrated black lawyer in America, having won a number of high profile cases including the integration of Missouri Law School in 1938.\textsuperscript{162} His growing status as a civil rights warrior led thousands of people to flood his New York office with complaints of racial discrimination and police brutality. "There is no question in my mind," Marshall said in a letter to T.T. Allen, the president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP in 1942, "that we should bring suit against the bus company, and take whatever steps we can against the policemen."\textsuperscript{163} Apparently the case never went to court.

Thurgood Marshall’s problem was that there were too many cases and too few resources. Marshall and his colleagues performed a cruel triage to determine which cases to pursue. African Americans choosing to testify in racially charged cases placed themselves and their loved ones at great risk. Sometimes the victims scratched out
shaky lives among the downtrodden that could easily be caricatured to discredit them. Sometimes the cases were heart wrenching but hopeless from a legal standpoint, given the realities of judicial practices in a hard racial caste system. Finding the right combination of strong documentation, brave witnesses, sympathetic victims and legal resources tested Thurgood Marshall’s legal and political acumen.

In a letter to his mentor, Judge William H. Hastie, the Dean of Howard Law School, Marshall asked for advice on how to respond to the brutal mistreatment and sexual harassment of two black women on a bus at an Alabama military camp in 1945. The two women, Private Roberta McKenzie and Private First Class Gladys Blackmon, boarded an empty bus and sat down in the rear. When asked to stand so that a white man could sit, they both refused, arguing that there were plenty of seats remaining in the white section. The bus driver grabbed his nightstick, walked towards the two Women’s Army Corps [WAC] members and knocked off their hats. He then slapped both women and, they alleged, “punched them in the breast,” while uttering profanities. After he pushed them off the bus, they reported the attack to the NAACP. In the midst of a “War for Democracy”, Marshall knew that the beating of black
WACs in uniform would be explosive. “This is one of the worst cases we have had in this office for some time,” he said. It “looks like dynamite to me.”

Ten years later, thousands of working and middle-class women, fed up with decades of abuse, took to the streets to protest their mistreatment and demand the right to “sit with dignity.” Historians point to the well-known 1955 Montgomery bus boycott as the opening scene of the modern civil rights drama. In many ways, however, the 1955 boycott was the one of the last acts of the Montgomery movement. It was the culmination of a decade of black women’s activism and a history of gendered political appeals—often led by black veterans—to protect black women from sexual and physical assault. Only by understanding the long and relatively hidden history of sexualized violence in Montgomery, Alabama, and African Americans’ efforts to protect black womanhood, can we see that the Montgomery bus boycott was more than a movement for civil rights. It was also a women’s movement for dignity, respect and bodily integrity.

Rosa Parks left Alabama for the first time in 1946. Atlanta was less than two hundred miles away, but seemed a
world away from the rickety rural shacks that still dotted the Alabama countryside. The New South city promised great change and possibility for the future. Skyscrapers sparkled against the sky and served as a backdrop for the bustling business district anchored by the headquarters of Sears Roebuck and Coca-Cola. Streams of automobiles roared through the city on viaducts high above the busy rail lines. Airplanes took off and landed just outside town. Though Atlanta was thoroughly segregated, it seemed to be the perfect setting for an NAACP meeting dedicated to training future leaders who would seize the opportunities of the postwar period to wage war against Jim Crow.

Thurgood Marshall, known as “Mr. Civil Rights” since he persuaded the Supreme Court to strike down the white primary as unconstitutional in 1944, was the keynote speaker. Though African Americans won some concessions during World War II, there was much work to be done, he said, listing the primary problems plaguing African Americans throughout the South. Much of what he focused on—police brutality, discrimination in public facilities, job discrimination and segregation—resonated with Rosa Parks, who had reams of notes on such abuses in Montgomery. But his final topic, the heinous treatment of returning black veterans, was on everyone’s mind that year.
For the approximately one million African Americans who served in the armed forces, victory over totalitarianism abroad meant little without real change at home. Having helped topple Hitler, black soldiers were not about to bow before the Bilbos and Talmadges of the South. Instead, they returned home with a new sense of pride and purpose, and often led campaigns for citizenship rights, legal equality, and bodily integrity.\textsuperscript{167} In small towns and cities across the South, black veterans became the “shock troops” of an emerging civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{168}

White Southerners responded to postwar black activism with a wave of violence that reasserted white supremacy.\textsuperscript{169} In Birmingham, Alabama, police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor directed a force that was responsible for untold numbers of racially motivated beatings, bombings, and murders in the years immediately after World War II. Within the first six weeks of 1946 alone, uniformed officers reportedly killed five black men, all veterans, because they had taken part in voter registration drives.\textsuperscript{170} On February 12, 1946, Linwood Shull, the chief of police in Aiken, South Carolina, jammed his billy club into Sergeant Isaac Woodard’s eye sockets after the black serviceman, home from a fifteen-month stint in the South Pacific, got into an argument with a white bus driver. The beating
permanently blinded Woodard. After an all-white jury in Columbia, South Carolina acquitted Shull of any charges, white spectators in the crowded courtroom roared with approval.\textsuperscript{171}

Fearful of black veterans’ refusal to stay “in their place,” whites in Georgia warned African Americans, especially vets, to stay away from the polls in 1946. Since Thurgood Marshall helped persuade the Supreme Court in \textit{Smith v. Allwright} to outlaw the white primary two years earlier, strict adherence to the Court’s ruling would have transformed the political landscape. Whites across the region turned to extralegal terror. In Greenville, the Ku Klux Klan planted a fiery cross in a black neighborhood, hoping it was enough to scare away any potential voters. In Cairo, masked men fired shots at the homes of prominent blacks. Throughout the state, white men nailed warnings and death threats on the doors of black homes and slipped them inside black newspapers.\textsuperscript{172} On July 17, 1946--Election Day--veteran Maceo Snipes walked past armed thugs patrolling the ballot box to cast his first and last ballot. Later that night, four white men dragged him out of his house and murdered him.\textsuperscript{173}

A few weeks later, a white mob led by the Georgia state police, shot two black couples to death in broad
daylight. Roger Malcolm, one of the victims, had stabbed his white landlord earlier that summer, allegedly because he showed sexual interest in Malcolm’s pregnant wife, Dorothy. Dorothy’s brother, George Dorsey, a veteran, defended his sister’s womanhood and his brother-in-law’s actions, insisting black men have the same right as white men to protect their women. Enraged whites gathered on July 25, 1946 beneath Moore’s Ford Bridge. Along the sloping banks of a river, a mob lined up the two couples and peppered their bodies with bullets.174 “Up until George went into the army,” Loy Harrison, one of the murderers, said years later, “he was a good nigger. But when he came out, they thought they were as good as any white people.”175

It did not take long for white southerners to equate black efforts to gain equality as a mask for more sinister, sexual desires, an argument rooted in Reconstruction-era politics. During the 1890s, former slaveholders and their Democratic political allies used the rhetoric of rape and fabricated rape scares, as Glenda Gilmore put it, as “a politically driven wedge powered by the sledgehammer of white supremacy” to seize power from the biracial coalitions of Republicans and Populists that swept elections in Southern states.176 Black activists in the
post–World War II period often joked that “the closer a black man got to a ballot box, the more he looked like a rapist.” However, African American men did not actually have to vote or threaten political overthrow to be accused of rape. As Frederick Douglass noted nearly a century earlier, the myth of the black man as a rapist was an “invention with a well defined motive.” These ghosts were easily conjured in the uncertain years after the war. Whites used rape as a catchall charge to justify violence against African Americans and undermine their political, social, and economic rights.

For example, in August 1946, police in Minden, Louisiana arrested and jailed John C. Jones, a twenty-eight-year-old black veteran, and his seventeen-year-old cousin, Albert Harris, for acting “uppity” after they protested an unfair land deal. However, police claimed the two men were “prowling” around a white woman’s window, though she refused to press charges. After several days in jail, police released them into a mob of armed white men. The mob drove Harris and Jones down a country road, where they tortured and beat Harris until they believed he was dead. Then the mob mutilated Jones with a meat cleaver and a blowtorch. When they were satisfied with their work, the mob left the mangled men in a ditch, ostensibly dead.
Jones died, but Harris managed to survive and eventually identified five of the murderers in court, though an all-white jury quickly acquitted them.

The brutal beating of Isaac Woodard and Albert Harris, the murder of Maceo Snipes and John Jones, the lynching on Moore’s Ford Bridge and dozens of other incidents across the South in 1946 were designed, as one white man put it, to “keep Mister Nigger in his place.”\textsuperscript{181} Walter White, head of the NAACP, called the violence “a rabies of the spirit...a mob sickness.” This disease, he said, is “a dread epidemic” that was “rampant in our land.”\textsuperscript{182} In an effort to end the violence, the national NAACP and forty other civil rights groups formed the National Emergency Committee Against Mob Violence on August 6, 1946 to focus national and international attention on racist brutality.\textsuperscript{183} The committee met with President Harry Truman a month later and urged him to use the power of the federal government to end mob violence in the South.

They believed Truman would act, if only to boost the United State’s image in the world at the dawn of the Cold War. Images of lynchings and racial violence scarred the front pages of newspapers around the world, mocking American ideals of democracy. The Soviet newspaper, Trud, pointed to the “increasing frequency of terroristic acts
against Negroes,” as part of an expose on the “Position of Negroes in the USA.”\textsuperscript{184} Segregation, a reporter for a Sri-Lankan newspaper noted, “is the greatest propaganda gift any country could give to the Kremlin in its persistent bid for the affections of the coloured races of the world.”\textsuperscript{185} Federal action would not only shore up America’s image abroad, the Committee assured Truman, but also give black voters in the urban North, whose ballots could tilt the election in his favor, an incentive to vote for Truman in the 1948 presidential election.\textsuperscript{186}

Truman responded with Executive Order 9808, creating the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) on December 5, 1946. He hailed their report, To Secure These Rights, as “an American charter of human freedom in our time” and a “guide for action.”\textsuperscript{187} The report condemned lynching, disfranchisement, and racial discrimination in public accommodations, housing and employment, and issued concrete prescriptions for change. Nearly a decade before the Brown v. Board of Education decision, To Secure These Rights asserted unequivocally that segregation was “inconsistent with the fundamental equalitarianism of the American way of life in that it marks groups with the brand of inferior status.” Most importantly, the report argued that it was the job of the federal government to protect
individuals from racial violence and discrimination, something that would not be codified until the Civil Rights Act of 1968.\footnote{188}

At the 1948 statewide NAACP convention in Mobile, Alabama, African Americans praised Truman’s new commitment to civil rights. But Rosa Parks, who attended the meeting as a delegate from the Montgomery branch, was more cynical. She knew sexual violence sat at the core of white supremacy and she feared a terrible backlash as segregationists, whose anger had already been roused by rising black activism, came unhinged. They viewed the report as a federal attack on the Southern way of life and an open invitation for interracial sex. Truman’s actions, segregationists argued, would lead to intermarriage, “amalgamation,” “miscegenation,” and the rape of white women. Led by Strom Thurmond from South Carolina, Southern legislators raced to vilify the President. In a fiery diatribe on the US Senate floor, Mississippi’s James Eastland and his state colleagues accused Truman of “turning over the government to the mongrelized minorities.”\footnote{189}

In popular memory, Rosa Parks leaves the speechifying to Dixie demagogues and Dr. King, but at the 1948 NAACP
Convention in Mobile, Parks gave an impassioned speech warning her colleagues to be wary of any federal civil rights promises. With southern Democrats like Eastland and Thurmond threatening to bolt the Democratic Party, Parks suspected that few, if any, of Truman’s initiatives on civil rights would become law. Besides, she argued, no matter how promising the report was, it would not end the wanton abuse and harassment of African Americans. “No one should feel proud,” she said, “when Negroes every day are being molested and maltreated.” Parks’s fiery speech got her elected secretary of the Statewide Conference of the Alabama NAACP, a job she took on in addition to her work for the Montgomery branch, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and her employment as a seamstress.¹⁹⁰

The new state NAACP position expanded the scope of Parks’s work documenting racial incidents, discrimination and violence in Alabama. “There were many, many cases to keep records on,” she recalled later.¹⁹¹ The failure to secure justice for Recy Taylor in 1944—one of the first cases Parks worked on as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP—weighed heavily on her memory. “There wasn’t much we could do,” she admitted in her memoir. “The NAACP and the Committee [for Equal Justice] managed to get Governor Sparks to commence a special grand jury to investigate the
case—though that grand jury also refused to indict the men.” “Of course,” Parks noted, “the opposite was true if a white woman cried rape and accused a black man.”

Parks clearly understood, as historian Timothy B. Tyson puts it, that the “much traveled back-road between the races was clearly marked ‘one-way’.” When white women violated these Southern signposts, it was not uncommon for them to sacrifice their black lovers to save themselves from the stigma of violating the South’s most sacred taboo. No one traveling in Parks’ political circles, for example, could have failed to hear about the tragedy of Willie McGee.

McGee, a married African American man from Laurel, Mississippi, entered into a long sexual relationship with his white employer, Mrs. Willametta Hawkins, after she threatened to cry rape if he refused her flirtatious advances. Hawkins first propositioned McGee, who often did odd jobs around her house, in 1942. “I was waxing the floors with her in the house and she showed a willingness to be familiar and let me have intercourse with her in the back room,” McGee said. “After that, she frequently sent for me to do work which gave opportunities for intercourse, which she accepted, and on occasions after dark,” he said, “she took me in her automobile out to a place in the
graveyard where we had intercourse.” The illicit relationship smacked of coercion from the start, but turned brutal when word leaked out.

McGee’s wife, Rosalee, figured out what was going on when Mrs. Hawkins surprised McGee as he and his wife walked home from a movie theater. “All of a sudden,” Rosalee said, “Mrs. Hawkins come out of an alley, and she says to Willie, ‘I got my car over here. Come on into my car with me.’” Rosalee protested and McGee told Hawkins to “go away.” “This is my wife,” he said, shocked at the woman’s audacity. “I’m with my wife!!”

“Don’t fool with no Negro whores,” Hawkins shouted, angry at being rebuffed.

McGee reluctantly went with Hawkins, fearing the tragic consequences of turning her away. “People who don’t know the South don’t know what would have happened to Willie if he told her no,” Rosalee told a friend. “Down South you tell a woman like that no, and she’ll cry rape anyway. So what else could Willie do?”

McGee finally broke off the relationship with Hawkins in November 1945, just before her husband, Troy, discovered the affair. After Troy and Willametta had a terrible fight, she called the police to report that a black, kinky-
haired intruder had raped her. Within a few hours, police held McGee in custody.\(^{196}\)

Nothing could have convinced white Southerners that Willametta Hawkins seduced McGee or that they had had a long-term sexual relationship. While it was perfectly reasonable, if frowned upon in some circles, for a white man to have a sexual relationship with a black woman, the segregated social order strictly forbade white women and black men from association, let alone sex. The chief justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court called the suggestion of a mutual love affair between a black man and a white woman a “revolting insinuation” that he “could not entertain” or “even consider in court.” He sent McGee to the electric chair without hesitation.\(^{197}\) That McGee received the death sentence for what was a relatively common, if covert, practice among white men and black women underscored the hierarchy of race and sex in the segregated South. It also helped launch an international protest movement.

The Civil Rights Congress [CRC], a leftist legal defense and protest organization, led the worldwide efforts to free McGee.\(^{198}\) Despite three interventions by the U.S. Supreme Court and overwhelming evidence of racial bias in sentencing in Mississippi, officials readied the portable
electric chair at the Jones County courthouse and scheduled McGee’s execution for May 8, 1951. Anne Braden, a white activist from Louisville, Kentucky who protested the public execution, demanded that “no more innocent men...die in the name of protecting southern white womanhood. We have been made a party to this injustice too long.” Willie McGee understood the political purpose of his execution. “You know I am innocent,” he told his wife in a letter the night before he was scheduled to die. “The real reason they are going to take my life is to keep the Negro down in the South.”

Near midnight on that fateful May evening, state officials delivered two deadly currents of electricity to Willie McGee as an ecstatic, almost all-white audience of five hundred men, women and children gathered outside. Troy and Willametta Hawkins stood amongst their neighbors and cheered McGee’s death.

Willie McGee was not the first nor the last black man executed for violating the South’s racial and sexual rules. On February 2, 1951, officials at the Virginia State Penitentiary executed seven black men convicted of raping a white woman in Martinsville two years earlier. On January 8, 1949, Ruby Floyd, a thirty-two year old white woman accused the seven black men of violently raping her.
The police rounded up some suspects and within a matter of days, seven men sat in jail. By the end of January, the "Martinsville Seven" had been tried, convicted and sentenced to death.204

As African Americans in Martinsville dealt with the shock of "seven rapid-fire consecutive death sentences," they faced the stark reminder that white men guilty of the same crime almost never received the same punishment. The Pittsburgh Courier highlighted this discrepancy on May 14, 1949, by juxtaposing the front-page announcement of the "Martinsville Seven" death sentences with an article detailing the rape of a black woman by two white police officers in Richmond, Virginia. The policemen, Carl R. Burleson and Leonard E. Davis, kidnapped the black woman, a waitress and mother of two, then drove her to a construction site and sexually assaulted her. Judge John L. Ingram found Burleson and Davis guilty and sentenced them to seven years in prison. The guilty verdict was surprising, but the paltry sentence, however, reminded black women that society did not consider them worthy of the same protection afforded white women.205

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, "protection" of white womanhood often meant shielding them from any kind of contact with African-American men, sexual or otherwise. In
Yanceyville, North Carolina, the collision of race and sex was so combustible in the summer of 1951 that even a glance in the wrong direction could land a black man in jail. On June 4, Mack Ingram, a forty-two-year-old black farmer and father of nine children, walked through a tobacco field on the Boswell farm to ask the white owner if he could borrow a trailer. About seventy-five feet ahead of him walked the farmer’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Willa Jean Boswell, who wore overalls and carried a hoe. Willa Jean screamed and began running when she saw Ingram walking in the same direction. She ran as fast as she could until she reached her brother. Exhausted and clearly terrified, she informed him that Ingram was “looking at her in a leering manner.” Her father called the police, who arrested Ingram later that afternoon. At the trial two weeks later, Willa Jean admitted Ingram never spoke to her, nor could he have since he was always at least seventy-five feet away. Still, her father argued, Ingram’s “eyes were all over her.”

A charge of “eye rape” was enough for Judge Ralph Vernon of the Recorder’s Court to sentence Ingram to two years of hard labor. According to the NAACP, which launched a campaign to defend Ingram, it was “as fantastic a story as has ever been enacted in an American court.” It ought to be “sold to Ripley’s Believe It or Not,” they
Although the charge of “eye rape” seemed utterly absurd, it was deadly serious. “The big issue,” according to the Chicago Defender, “is the right of a Colored man to walk across a farm road or walk the streets of Yancevillle” without the fear of being killed or sent to prison “because [a white woman] doesn’t like the way he looks at her.” The North Carolina Supreme Court finally dismissed the case in 1953.

While the CRC, NAACP, and other organizations lost the Martinsville Seven and Willie McGee cases, they helped expose the South’s legal double standards. At the same time, they revealed to the world the South’s tendency toward hysteria when black men and white women crossed paths, whether in a bedroom or a wide-open tobacco field. Though McGee lost his life, his defenders worked to make audible the “whispered narrative of consensual interracial sex that had been the real story behind too many southern lynchings.”

Rosa Parks labored tirelessly on similar cases in Montgomery, but one in particular haunted her. In 1952, a white Montgomery woman cried rape after a nosy neighbor caught her undressing with her sixteen-year-old black lover, Jeremiah Reeves. The woman cried rape when she saw
the neighbor peering in her window. Shortly thereafter, Montgomery police arrested Reeves and beat a confession out of him. The lower courts found Reeves guilty of rape and sentenced him to die. Reeves’ mother, Parks recalled, “brought the case to the NAACP.” The Montgomery branch, she said, “struggled for quite a few years” to save the young man. They challenged his sentence all the way to the United States Supreme Court to no avail. Alabama officials executed Reeves in 1957. “It was a tragedy he lost his life,” Parks said. “I tried to find some way of documenting that [the white woman had] lied but I was never able to do so...sometimes it was very difficult to keep going when all our work seemed to be in vain.”

Cases like Jeremiah Reeves’s and Willie McGee’s taught African Americans, as Martin Luther King Jr. noted in Stride Toward Freedom, to “fear and mistrust the white man’s justice.” “In the years that [Reeves] sat in jail,” King wrote, “several white men in Alabama also had been charged with rape, but their accusers were Negro girls.” White men were seldom arrested and if they were, King said, “They were soon released by the grand jury. No one was ever brought to trial.” This was mostly true throughout the South, but Montgomery seemed to get more than its share of what NAACP leader Roy Wilkins called “sex cases.”
Laboring patiently for the NAACP in Montgomery, Rosa Parks felt that 1949 in particular was a “very bad year.” “There was a lot of white violence against blacks,” she recalled. “Things happened,” she said, “that most people never heard about.”

Even if the stories never got their due in the mainstream press, it was the misfortune and courage of a number of unknown women who helped mobilize the African American community in the late 1940s around issues of sexualized violence. These campaigns sparked larger protests for dignity and bodily integrity that culminated in the Montgomery bus boycott. The truly decisive moment came in 1949, when two white police officers attacked a young woman named Gertrude Perkins. “Gertrude Perkins is not even mentioned in the history books,” Joe Azbell, former editor of the Montgomery Advertiser, said, “but she had as much to do with the bus boycott and its creation as anyone on earth.”

The moon illuminated the dark street as Gertrude Perkins, a twenty-five-year-old black woman, walked home, a little unsteady on her feet after a night of partying. It was after midnight on March 27, 1949, when a squad car
inched toward her and stopped. Two Montgomery police officers, their badges glimmering in the moonlight, told Perkins to halt, then walked toward her. Smelling beer on her breath, they accused her of public drunkenness and ordered her to get into their car. When she refused, they grabbed her and pushed her into the backseat. They drove to the edge of a railroad embankment and dragged her behind a building where the uniformed men raped her repeatedly at gunpoint and forced her to have “all types of sex relations.” When they finished, they shoved Perkins back into the car, then dumped her out in the middle of town and sped away.

Alone on the dark roadside, terrified and shaken, Perkins nevertheless mustered the clarity and courage to report the crime. Instead of going home to her three children, she went directly to Reverend Solomon S. Seay Sr.’s house. Seay was the prominent and rotund minister of the AME Zion church. A newcomer to Montgomery, Seay was already regarded as one of the most outspoken black ministers in Montgomery. She knocked on the door of the Holt Street parsonage, where Seay and his family lived. Awaking him, Perkins told Seay the details of her assault through sobs and tears. He could smell the alcohol and
wondered if perhaps she was lying. “If you’re not telling the truth,” he said, “you’re going to be in big trouble.”

“I’m telling you the dying truth,” she insisted. Seay decided that even if she had had too much to drink, she did not deserve to be attacked. “No white or black man,” he said, “had a right to rape her.” Seay consoled Perkins and listened as she spoke. “We didn’t go to bed that morning,” he recalled. “I kept her at my house, carefully wrote down what she said, and later had it notarized.” He sent Perkins’s horror story to syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, who let the whole country know what happened in his daily radio address before Montgomery’s white leaders knew what hit them.217

Early the next day, Seay escorted Perkins to the police station so she could report the crime. She asked Mayor John L. Goodwyn to arrest her assailants. He quickly rebuffed her. Goodwyn, who also served as police commissioner, refused to hold a lineup so Perkins could identify her attackers. He denied her request to see a log of who was on duty the previous evening. Goodwyn claimed that providing access to that information would “violate the Constitutional rights of the members of the Police Department as individuals.”218
As word of the attack spread, E. D. Nixon and Reverend Seay, the leaders of the local Ministerial Alliance, the Negro Improvement League, and the NAACP, organized the Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins. Dozens of active black citizens joined to demand equal justice and protection for black women. Mary Fair Burks, an English professor at Alabama State and her newly formed middle-class organization, the Women’s Political Council, may also have been involved since one of their early goals was to “come to the defense of women who had been victimized by rape and other physical assaults.”

At the first meeting of the Citizens Committee, members elected Reverend Seay chairman of the “investigating committee.” His job was to find the police officers who attacked Perkins. When the meeting adjourned, members of the Citizens Committee poured out of the YMCA and ran into a wall of police cars and blinding headlights. Seay stepped forward. “Why are you flashing your lights into my face,” he asked. An officer stepped out of his car, grabbed his club with one hand and pulled at his gun with the other and walked over to Seay. Without saying a word, he threw his arm back and hurled the club into Seay’s chest.
"You’re under arrest," the officer said as Seay recoiled in pain. Members of the Citizen’s Committee rushed around Seay.

"Y’all ought to leave this man alone," someone said, "he ain’t doing anymore than you do…trying to defend his women." Police grabbed Seay, pushed him into their squad car and drove him downtown. At the jailhouse, the chief-of-police recognized the minister. "Pull your hat off," he ordered. "We gonna teach you that we run this town. Niggers don’t run it." The next day E. D. Nixon helped bail Seay out and promised that the NAACP would defend him in court.221

As the ministers and the NAACP rallied around Seay and Perkins, white officials publicly dismissed Perkins’s case. The Mayor claimed Perkins’ rape charge was "completely false." He insisted that holding a line-up or issuing any warrants would set a bad precedent since, as Goodwyn argued, "charges of this nature, even though untrue…are often used to destroy goodwill between the races."222 Besides, he added, his "policemen would not do a thing like that."223 Since black prostitutes had routinely serviced white police officers in the past in exchange for allowing the existence of brothels in Montgomery, perhaps Mayor
Goodwyn thought there was no need to resort to violence or force for interracial intimacies.\textsuperscript{224}

Blacks in Montgomery knew better. The city’s police force had a reputation for physical and sexual violence. Police brutality plagued the black community. The Perkins case was just the tip of the iceberg.\textsuperscript{225} E.G. Jackson, editor of Montgomery’s black newspaper, the Alabama Tribune, urged action on the Perkins case and reminded readers of a similar assault three years earlier.

In 1946, Viola White, an African American woman who worked at Maxwell Air Force Base, had refused a bus driver’s order to move out of her seat. The driver threatened to physically remove her, but she would not budge. Finally, he called the police and asked them to arrest her. When the officer arrived, he beat White into submission and took her to jail. The next day, a judge found White guilty of “disobeying a bus driver.” White was so incensed that she hired a lawyer to appeal her case. Not long after she filed suit, Montgomery police retaliated. One afternoon, Officer A. A. Enger seized White’s sixteen-year-old daughter, drove her to a cemetery and raped her. As the officer thrust himself inside her, she stared at his car, focused on memorizing the tag number. The next day, she reported the crime. After many
attempts, E.D. Nixon was finally able to get a judge to sign a warrant for Enger’s arrest. Instead of detaining Enger or firing him, however, the police chief decided to let him slip quietly out of town.\footnote{226}

While E. G. Jackson recalled other unsolved crimes against black women, the assault on Gertrude Perkins, he said, was “one of the worst crimes ever committed in...Montgomery.” “The head officials,” he complained, are still “trying to keep it quiet.”\footnote{227} But nothing could silence the voices of protest coming from the Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins. Their public protests, sensational newspaper headlines and a flood of “inflammatory” pamphlets garnered massive attention throughout the city. Even the Montgomery Advertiser, the ‘white’ daily newspaper, followed Perkins’s case for nearly two months, often featuring the latest news on the front page.\footnote{228} Because of the media attention, unrelenting protests from the Citizens Committee, and the dogged determination of Perkins’s white liberal lawyers, John and Virgil McGee, the Mayor finally relented and brought the case in front of the grand jury.\footnote{229}
Reverend Seay accompanied Perkins to court on May 20, 1949, nearly two months after police assaulted her and beat Reverend Seay. Seay waited outside the closed courtroom where he could hear County Solicitor Temple Siebels berate Perkins with his “roaring, shaking and loud voice.” “Aren’t you lying,” he bellowed repeatedly. “No,” Perkins said plainly. “I am not lying.”\(^{230}\) The fact that she did not say “sir” must have unsettled Siebels, who continued to verbally assault her. His bellicose style did not seem to rattle Perkins, who walked out of the courtroom, according to Seay, “as calm as anybody you’ve ever seen in your life.”

Perkins’s dignified self-defense belied white portrayals of her as a drunk and an “ignorant, almost illiterate black woman,” but that did not stop Siebels from presenting her as a prostitute.\(^{231}\) “Reverend,” Siebels said to Seay when he was questioned in front of the jury, “did you know that Gertrude Perkins was...that she’s just a common street woman?” Seay argued that Perkins’s character was not the issue. “Whatever she [is],” Seay said, “she had rights that no man had a right to violate.” Besides, Seay argued, “since when did policemen gain the special liberty, on or off duty, to be entertained in such a fashion?”\(^{232}\)
Perkins’s testimony and Seay’s defense did not move the all white, all male jury. Convinced that “there was no evidence of rape in the Perkins case,” the jurors refused to indict anyone. In an interview with the Montgomery Advertiser, the lead juror declared Perkins’ testimony full of “manufactured lies.” Then, scolding the Citizens Committee and the NAACP, he argued that “the publicity of this case has not been helpful to the racial relations of the city.”233 In order to stave off any protests, the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser felt compelled to report that the men serving on the jury were “prominently identified” with Montgomery’s different churches, including “five Methodists, seven Baptists, three Presbyterians, and three members of the Church of Christ.”234

“You could see what the point was,” Reverend Seay stated in response to the newspaper’s reference to ecumenical diversity. The Advertiser hoped this tactic would stave off any criticism of the verdict. In an editorial designed to put any hard feelings to rest, the Advertiser argued that “those colored people who have felt humiliated or angered over the Perkins case can now abate those emotions.” The Advertiser pointed to a similar case seventeen miles north, in Wetumpka, Alabama, in which two white men, John C. Howard and Jack Oliver, received forty-
five year sentences for raping two black women as proof that African Americans could get justice in the courts.235

“We have no doubt,” the Advertiser insisted, “had there been evidence, the same would have happened here.” After all, the Advertiser continued, “the case ran the full process of our Anglo-Saxon system of justice. What more could have been done?”236

Certainly Seay and other members of the Citizens Committee would have preferred an indictment. White people, Reverend Seay noted, “had not accepted black people as really human....” The lack of justice in the Perkins case, he said, only “increased the resentment of ordinary black people about how they were being treated.”237 Still, many were pleased with the “groundswell of unrest” that their protest yielded, including the fact that, according to Seay, it was “the first time all the ministers in the city were shaken up.”238 It would not be the last time, of course: when Rosa Parks’s arrest in 1955 stirred the black community into a truly mass protest, Seay would be a pivotal leader. The public outcry in the Perkins case was “a bold expression,” Seay said, “on the part of black people in this town to say to the courts and others “We protest what is going on.””239
The Perkins protest did not occur in isolation. In February 1951, a white grocery store owner raped a black teenager. Sam E. Green regularly employed Flossie Hardman, a black fifteen-year-old, as a babysitter and frequently drove her home at the end of her shift. One night, instead of taking Flossie directly home, Green pulled to the side of a quiet road and raped her.\(^\text{240}\)

Flossie immediately informed her parents of the assault. Despite the odds of bringing Green to justice, they decided to press charges. Meanwhile, Rufus A. Lewis, a World War II veteran and celebrated football coach at Alabama State University, launched a campaign to bring Green to trial. Backed by Lewis and many of his fellow veterans, the Hardmans succeeded in bringing Green to court. But when an all-white jury returned a not guilty verdict after deliberating for only five minutes, African Americans decided to take the matter into their own hands. Lewis led the charge.\(^\text{241}\)

As one of the principal spokesmen for voter registration efforts in Montgomery, Lewis had enormous respect and support within the black community; he belonged to the mostly middle-class Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and was a member of many of the “best” clubs and associations in town.\(^\text{242}\) Additionally, as the owner of Montgomery’s
largest black funeral home, he was financially independent and not easily intimidated by white economic reprisals. Lewis parlayed his social and economic wealth into a spacious brick clubhouse, named the “Citizen’s Club.” It functioned as the headquarters for many of city’s community organizations. Here Lewis taught veterans and others the ins and outs of voter registration and created a safe space where African Americans could “come and socialize” and, in the process, get politicized.\textsuperscript{243} Lewis knew that a large swath of the black community was outraged by the attack on Flossie Hardman and the unjust ruling. Since Green’s grocery store was located in a primarily black community, Lewis figured an economic boycott could destroy Green’s livelihood.

Lewis organized the Citizens Committee to lead the boycott. The committee brought together veterans groups, the Women’s Political Council and the NAACP under the banner of protecting black womanhood. The campaign to shut down Green’s store was a success. Within a matter of weeks, African Americans delivered their own guilty verdict by driving Green into the red.\textsuperscript{244} The campaign established the boycott as a powerful weapon for justice and sent a message to whites that African Americans would not allow white men to disrespect, abuse and violate black women’s
bodies with impunity. Soon enough an even larger boycott would be imaginable for the African American community.

Many whites chose to ignore this message, notably the city's bus operators, who snubbed, bullied, and brutalized black passengers daily. Drivers shortchanged African Americans, then kicked them off the bus if they asked for correct change. Half-empty buses often bypassed blacks waiting at bus stops. And bus drivers never hesitated to use violence to enforce segregation. In a sense, the ruthless beatings that Ella Ree Jones, Roberta McKenzie and Gladys Blackmon received when they defied Jim Crow in the early 1940s, represented relatively light punishment, considering the price paid by Hilliard Brooks.

On August 12, 1950, Brooks, an African American veteran of World War II and neighbor of Rosa Parks, attempted to board a bus driven by C. L. Hood. Hood refused to let Brooks on his bus, claiming he was too intoxicated. Brooks put up a fuss and demanded to be allowed to ride. Hood waved a police officer over, and then pushed the veteran off the front steps, knocking him to the ground. As Brooks struggled to stand, the police officer, M. E. Mills, pointed his pistol at Hood and, in the bright afternoon sun, shot him dead. Satisfied with the
assailants' claim of self-defense, the mayor cleared them of any wrongdoing.

There were at least thirty complaints by African Americans in Montgomery in 1953, indicating a growing sense of impatience with the grim conditions on city buses. Most of these complaints came from working-class black women who made up the bulk of Montgomery City Lines' riders, over half of whom toiled as domestics. With a median salary of just $523 per year, domestics could not afford automobiles and had no choice but to ride the city buses to and from the white homes in which they worked. Their workplace could be just as dangerous: domestic workers faced sexual and physical abuse by their white employers. While domestics could and often did resist sexual harassment and abuse on the job by quitting, they could not easily find other transportation. They were stuck with the buses. As black lawyer Fred Gray put it, bus transportation was not "something optional, like restaurants."

African American women constantly complained about the atrocious treatment they received on the buses. Gladys Moore remembered that Montgomery’s bus operators treated black women, “just as rough as could be...like we are some
Jo Ann Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State and member of the increasingly militant Women’s Political Council, argued that mistreatment on the buses was degrading, shameful and humiliating. “Black Americans,” she insisted, were “still being treated as...things without feelings, not human beings.” Bus drivers, Robinson recalled, disrespected black women by hurling nasty sexualized insults their way. Ferdie Walker, a black woman from Fort Worth, Texas, remembered bus drivers sexually harassing her as she waited on the corner. “The bus was up high,” she recalled, “and the street was down low. They’d drive up under there and then they’d expose themselves while I was standing there and it just scared me to death.” Aside from direct sexual harassment, drivers referred to black women with contemptuous names like “Black nigger,” “black bitches,” “heifers,” and “whores.” Della Perkins remembered a driver who regularly referred to her as an “ugly black ape.”

In addition to slinging insults, bus drivers often slapped black women who crossed them. They refused to stop at every corner in black neighborhoods, allowed white children to board before black adults, demanded blacks give up their seats for whites, and forced them to pay their
fare at the front of the bus and then enter via the rear.\footnote{256}
The latter practice was designed to eliminate any chance that black bodies might accidentally come in contact with white bodies, thus removing the opportunity for any inadvertent move toward 'miscegenation' or 'social equality'. This was especially important if black men boarded the bus when white women sat in the front seats, but drivers imposed the rule on black women as well. One black woman recalled that a bus driver demanded she relocate "because a white man could not sit opposite a colored lady."\footnote{257} Considering white men's long history of 'integrating' with black women, this rule was particularly galling.

Georgia Gilmore, a plucky and spirited black cook, decided not to ride the buses after a driver insisted she enter the bus through the rear after paying her fare in the front. Gilmore protested, but the red-faced, redhead driver hollered, "I told you to get off and go to the back, Nigger!" Since the bus was her sole transportation, Gilmore retreated. As she was about to enter the back door, the driver slammed it shut and pulled away.\footnote{258} Such malicious acts often resulted in injuries. "There had been several reported incidents," Ralph Abernathy, a Baptist
Verbal, physical and sexual abuse maintained racial hierarchy in an enclosed space where complete separation of whites and blacks was all but impossible. A big arrow pointing to the rear of the bus for "colored" and another pointing to the front of the bus for whites provided some guidance. But the Jim Crow line could vanish just as easily as it appeared, as the racial composition of riders changed at each stop. "The bus driver could move colored people anywhere he wanted on the bus," E.D. Nixon recalled. "If a white person came into the bus and sat way back in it, no Negro was permitted to stand or sit between the motorman and that person." As a rule, the first ten of the thirty-six seats on a Montgomery city bus were reserved for whites, no matter how many people were actually on the bus. This frequently left black passengers, who almost always outnumbered white passengers, in the humiliating position of having to stand over empty seats.

This policy fueled resentment and anger among African Americans, especially domestics and day laborers who spent hours on their feet cooking, washing, and ironing for white people. "You spend your whole lifetime in your occupation...making life clever, easy and convenient for
white people," Rosa Parks recalled, "but when you have to get transportation home, you are denied an equal accommodation." Mistreatment on the buses, she argued, emphasized the fact that "our existence was for the white man's comfort and well being; we had to accept being deprived of just being human." Like sexualized mistreatment, it was an all-too-familiar part of being a black woman in Montgomery.

With abuses piling up like cordwood and memories of previous crimes smoldering, a group of black women decided to take on the bus drivers by demanding to be treated like ladies. The Women's Political Council led the charge. The Women's Political Council was one of over fifty active and vibrant black benefit associations, mutual aid societies, and social clubs in Montgomery that stitched together the social fabric of the African American community. Professional black men belonged to one or more of the traditionally black fraternities like Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, or Omega Psi Phi, while small businessmen and laborers held membership in the fraternal orders and benefit associations like the Prince Hall Free Masons, the Knights of Labor, the Elks, or the Knights of Pythias.
There were also neighborhood associations, church clubs, and political organizations like the NAACP and its youth division, E.D. Nixon’s Progressive Democrats and Rufus Lewis’s Citizens Club.²⁶⁵

Black women of a certain class in Montgomery found camaraderie in sororities like Alpha Kappa Alpha, Zeta Phi Beta, Delta Sigma Theta, or Sigma Gamma Rho, or they belonged to one of eighteen clubs that made up the Montgomery City Women’s Federated Clubs, including the Crusaders, Anna M. Duncan, Excelsiors, Home Makers, Phyllis Wheatley, Cosmopolites, and Sojourner Truth clubs—most of which featured junior versions for young women. In addition to these civic, professional, and social clubs, many black women belonged to societies affiliated with the more than fifty black churches in Montgomery.²⁶⁶

Meetings occurred in church basements, women’s homes, at the black-owned Ben Moore Hotel, which had a large ballroom and roof-top garden, or any one of the dozen or more lounges, bars, and clubs where blacks could drink, dance, or eat a hearty meal. The most popular gathering places were the Elks Club, the Reno Café, Pics Café, the Afro-Club, Rufus Lewis’s Citizens Club, Club 400 and the Tijuana Club.²⁶⁷ These clubs provided spaces where black men and women, free from white surveillance and racial
domination, could work out community problems, organize politically or just relax.

The rich network of social and political organizations kept Montgomery’s class-divided black community relatively connected. In addition, they served as information hubs, where news could travel easily from one neighborhood to the next. The sheer number and diversity of organizations explains the relative speed with which the 1955 boycott began; after all, blacks in Montgomery were already organized. It only seemed “spontaneous” from a distance.

Even though they were knit together socially, African Americans in Montgomery rarely came together to protest white supremacy en masse. With the exception of E.D. Nixon and Rufus Lewis’s voter registration efforts, Rosa Parks’ investigations on behalf of the NAACP, and the mass mobilization on behalf of Gertrude Perkins and Flossie Hardman, most clubwomen preferred to work on racial uplift and charitable causes within the black community instead of agitating for political and civil rights in the city at large. Direct protests proved dangerous throughout the South and Montgomery was no exception. Few people were willing to risk their lives or their livelihoods for something that seemed as immutable as segregation.
And yet there were always a handful of fearless individuals, like E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks, who pushed for more direct political engagement. Vernon Johns, the irascible and outspoken preacher at Dexter Avenue Baptist church in the 1940s and early 1950s, regularly chastised his “silk stocking” congregation for their apparent resignation to Jim Crow. But Johns was not an ordinary man. He seemed to be hard-wired to resist segregation. The preacher loved to shock his congregants and scare white Montgomerians. In response to the ruthless beating of a black man by white police officers in the early 1950s, he posted “It’s Safe to Murder Negroes in Montgomery,” on the church marquee. The next week, his advertised sermon title was: “When the Rapist is White.” One Sunday morning he stunned his middle-class audience by beginning his sermon with a horrific tale. “When my grandfather was hanged for cutting his master in two with a scythe,” he said, “they asked him on the gallows if he had anything to say.” “Yes,” his grandfather said, “I’m just sorry I didn’t do it thirty years before.” The story was not true, but Johns had a point. He wanted his flock to become as fearless as was his fictional grandfather.

Johns’s tactics made most of Dexter’s members uncomfortable, but Mary Fair Burks felt the call one
morning when Johns mounted another scathing attack on the complacency of his affluent parishioners. Burks had waged her own private “guerilla warfare” by refusing to abide by Jim Crow signs throughout the city. After a run-in with a white police officer, however, Burks decided to broaden her attack and form an army of women dedicated to destroying white supremacy. She needed foot soldiers. “I looked around and all I could see were either masks of indifference or scorn,” she recalled. Being a “feminist before [she] really knew what the word meant,” she said, she “dismissed the hard-faced men.” They “would take it over,” she said, “and women wouldn’t be able to do what they could do.”

Instead, Burks focused on the women in her church and social circles, hoping she could convert them into activists. “I played bridge with them,” she reasoned, “but more important, I knew that they must suffer from the same racial abuse and the indignity.” She left church that day with a plan. Over the next week, she contacted fifty women. When forty showed up for the first meeting of the Women’s Political Council [WPC] in the fall of 1946, she was pleasantly surprised. Burks started the meeting by testifying about her run-in with a club-wielding police
officer. When she finished, nearly every woman at the
meeting chimed in with similar stories of brutalization.\textsuperscript{276}

In order to gain political leverage with the city’s
leaders, members of the newly formed WPC, many of them
public school teachers and faculty members at Alabama State
College, decided they needed to become registered voters.
After a number of them cleared the various hurdles designed
to keep the voting rolls lily white, they set up workshops
throughout the city to help others get registered. The WPC
set up “registration schools” in churches, where they
taught weekly classes on how to fill out voter registration
forms, and if necessary, basic literacy. When participants
were ready, WPC members accompanied them to the courthouse
and helped them fill out registration applications, then
returned a few days later to check on the results.\textsuperscript{277} More
than anything, they taught ordinary women how to assert
themselves in front of white authorities.

By teaming up with Rufus Lewis’s veteran’s
organization and E. D. Nixon’s Progressive Democrats, both
of which had been active in voter registration efforts
since the early 1940s, the WPC muscled its way into city
elections.\textsuperscript{278} By the early 1950s, there were enough African
Americans registered to vote in Montgomery that they could
easily tip the scale in close elections.\textsuperscript{279} Over the next
few years, the Women’s Political Council grew as well. By 1955, it had three chapters in Montgomery and over three hundred female members. During this remarkable growth period, the WPC earned a reputation as the “most militant and uncompromising voice” for blacks in the Cradle of the Confederacy.280

The militant reputation rested upon the WPC’s new leadership and new focus: mistreatment on the city’s buses. Mary Fair Burks handed Jo Ann Robinson, her colleague at Alabama State College and a fiery advocate of human rights, the reins of the radical women’s organization in 1950, just a year after she moved to Montgomery. Despite being a newcomer, Robinson easily fell in with Montgomery’s middle-class clubwomen, among whom she quickly became a “much sought after dinner guest.”281 Born and raised in Georgia, Robinson was no stranger to white supremacy. As a middle-class woman with a vehicle, though, she was unaware of the intricacies of the segregated seating policies on Montgomery’s buses.

Her introduction came at the end of her first full semester teaching, as she was preparing to visit family for Christmas in December 1949. Robinson boarded a near empty city bus and sat down in the fifth row, two rows behind the only white woman on the bus, closed her eyes and imagined
the wonderful two weeks [of] vacation” ahead. Suddenly startled by the bus driver’s roaring voice, Robinson sat straight up.

“If you can sit in the fifth row from the front of the other buses in Montgomery,” he bellowed, “suppose you get off and ride in one of them.”

Being a respectable, professional woman who was used to being treated like a lady in the black community, Robinson did not realize the driver was speaking to her until he pulled to a stop and stormed over to where she was seated.282

“Get up from there,” he yelled, drawing his arm back as if he was about to strike her. “Get up from there!”

Robinson leapt to her feet, fearful of being beaten, and ran to the front of the bus. She stumbled off the bus in a daze. “Tears blinded my vision,” she recalled, and “waves of humiliation inundated me.”283

Recalling the shame and embarrassment she experienced that December day, Robinson readily accepted the leadership of the WPC. Utilizing the political leverage the WPC had built up over the previous years, Robinson and her army of militant women—Mrs. A. W. West, Mrs. N. W. Burkes, Mrs. J. E. Pierce, Georgia Gilmore, Mrs. Edwyna Marketta, Ella Mae Stovall, Lettie M. Anderson, Mrs. Horace Burton, Mrs. Ruby
Hall and Ella Mae Henderson, to name a few—canvassed black neighborhoods. According to Robinson, they gathered “thousands of signatures on hundreds of petitions” that demanded the city do something about the “shameful and deplorable one-sidedness” of the city’s segregated parks and recreation system. They repeatedly confronted the city commissioners with complaints about police brutality. In the early 1950s, Jo Ann Robinson led her band of women warriors to directly attack abuse on the city’s buses.\footnote{284}

In 1952, members of the WPC packed a public hearing regarding a bus fare increase, where Zolena Pierce and Sadie Brooks testified about their mistreatment on the buses. One year later, a group of WPC members stormed a meeting with the City Commission, where Jo Ann Robinson railed against the abuses heaped upon black female bus riders and argued that African Americans should not have to stand over empty seats when the black section was filled and the white section was empty. Nor should they have to pay at the front, she said, and then disembark and get on in the back. The WPC demanded that black riders be treated with dignity and respect.\footnote{285} “We were not fighting segregation,” Mary Fair Burks pointed out, “as much as abuses of Negroes.”\footnote{286}
Black women across the country spoke out against similar abuses. Besides the WPC, no organization did this better or more explicitly than the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ), a short-lived, but important national black women’s organization dedicated to “the full dignity of Negro womanhood.” Two African American women, Louise Thompson Patterson, a Communist and wife of William Patterson, the head of the Civil Rights Congress, and Beulah Richardson, a poet and Progressive Party activist from Mississippi, organized the STJ in the fall of 1951. Patterson and Richardson sought to unite black women across social, political and economic lines in an effort to end white violence and terror. “We will no longer in sight of God or man,” the women proclaimed, “sit by and watch our lives destroyed by an unreasonable and unreasoning hate that metes out to us every kind of death.”

Speaking as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and witnesses to sexualized violence, the members of the STJ issued a pamphlet that assailed white supremacy and called for a national meeting of black women in Washington D.C. “We have seen our brothers beaten, shot, and stamped to death by police [and] we have seen our daughters raped and degraded, and when one dares rise in defense of her honor she is jailed for life.” By inviting black women to come
“speak [their] mind” and issuing the call in the “spirit of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth,” the STJ rooted themselves in a “radical black feminist tradition of resistance” and the tradition of testimony.290

On September 29, 1951, over one hundred African-American women from fifteen states gathered in the nation’s capital to testify and bear witness to each other’s horror stories. Mary Church Terrell, the aged and sagacious “dean of Negro women” presided over the weekend gathering and encouraged participants to “fight for our country” and make it “practice what it preaches.” At the end of the historic meeting, the STJ issued a proclamation demanding the protection of “Negro womanhood” and decrying black women’s “second-class” status, which “denies us dignity and honor.”291

As part of the campaign to protect black womanhood, the STJ called for the immediate freedom of Rosa Lee Ingram, a black sharecropper, widow and mother of twelve, who was convicted and sentenced to death in the self-defense slaying of a white man in Ellaville, Georgia on November 4, 1947.292 John Stratford, a sixty-four year old white sharecropper who lived on the same property as Ingram and her family, harassed Ingram for years. She finally fought back after he tried to force her into a shed to have
sex with him. He never tried to rape me,” she told a reporter, “...he just tried to compel me.” Angered by her repeated rejections, Stratford lashed out. Cursing her out, he grabbed his gun and used the butt as a bludgeon. “I grappled with him,” she remembered, “and he dropped the gun. He choked me and nearly tore off my sweater.”

When Ingram’s sixteen-year old son, Wallace, heard the scuffle, he ran to his mother’s aid. “Please stop beating mama,” he begged. Stratford persisted and Wallace picked up the gun. Wallace rammed the gun into Stratford’s head, knocking him to the ground. Rosa Lee and her son left Stratford lying in the grass and ran home, unaware that he was dead. Within two months, she was on death row for murder.

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice rallied to free Rosa Lee Ingram from prison and praised her for “defending the honor of all womanhood.” They argued that her willingness to fight back against a white man’s sexual and physical advances was not a crime, but instead was “the first step in ending the indignities heaped upon Negro women everywhere in our land...” “WE SHALL NOT BE TRAMPLED UPON ANY LONGER,” the women declared.
Black women in Montgomery, especially those in the Women’s Political Council, could have adopted the Sojourner’s rallying cry as their own. When members of the WPC, Rufus Lewis’s Citizen’s Committee and the Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs marched into another meeting with the City Commission in March 1954 and demanded better treatment on the buses, city leaders again refused to budge. Jo Ann Robinson was furious. As she heard more “stories of unhappy experiences” on the buses, she decided to give Mayor W. A. “Tacky” Gayle a piece of her mind. Robinson fumed, Gayle recalled later. She said “they would just show me,” he claimed. “They [said] they were going in the front door and sitting wherever they pleased.”297

Lest Gayle misunderstand the threat, Robinson sent him a letter on May 21, 1954, just four days after the momentous Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education that banned segregation in public schools. In the letter, Robinson spelled out exactly what would happen should Gayle and the other City Commissioners ignore the WPC’s demands. Since “three-fourths of the riders of those public conveyances are Negroes,” Robinson warned, “they could not possibly operate...if Negroes did not patronize them.” “More and more of our people are already arranging with neighbors and friends,” she asserted, “to ride to keep
from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers.” In addition, Robinson pointed out, more than twenty-five local organizations had begun talking about a “city-wide boycott of the buses” and plans are already “being made to ride less or not at all, on our buses.”

Perhaps the earth-shattering Supreme Court ruling gave Robinson the courage to issue such a forceful warning. After all, it appeared that Jim Crow was beginning to die a slow, but sure death. Maybe she was inspired by the spirit of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. More likely, however, she had simply had enough. Threatening a boycott was perhaps the only option remaining after requests to be treated with dignity fell on deaf ears for more than a decade.

Ten years earlier Thurgood Marshall had warned that the abuse and mistreatment of black women on public conveyances was “dynamite.” Just after Robinson sent her letter to Mayor Gayle, a news report hit the black community like a “bombshell.” Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old high school girl, had been manhandled, arrested, and indicted for refusing to relinquish her seat to a white man.”298
Chapter Three
Walking in Pride and Dignity

Claudette Colvin, a spirited and studious tenth grader at Booker T. Washington High School, boarded the Highland Gardens bus near Dexter Avenue Baptist Church after school on March 2, 1955. She had spent the school day studying Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, “black heroes and how they broke down Jim Crow laws,” as she put it. Each student brought in articles about racial violence and discrimination. Her class spent the afternoon talking about the bleak racial conditions in Montgomery. By the time she boarded the bus, Colvin was filled with resentment over the city’s double standard of justice. She plopped down in the rear section reserved for “Colored” passengers.299

At the next stop, passengers climbed aboard and filled the remaining seats—the first ten rows reserved for whites, blacks in the back. Mrs. Ruth Hamilton, visibly pregnant, sat down next to Colvin. A white couple squeezed into the last two seats directly across from them. When the bus driver, Robert W. Cleere saw that the color line had been breached—black and white people could not sit across from each other—he ordered Colvin and Hamilton to stand in the
aisle to preserve segregation. Hamilton refused to give up her seat. Placing her hands on her protruding belly, Hamilton told Cleere that she “was not going to get up,” because, she said, she “didn’t feel like it.”

Uncomfortable asking a pregnant woman to relinquish her seat, the driver turned to Colvin and threatened to call the police unless she moved. Colvin did not budge. Furious, Cleere pulled the bus to the curb in the middle of the downtown business district, locked the passengers in and walked away. He soon returned with two policemen. The officers lumbered onto the bus and stood over Hamilton and Colvin, staring down at the stubborn women. “Move,” ordered one of the officers. A black man seated behind Hamilton interrupted the stand off and offered Hamilton his seat, which she accepted, leaving Colvin alone. The police demanded to know why she ignored the driver’s direct order.

“It’s against the law here,” an officer reminded her.

“I didn’t know that it was a law,” Colvin shot back, “that a colored person had to get up and give a white person a seat when there were not any more vacant seats and colored people were standing up.”

Colvin had a point—the city law required passengers to move only if another seat was available. Since all the seats were taken, Colvin had every right to stay put. The
officers seemed genuinely stumped until she sat up and with righteous indignation said, “I [am] just as good as any white person.”

A hush fell over the crowded bus. The driver and the two officers stepped outside to consider their options. “We just sat there,” Gloria Hardin, another passenger, recalled. “We didn’t know what was going to happen but we knew something would happen.” Colvin waited quietly for Cleere and the police. “I thought he would stop and shout and then drive on,” Colvin said later, “that’s what they usually did.” Colvin’s assertion of equality seemed to have pushed Cleere over the line. He told the police to arrest her. Clambering back onto the bus, Cleere pointed at Colvin. “I have had trouble out of that thing before,” he said. The police slowly walked over to Colvin, grabbed her arms and jerked her toward the aisle. She began to sob and pulled against the officers, trying to remain in her seat. “I wasn’t getting up,” she said later. “I couldn’t. I had it in my mind that it was wrong.”

“You black whore,” an officer shouted, then yanked her from the seat and kicked her down the aisle towards the front of the bus. The other officer dragged the weeping teenager down the steps and pushed her into their patrol car. Colvin was terrified. “You just didn’t know what
white people might do at that time," she recalled later. "I didn’t know if they were crazy or if they were going to take me to a Klan meeting." When she heard one of the officers make a joke about her breasts and bra size, she feared the worst. Stories of ordeals like the one Gertrude Perkins endured at the hands of the Montgomery police were common currency in the black South. "I started protecting my crotch," she remembered. "I was afraid they might rape me." 305

Deep history and day-to-day life in Montgomery gave her plenty of reasons to be afraid. Away from the public glare and in the back seat of a white man’s car, anything could happen. They could take Colvin wherever they wanted and do whatever they pleased with her without fear of punishment. It was the worst possible situation for a young black woman—something generations of mothers had warned their daughters to avoid at all costs.

Colvin tried to remain calm as the police drove her to the jail and booked her for violating the city’s segregation laws. Furious that the teenager had defied them, they also charged her with assault and resisting arrest. To drown out the horror of being in jail, Colvin recited poetry and scripture. "I recited Edgar Allan Poe,"
she recalled, “Annabel Lee, the characters in Midsummer Night's Dream, the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm.” 306

Colvin may have asked the Lord to be her shepherd, but the local trinity of Fred Gray, E.D. Nixon and Jo Ann Robinson planned her deliverance. News of Colvin’s stand against segregation and subsequent detention spread quickly through town. “In a few hours every Negro youngster on the streets discussed Colvin’s arrest,” Jo Ann Robinson remembered. “Telephones rang, clubs called special meetings...mothers expressed concern...[and] men instructed their wives to walk or to share rides.” 307 Almost immediately, the Citizens Coordinating Committee, led by Robinson, Rufus Lewis, and Fred Gray, Montgomery’s newest and youngest black attorney, sent out an appeal to “Friends of Justice and Human Rights.” They requested financial assistance and called for an “unconditional acquittal of Miss Claudette Colvin.” 308 Martin Luther King Jr., the baby-faced Baptist preacher who had only been in town for a few months, called the situation an “atrocite” that “seemed to arouse the Negro community.” He remembered later: “There was talk of boycotting the buses in protest.” 309 In fact, there had been an explicit threat to boycott the buses by the Women’s Political Council nearly a year earlier. But fighting the city was risky, if not
dangerous. “People had everything to lose,” Jo Ann Robinson noted, “and nothing to gain.”

Committee members shelved the boycott and decided to appeal city and bus officials directly, and if that failed, they reasoned, then they would go to court.

The first meeting the Citizens Coordinating Committee had with Police Commissioner Dave Birmingham and J. H. Bagley, the manager of the bus company, went relatively well. Birmingham, an amiable if demagogic populist, frequently met with black constituents and often responded to their complaints. In 1953, for example, Birmingham acknowledged widespread police brutality in black neighborhoods and appointed the city’s first seven black police officers—four men and three women—the most in the state. Birmingham expressed deep concern over what happened to Colvin and conceded that the driver acted improperly. He and Bagley agreed that bus drivers ought to treat all passengers with courtesy and promised to take a look at the “Mobile plan,” a seating scheme used in Mobile, Alabama in which there was no firm color line. Blacks filled seats from the back of the bus forward and whites from the front to the back until they met somewhere in the middle. With assurances that Birmingham and Bagley would consider changing some of the most humiliating
practices on the buses, Jo Ann Robinson and King left the meeting feeling optimistic. But within a few days, as King recalled, “the same old patterns of humiliation continued.”

The second meeting was more confrontational. Backed by a crowd of black women from the WPC and the Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs, Rufus Lewis and Fred Gray presented petitions that demanded an end to mistreatment on the buses to Mayor Gayle and a cadre of city and corporate attorneys. Nixon had invited Rosa Parks, but she refused to attend. The race pride that she had learned from her Garveyite grandparents drew limits. “I had decided,” she said, “that I would not go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors.”

Parks’s instincts proved correct. At the meeting, Robinson urged complacent city commissioners to again accept the “Mobile plan,” but Jack Crenshaw, the attorney for the bus company, quickly squashed the idea, claiming it would violate the city’s segregation laws. City attorneys backed Crenshaw. The meeting ended in stalemate. Since the city’s leaders stubbornly sided with segregation, Attorney Gray decided to take Colvin’s case to court. Instead of asking for a kinder, gentler Jim Crow on the buses, he would challenge its constitutionality.
On March 18, 1955, Fred Gray, the twenty-four-year-old attorney, stood before Judge Wiley C. Hill, whose first cousin was U.S. Senator J. Lister Hill, and defended Colvin, who pled not guilty to all charges. A native of Montgomery and a former student of Jo Ann Robinson at Alabama State University, Gray returned to the Cradle of Confederacy after law school to “destroy everything segregated that [he] could find.” He wasted no time. Segregation ordinances on the city buses violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Gray asserted. Judge Hill quickly overruled Gray’s claim, swatting it away as if it were a pesky fly. Gray pushed ahead. Colvin was innocent, he insisted, because it was only a crime to disobey a bus driver’s order to relinquish a seat if there were other seats available in the Colored section. Since more than a dozen witnesses testified that no other seats were available, Gray claimed Colvin had not violated the law.

Gray also produced witnesses who testified that Colvin was calm and well behaved, rather than unruly and wild, as the officers claimed. Under cross-examination, the bus driver, Robert Cleere, admitted that Colvin was “not talking in a rage” and was not “disturbing anybody on the
bus.” When asked if Colvin ever hit the officers, Cleere had to admit he “didn’t see her hit them.” When circuit solicitor William F. Thetford asked one of the police officers if Colvin “hit or strike [sic] or scratched” him, the officer said simply, “No, sir.” Thetford seemed surprised by his witness’s answer. When he asked the officer again if Colvin caused a commotion, the policeman could only say “she started crying.” But, he added, he “didn’t hear her scream too loud” and didn’t remember her swearing. Although Gray proved Colvin did not violate any laws and was not unruly or abusive, Judge Hill found her guilty of assault and battery and charged her with violating the state rather than city segregation laws, something Thetford had thrown in at the last minute. Hill sentenced Colvin to indefinite probation.

When Gray appealed the decision in Circuit Court on May 6, 1955, Thetford dropped the state segregation charge, a sly move that destroyed Gray’s plan to use Colvin’s case to test the constitutionality of bus segregation. Despite the solicitor’s backpedaling and the lack of evidence, Circuit Court Judge Eugene Carter found Colvin guilty of assault and battery, assessed a small fine and declared her a juvenile delinquent.
Stunned by the harsh decision, Colvin burst into tears. Spectators and supporters who filled the courtroom, Jo Ann Robinson recalled, “brushed away their own tears” as her “agonized sobs penetrated the atmosphere of the courthouse.” African Americans in Montgomery, Robinson remembered, “were as near a breaking point as they had ever been. Resentment, rebellion, and unrest were evident in all Negro circles.” The unexpected verdict hit the black community, she said, “like a bombshell.”

Colvin was not the first woman to be arrested for violating Montgomery’s segregation code. She was, however, the first to plead innocent and challenge the city in court. And she had the support of all three hundred members of the Women’s Political Council. “Bless her heart, she fought like a little tigress,” said Irene West, an influential WPC member and widow of a prominent black dentist. Virginia Durr, a well-known white liberal in Montgomery, told a friend that Colvin’s case “created tremendous interest in the Negro community.” African Americans are “fighting mad,” she said, adding that Colvin’s arrest “may help give them the courage to put up a real fight on the bus segregation issue.”
Jo Ann Robinson had been itching for a boycott for over a year and now she began laying the groundwork. The timing seemed right; after Colvin’s second trial, Robinson recalled, “large numbers [of women] refused to use the buses...for a few days.” These private protests convinced her that the community was ready for action, but she had to convince E. D. Nixon, whose connections and expertise would be necessary for any successful mass movement.

With Mary Fair Burks, her colleague from Alabama State, and two carloads of women, Robinson led a caravan to E. D. Nixon’s house to sketch out plans for a citywide boycott. Robinson and Burks told Nixon that they had found a “victim around whom they could rally community support for a general protest” and assured him they were ready to mobilize the masses. Robinson told Nixon that they “had already planned for fifty thousand notices calling people to boycott the buses; only the specifics of the time and place had to be added.” The women asked Nixon for his support.

Nixon hesitated to endorse a general boycott before meeting with Colvin and her parents. He asked Robinson to give him some time. Nixon had followed Colvin’s case. In fact, the seasoned labor union operative had already contacted Virginia Durr’s husband, Clifford, a local white
attorney and former New Deal "brain-truster," to discuss legal and political options. Still, he worried about using Colvin as a symbol for the fight. A visit to Colvin’s house made his decision easy. Nixon arrived at Colvin’s house in the King Hill section of Montgomery, a lower-class black enclave with tumbledown houses, unpaved streets and outdoor privies. When Colvin answered the door, Nixon saw that she was pregnant. “My daughter,” Colvin’s mother explained, “done took a tumble.”^{328} Nixon decided that Colvin could not possibly serve as the community’s standard-bearer, nor be a good litigant.

For starters, an unwed pregnant teenager might have been a divisive symbol for a community where fissures of class, religion and color already presented tough challenges. Her stomach was beginning to swell, Nixon argued, and her mother was ashamed to have her appear in public.^{329} But it was more than Colvin’s pregnancy and her parent’s shame that concerned Nixon. Colvin’s dark skin color and working-class status made her a political liability in certain parts of the black community. Colvin’s mother was a maid and her father did yard work. They lived in one of the poorest sections of town, where juke joints rocked until dawn and, Nixon acknowledged, “men would drink too much and get into a fight.” “It wasn’t a bad area,”
Colvin admitted years later, “but it had a bad reputation.”

In some ways, Colvin’s roots in King Hill could have made her the perfect symbol for a bus boycott, since she was one of thousands of working-class black women who suffered humiliation and mistreatment daily on the buses. Though Jo Ann Robinson was firmly rooted in the middle class, she saw Colvin as a kind of black everywoman who would inspire others. But Nixon refused. “She’s just not the kind we can win a case with,” he said. Robinson fumed. She “liked to have a fit,” Nixon recalled. “She jumped all over me.” But he was resolute: “I’m not going to go out on a limb with it.”

“I’ve handled so many cases that I know when a man would stand up and when he wouldn’t,” Nixon argued. “You’ve got to think about the newspapers, you got to think about public opinion, you got to think policies and so forth, and intimidation.” His point was not easily dismissed.

Despite her support for Colvin, who was a straight-A student and a member of the NAACP Youth Council, Rosa Parks believed that Nixon was right. Parks knew that Colvin had stepped outside the bounds of respectable behavior for a young woman in the 1950s. “If the white press got hold of that information,” Parks feared, “they would have [had]
a field day...they’d call her a bad girl and her case wouldn’t have a chance.”

Even if African Americans there were, as historian Taylor Branch put it, “willing to rally behind an unwed pregnant teenager—which they were not—her circumstances would make her an extremely vulnerable standard-bearer.” Without Nixon’s support, Robinson and her colleagues on the Women’s Political Council would have to wait for another arrest.

It did not take long. On October 21, 1955, police arrested and fined Mary Louise Smith, an eighteen-year-old maid, for refusing to give up her seat and stand in the colored section so that a white woman could sit down. “I am not going to move,” she declared when the driver asked her to stand. “I got the privilege to sit here like anybody else.” After meeting Smith and her family, Nixon decided that she could not be the boycott’s symbolic heroine, because her father had a tendency to drink too much and she lived in a “low type of home” in Washington Park, a poor section of town similar to King Hill. A few days after her arrest, Smith’s father paid the fine, making a legal challenge impossible.

Colvin and Smith were victims of time, place, and circumstance. By late 1955, black leaders in Montgomery had little choice but to embrace the “politics of
respectability” amidst the growing white backlash sparked by the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. Just four days after the landmark Supreme Court ruling, Thomas P. Brady, a circuit court judge in Brookhaven, Mississippi, and author of the segregationist manifesto, Black Monday, called on state legislators to build an organization that would protect white supremacy by any means necessary. Their response was the White Citizens Council [WCC], an organization designed to “counteract the NAACP and other left-wing organizations which...certainly contributed to the Black Monday decision.” The WCC quickly spread throughout Mississippi and the Deep South, especially areas where African Americans pressed for desegregation of schools or public accommodations. In Mississippi alone, the WCC counted twenty-five thousand members in 1955 and nearly eighty thousand in 1956. The WCC recruited supporters by relying heavily on sexual scare tactics and the paranoia that Brown would lead to “racial amalgamation.” Headlines in The Citizens’ Council, the organization’s newsletter, warned that “mixed marriage,” “sex orgies” and black men raping white girls were “typical of stories filtering back from areas where racial integration is proceeding ‘with all deliberate speed...’”
In this environment, political respectability required middle-class decorum. Shining a spotlight on a pregnant black teenager would only fuel white stereotypes of black women’s uninhibited sexuality. Colvin’s swollen stomach could have become a stark reminder that desegregation would lead to sexual debauchery. Smith’s shaky social status could raise the question of whether black citizens merited equal treatment in the minds of whites and might divide African Americans along class lines. If Nixon and the WPC supported Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, they risked evoking black stereotypes that could ultimately smother any movement for change.

Respectability had been a staple of African American politics since Reconstruction, when whites used racist violence and sexual abuse to shore up white supremacy. Silence and secrecy among black clubwomen at the turn of the century helped counter slanderous images and kept the inner lives of African Americans hidden from white people. This self-imposed reticence, Darlene Clark Hine argues, “implied that those [African-American women] who spoke out provided grist for detractors’ mills and, even more ominously, tore the protective cloaks from their inner selves.” In the wake of Brown, testimony and openness were temporarily replaced with silence.
Testimony triumphed throughout the 1940s as African Americans rallied around black women who had been sexually abused, no matter their class status. Recy Taylor was a struggling sharecropper, yet her case served as the catalyst for a national campaign. In 1947, the NAACP and the National Council of Negro Women—both solid, middle-class organizations—stood by Rosa Lee Ingram despite the fact that she was poor and had almost a dozen children. Gertrude Perkins was hardly a model of respectable womanhood, but Montgomery’s middle-class black ministers rallied to her defense, risking their livelihoods, if not their lives, to help preserve her dignity and bodily integrity.

Five years later, amidst rising white opposition to Brown and growing anticommunism at home and abroad, African Americans found themselves hemmed in politically. As Southern McCarthyites equated black self-assertion with a Marxist plot to destroy America, the WCC and the KKK claimed desegregation efforts would lead to “mongrelization” and “amalgamation.” The powerful cocktail of anticommunism, white supremacy and sexualized propaganda and paranoia, enabled whites to push aside or even kill African Americans who asserted their humanity. By February 1956, 40,000 white Alabamians, many from Montgomery, joined
the Citizens' Council crusade, helping to launch the "massive resistance" movement. Mayor Gayle and other city commissioners, not to mention state senators, proudly proclaimed solidarity and allegiance to the WCC as it became the "mouthpiece of southern defiance." E. D. Nixon undoubtedly sensed this hysteria when he refused to raise a pregnant teenager up as the symbol of the integration struggle. In the mid-1950s Alabama, he had to find someone whose class background, moral reputation and public record could withstand withering white scrutiny and inspire African American unity.

Because she was so perfect for the role, it is tempting to think that Rosa Parks's famous stand against segregation was a planned protest. She was, as historian J. Mills Thornton argues, "more actively involved in the struggle against racial discrimination, and more knowledgeable about efforts being made to eliminate it, than all but a tiny handful of the city's forty-five thousand black citizens." She knew Nixon was searching for a "plaintiff who was beyond reproach" and was certain he would support her since she fit his qualifications of respectability. It is unlikely that she planned a protest. Instead, when Rosa Parks had an opportunity to
resist, she seized it. Her decision to stay put that fateful day was rooted in her history as a radical activist and years of witnessing injustice—from Recy Taylor to Gertrude Perkins to Jeremiah Reeves. She had grown up in the Garvey movement. She and her husband had labored in the Scottsboro struggle as a young married couple. In 1944, her investigation of the Recy Taylor case launched a national crusade. For more than a decade, her work with the NAACP, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other groups placed her at the center of Montgomery’s black freedom struggle. Her decision to keep her seat on December 1, 1955 was less a mystery than a moment.

Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus on December 1, 1955, and slipped into a seat near the middle of the bus—an area passengers referred to as “no-man’s land” because it was not designated white or black. When the ruddy-faced bus driver saw her seated there, he yelled, “Let me have those front seats.” Parks sat still. “Make it light on yourself,” he shouted, “and let me have those seats!” Parks recognized the driver immediately. It was James F. Blake, the same operator who mistreated her in 1943. She turned to look out the window and ignored Blake’s order. “I couldn’t see how standing up was going to ‘make
“it light’ for me,” she said later. “The more we gave in and complied the worse they treated us.”

When Blake stepped off the bus to call the police, Rosa Parks remained calm, though she knew better than anyone what kind of danger she faced. She had twelve years of notes on nearly every case of racial brutality in and around Montgomery. There was no way to be without fear, but she held herself steady. As she waited, perhaps she conjured up the spirit of her grandfather, who sat up many nights with a double-barreled shotgun to protect their little home from the Klan in Pine Level, Alabama.

Parks also recalled the ten days she spent in the company of the South’s most active reformers at Highlander, a training center for labor and civil rights activists in Tennessee. Her experience at Highlander in the summer of 1955 was a highlight in her career as an activist and one of the first times she said she did not “feel hostility from white people.” She had been reluctant to leave that interracial island and now she found herself stranded on a city bus, about to be arrested—or worse.

Two white police officers, F.B. Day and D.W. Mixon, climbed onto the bus and ambled toward Parks. One asked why she refused to give up her seat. “Why do you all push us around?” she shot back.
“I do not know,” the officer replied, “but the law is the law and you’re under arrest.” The officers picked up her purse and shopping bags, escorted her to their squad car and drove her to the city jail.

News that her daughter was in jail must have sent shivers down Leona McCauley’s spine. Rosa’s mother had been a member of the NAACP since 1943, worked with her daughter on the Recy Taylor case in 1944, and must have known about Gertrude Perkins, Flossie Hardman and the other women who were abused in and around Montgomery. Parks was vulnerable every minute she was in jail. When she finally called home, her mother immediately asked, “Did they beat you?” That these were her first words speaks volumes about the context of Parks’s protest.

If E. D. Nixon shared Leona McCauley’s fears, he kept them hidden. Instead, he seemed positively jubilant. “That’s it!” Nixon shouted after he heard about the arrest, then picked up the telephone to spread the good news. Johnnie Carr, Parks’s childhood friend and fellow NAACP member, was one of the first people on Nixon’s list. “Mrs. Carr,” Nixon said gravely, “they have arrested the wrong woman.”

“Who have they arrested?” she asked.
“Rosa Parks!!” Nixon replied, barely able to contain his glee.

“You’re kidding,” Carr said.

“No,” he chuckled, “they arrested Rosa Parks. They arrested the wrong woman!”

Unlike Claudette Colvin or Mary Louise Smith, Parks was the perfect woman to rally around. “She was secretary for everything I had going,” Nixon told reporters, “the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP, Alabama Voters’ League, all those things.” Plus, he said, she could “stand on her feet, she was honest, she was clean, she had integrity. The press couldn’t go out and dig up something she did last year, or last month, or five years ago. They couldn’t hang nothing like that on Rosa Parks.” As long as Nixon could persuade Parks to press charges, she could serve as the symbol of segregation in court and Nixon and Attorney Fred Gray could use her arrest to strike a blow at Jim Crow.

Only her husband stood in the way. In the 1950s, this was no small obstacle. Raymond Parks begged his wife to turn Nixon down. “Oh Rosa, Rosa, don’t do it, don’t do it,” he pleaded. “The white folks will kill you.” Though his days as a defender of the Scottsboro boys had passed and he no longer held secret, armed meetings in the middle of the
night, he knew something about the risks entailed in protesting white supremacy. He was certainly not ready to sacrifice his wife.

When Jo Ann Robinson heard that Parks had been arrested, she did not wait for Nixon’s approval to launch a boycott, nor did she ask Rosa and Raymond Parks what they thought. Instead, she planned the kind of protest that members of the Women’s Political Council had been demanding. “The Women’s Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks’s consent to call for a boycott of city buses,” Robinson scribbled on the back of an envelope as soon as she heard the news. “On Friday, December 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a boycott to take place on Monday, December 5.”

Robinson quickly drafted a more detailed announcement, called John Cannon, her colleague at Alabama State University, and asked for access to the college’s mimeograph machines. Cannon agreed, adding that he had been mistreated on the buses one too many times.” As darkness fell across campus, Cannon, Robinson and two student assistants met in a basement office. There, they copied, cut, and bundled 52,500 fliers. Only the rising sun and the fear of being caught chased them home.
The fliers announced the boycott, promoting it as an effort to protect black womanhood:

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. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. 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. Don’t ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday...Please stay off all buses Monday.363

In the early morning hours, Robinson called her foot soldiers in the WPC and told them it was time for their long-planned protest. She explained the distribution routes they had sketched out for delivering the announcement. Before breakfast on Friday, December 2, Dr. Mary Fair Burks, Mrs. Mary Cross, Mrs. Elizabeth Arrington, Mrs. Josie Lawrence, Mrs. Geraldine Nesbitt, Mrs. Catherine N. Johnson and a dozen other women waited on street corners for Robinson and her student helpers to hand over the huge stacks of fliers. The women delivered the notices to schools and storefronts, beauty parlors and beer halls,
barbershops and businesses. By mid-afternoon, "practically every black man, woman, and child in Montgomery knew the plan and was passing the word along," Robinson said. "No one knew where the notices had come from or who had arranged them and no one cared." Just before she rallied her troops, Robinson called Nixon to let him in on the news. This time he could not say no. Of course, he had no such intention.

Neither did Rosa Parks. Despite her husband's pleas, she decided that the benefits of a legal battle and a boycott outweighed any personal risks. "There had to be a stopping place," she said, "and this seemed to be the place for me to stop being pushed around. I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen, even in Montgomery, Alabama." Parks told her husband about her decision and gave Nixon permission to go ahead with the legal case, both defying gender roles as a dutiful wife, and defining them by agreeing to serve as a model of dignified womanhood in court.

From that moment forward, Rosa Parks's history as an activist and defiant race woman disappeared from public view. Nixon and others promoted her as a model of the
middle-class ideals of “chastity, Godliness, family responsibility, and proper womanly conduct and demeanor.”

She was the kind of woman around whom all African Americans in Montgomery could unite. She was “humble enough to be claimed by the common folk,” Taylor Branch notes, and “dignified enough in manner, speech, and dress to command the respect of the leading classes.” Though Parks was far from a bruised blossom in need of chivalry, her role as a symbol of virtuous black womanhood was decisive in Montgomery as even the most reluctant middle-class ministers rallied to her defense.

The day after Parks was arrested, over fifty black activists and community leaders gathered in the basement of Dexter Avenue Baptist church to hash out conflicting ideas about Jo Ann Robinson’s call for a boycott. The debate was fierce, with some ministers refusing to be part of the boycott. But Parks’s presence and her moving appeal to the ministers to do something about the longstanding abuse of black women in Montgomery brought unity. Undoubtedly, members of the Women’s Political Council echoed her sentiments. Many of the ministers and political leaders, according to historian Douglas Brinkley “did not want to be on record as abandoning a good Christian woman in need.”
They decided to put aside their differences to “embrace ‘Sister Rosa’” by “promising to promote the one-day boycott in their Sunday sermons.”

Parks’s iconic role as the respectable, even saintly heroine played a role in the wider political world and was crucial at the birth of the boycott. Because it was the first Sunday of the month, parishioners filled almost all the pews in Montgomery’s black churches. Ministers decried the arrest of Rosa Parks, urged congregants to join in the one-day boycott on Monday December 5 and assemble afterwards at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instructions.

Monday December 5, 1955 was a rainy, bone-cold day. Robinson and others worried that the downpour would dampen the one-day protest, but those fears quickly dissipated as empty buses began rolling through Montgomery’s rain-soaked streets. Rosa Parks awoke early and watched the normally packed Cleveland Avenue bus whizz past her house without a single passenger. Parks felt vindicated. “I could feel that whatever my individual desires were to be free,” she said later, “I was not alone. There were many others who felt the same way.”

Like Parks, Johnnie Carr watched with satisfaction as the empty buses splashed through intersections. She even decided to trail one in her car.
They “didn’t pick up a single soul,” she remembered with glee. “They were just moving down the street empty.”

When Parks and Carr saw the sidewalks clogged with black women under dark umbrellas walking to work or waiting for a ride, they were elated.

Montgomery officials, who did not share the excitement, inadvertently boosted boycott participation. Surely, they reasoned, the near-universal abandonment of the buses by their happy Negroes must reflect coercion by agitators. The city assigned police escorts to bus routes in black neighborhoods in order to “protect Negro riders” from potential “goon squads.” If any black women were tempted to get on the bus that miserable Monday morning, the sight of police with shotguns surrounding the buses can only have strengthened their resolve.

Confident that the one-day boycott was going to be successful, Parks readied to play her part in court. “I knew what I had to do,” Parks recalled. “I remember very clearly that I wore a straight, long-sleeved black dress with a white collar and cuffs, a small black velvet hat with pearls across the top, and a charcoal-gray coat. I carried a black purse and wore white gloves.” Her conservative, Puritan-like clothing—and her memory of exactly what she wore forty years later—indicated a keen
understanding of the importance of the politics of respectability.

Flanked by E. D. Nixon and her two attorneys, Fred Gray and Charles Langford, Rosa Parks ascended the courthouse steps with confidence and grace. Her elegant deportment made quite an impression on the five hundred supporters who crowded the steps of Montgomery’s City Hall, many of whom were her charges in the NAACP Youth Council. Mary Frances, one of the girls in the crowd, saw Parks and shouted, “Oh, she’s so sweet! They’ve messed with the wrong one now.” Frances and others began to chant “they’ve messed with the wrong one now” as Nixon, Parks, and her attorneys, both in their best Sunday suits, waded through the throng of supporters and disappeared into the crowded courtroom.

The trial lasted no more than five minutes. Judge John B. Scott quickly found Parks guilty of violating the state segregation law, despite the fact that she had been arrested for violating the city’s segregation ordinance. He then gave her a suspended sentence and fined her fourteen dollars. As Parks turned and walked briskly out of the courtroom, two policemen scurried to her side. She and Nixon walked down a long hallway to the city clerk’s
office to sign an appeal bond. Gray and Langford stayed behind to file an appeal. The sight of police officers escorting Parks sent the crowd into hysterics. They surged, crowding around Parks so she could hardly move. "It was the first time I had seen so much courage among our people," Nixon recalled. Despite his excitement, he urged calm. "Everything is alright," he said, gesturing toward the heavily armed policemen who suddenly lined the hall. "Keep calm because we don’t want to do anything to make that man use the shotgun." After Nixon signed the bond and handed Parks to her husband, he turned to the angry crowd and told them to go home. "Don’t hang around," he urged, "because all they want is some excuse to kill somebody." 376

Parks asked her husband to drop her off at Fred Gray’s office to work the phones for the rest of the afternoon. Meanwhile, Gray, E. D. Nixon, Ralph Abernathy, Reverend E. N. French, and a handful of other ministers assembled in the basement of the Mt. Zion AME Zion Church to hammer out a plan for that evening’s mass meeting. They needed a name and a president for their new organization. Nixon suggested the Citizens Coordinating Committee—a kind of amalgam of titles from previous campaigns to protect black women like Recy Taylor and Gertrude Perkins. Ralph
Abernathy, the young Baptist minister in town wrinkled his nose at the suggestion. “No, I don’t like that,” he said. “What about the Montgomery Improvement Association?” “That sounds good,” Reverend French, pastor of the Hilliard AME Zion church said. “I believe I can go along with that.” Abernathy then turned to Nixon. “Brother Nixon, you going to serve as President, ain’t you?” Nixon smiled. “Not unlessen you don’t accept the man I got in mind.”

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was only twenty-six-years-old, virtually unknown outside his upper-crust congregation at Dexter Baptist. But everyone who met him knew he was good looking, intelligent and eloquent. To Nixon, however, the crucial fact was that King was not beholden to anyone, white or black. “He didn’t have to bow to the power structure.” Nixon recalled. “So many ministers accept a handout, and then they owe their soul.” King had not even had the opportunity to sell out. “He had not been here long enough for the city fathers to put their hands on him,” as Nixon put it.

Although historians would later argue that Nixon wanted to be president of the MIA and that Rufus Lewis, Nixon’s chief political rival, engineered King’s nomination, Nixon and other established leaders in Montgomery were not eager to take on what in all likelihood
would be a short-lived and dangerous exercise. After all, their plans called only for a one-day boycott. No one knew what would happen next, but most were confident it would not include glory or fame. Though they all knew a moment had come, no one suspected that the moment had come.

Though Nixon was happy to let King head the MIA, he did not shrink from bold leadership. When some ministers suggested that their names remain secret to protect themselves and their families from white retribution, Nixon exploded in anger. "They was talking about slipping around, didn’t want the white folks to know," Nixon recalled. "How you going to run a bus boycott in secret?" he demanded. Then, using language that as Nixon put it, "wasn’t in the Sunday school books," he chastised the timid preachers. "How the hell you going to have a protest without letting the white folks know? What’s the matter with you people?" he asked, flabbergasted by their cowardice. "Here you have been living off the sweat of these washwomen all these years, and you have never done anything for them. Now you have a chance to pay them back. And you’re too damn scared to stand on your feet and be counted." Scolding the black ministers for shirking their manly duties, he dared them to rise up in defense of black womanhood. "We’ve worn aprons
all our lives,” he said. “It’s time to take the aprons off....If we gonna be mens, now’s the time to be mens.”\(^{382}\)

Nixon’s tirade may have convinced the ministers to stand up for black women, but it did not mean they planned to share leadership with them. Indeed, neither Jo Ann Robinson nor Rosa Parks, the two women who made the boycott possible, were at the meeting where the Montgomery Improvement Association was born and Martin Luther King Jr. was chosen as its president. Whether Nixon and others simply forgot to include Robinson and Parks or explicitly excluded them is not known. It was not until the mass meeting that night that Robinson realized her leadership had been subverted. “The men took it over,” she said. They had “definitely decided to assume leadership.”\(^{383}\)

That night, December 5, 1955, over five thousand African Americans squeezed into the sanctuary, the balcony and basement annex at the Holt Street Baptist Church. A wave of bodies spilled out the double doors and clogged six blocks of city sidewalks outside. Cars jammed the streets surrounding the modest church, unable to move even an inch. Volunteers set up loudspeakers so that the throngs of people clamoring unsuccessfully for a seat could stand outside and hear Nixon, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King
Jr., and other ministers make their debut as “mens.” The moment was electrifying.

King started slowly, speaking about the murky nature of segregation laws, then began to rock the crowd with his incredible oratory, bringing a steady stream of “yeses” and “Amens.” When King praised Parks, the audience applauded and cheered on their new heroine. “And since it had to happen,” King declared, “I’m happy that it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks.”

“Yes,” the crowd shouted.

“Nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity,” King said.

“Sure enough,” someone in the audience yelled.

“Nobody can doubt the height of her character; nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus.”

“Yes!” roared the crowd.

“Nobody can call [Rosa Parks] a disturbing factor in the community...she is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there.”

The crowd, undulating in call and response, shouted “All right!”

Then, in the gospel tradition of turning one person’s burden into a shared experience, King spoke to everyone who
had been mistreated on the buses or humiliated by segregation. "There comes a time," he began, his voice steady and even, then rising, "when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." A roar of approval rolled over the crowd. "There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair." As emotions swelled and the applause shook the rafters of the old church, King reached a crescendo; "there comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November." The amazing thunder of sound—clapping, screaming, and foot stomping, drowned King out.

He had touched a nerve. In those few sentences, King captured the soul-deep sense of humiliation and degradation that the mostly working-class audience of maids, cooks, teachers and day laborers undoubtedly felt. The language King employed to describe the effect of mistreatment on the buses—"abyss of humiliation" and "nagging despair"—speaks to the way racial and sexual subjugation conspire to steal a person's humanity. It is no surprise that the audience erupted in raw emotion. King then skillfully moved to control the anger and enthusiasm to remind the audience
that they had the power—through Christian love, faith, and unity—to overthrow the system that had oppressed them for so long.

After King’s momentous speech, Reverend E. N. French stepped onto the pulpit and presented Rosa Parks to the crowd. If there was one woman in Montgomery who could testify to the decades of injustice under Jim Crow, it was Rosa Parks. Not only could she speak about her own mistreatment and abuse on the buses—something that so many of the women assembled together shared—she could also place her arrest in the long history of crimes committed by whites against blacks, something of which she had intimate knowledge.

Just before Reverend French presented Rosa Parks to the crowd, she asked him if the men in charge that night wanted her to say a few words. French told her that she had “had enough and [had] said enough and you don’t have to speak.” She nodded and they walked toward the front of the church. “I have the responsibility,” Reverend French proclaimed to the pulsating crowd, “to present to you the victim of this gross injustice, almost inhumanity, and absolute undemocratic principle, Mrs. Rosa Parks.” The audience erupted in applause as she stood silent before them.
We can only wonder what Rosa Parks might have said that night in front of throngs of supporters and fellow sufferers. Perhaps she would have spoken about the abuses suffered by Recy Taylor, Gertrude Perkins, Flossie Hardman, Claudette Colvin, and so many of the women present that night, conjuring up a collective spirit of defiance and self-defense. She might have called on her decades of experience defending ordinary black Alabamians from white terror and her long struggle for human rights to remind her peers of their long and continuing struggle for justice and to push for mass action. Her testimony could have changed the way she was received and forever remembered.

Because Reverend French and the ministers leading the mass meeting that night silenced Parks, they turned her into the kind of woman she wasn’t: a quiet victim and solemn symbol. From that moment forward, Parks was sainted and celebrated for her quiet dignity, prim demeanor and middle-class propriety, her radicalism all but erased as she became the Madonna of Montgomery. She “looked like a symbol of mother’s day,” L.D. Reddick, a history professor at Alabama State proclaimed, though Parks was neither a mother nor, at just forty-two-years-old, matronly. The deliberate construction of Rosa Parks as a symbol of virtuous black womanhood began that evening. Reverend
Abernathy said as much: “Mrs. Rosa Parks was presented to the mass meeting because we wanted her to become symbolic of our protest meeting.”

Unlike Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, Parks’s respectability gave credibility to the nascent Montgomery Improvement Association, minimized controversy and allowed African Americans to claim the moral high ground in what would become an all out war against white supremacy. At the same time, they protected themselves and Parks by playing down her radicalism, which would have encouraged opposition, if not outright violence, in an environment poisoned by anticommunist paranoia and the racist rhetoric of White Citizen’s Councils.

The presentation of Parks as a woman worthy of protection enabled African American ministers and male leaders, most of whom had been resistant to the WPC’s calls for a boycott, to take credit for and assume leadership of the boycott. By stepping forward, they could fulfill their manly duty to defend black womanhood, a role that white supremacy had denied them for centuries. Jo Ann Robinson, who complained in her memoir about black men’s inability or unwillingness to protect black women from abuse and mistreatment on the buses, understood the enormous symbolism displayed at the Holt Street Baptist Church that
night when the leading black men of the community claimed leadership and, as Nixon put it, removed their “aprons.” The ministers, Robinson noted, were finally “catching up with their congregations.”

If the ministers caught up with their congregations by assuming the leadership of the MIA, black women, who filled the majority of the pews that evening and every mass meeting thereafter, kept the MIA and the bus boycott running. Although newspapers focused on King as the leader and ministers’ names lined the MIA’s letterhead, Robinson made sure that she, along with Mrs. A.W. West, a wealthy eighty-year-old widow and WPC member, and Rosa Parks served on the Executive Committee. In fact, it was Robinson, “more than any other person,” according to King, who “was active on every level of protest.” As long as WPC members handled the day-to-day business of the boycott, Jo Ann Robinson did not challenge the MIA’s male leadership. “We felt it would be better,” Robinson said, “if the ministers held the most visible leadership positions.”

Robinson stacked the MIA staff with her own WPC members, guaranteeing control of the boycott’s daily operations. She chose each woman carefully. Mrs. Erna Dungee, a “sophisticated, socially involved woman,” was the MIA’s financial secretary and worked for the boycott full
time. Mrs. Maude Ballou became Martin Luther King’s personal secretary. Ballou, a quiet and dedicated worker, earned King’s trust, Robinson recalled, by never remembering any of his business. Mrs. Martha Johnson was the MIA’s secretary clerk. She assisted all the other leaders of the MIA and “never got two person’s business mixed up.” Mrs. Hazel Gregory served as the general overseer of the MIA. She knew “where everything was, never got anything mixed up, and could get what was needed immediately,” Robinson remembered fondly. Gregory’s position also included “managing the business and taking care of the building where the MIA was housed.”

Only at the podium did women take a backseat in the boycott.

The public face of the boycott belied the crucial role Jo Ann Robinson played in making it a success. During an interview with Rufus Lewis on January 20, 1956, Donald T. Ferron, an oral historian from Fisk University, questioned the leadership of the boycott in his notes. “The public recognizes Reverend King as the leader,” he wrote, “but I wonder if Mrs. Robinson may be of equal importance. The organizational process is being kept secret, as well as the organizers.”

It was Jo Ann Robinson, not Martin Luther King Jr., who served as the chief strategist for the Montgomery
Improvement Association. She negotiated with city leaders and bus company officials, edited the MIA newsletter, and ferried African Americans to and from work for nearly 381 days, all while holding down a full time teaching job at Alabama State. "Few realize how much Jo Ann did," Fred Gray recalled. Hardly anyone knew, for example, that "much of the activity...occurred at Jo Ann Robinson's house."

The enormous spotlight that focused on King, combined with the construction of Rosa Parks as a saintly symbol, hid the women's long struggle in the dimly lit background, obscuring the origins of the MIA and erasing women from the movement. For decades, the Montgomery bus boycott has been told as a story triggered by Rosa Parks's spontaneous refusal to give up her seat followed by the triumphant leadership of men like Fred Gray, Martin Luther King Jr., E.D. Nixon, and Ralph Abernathy. While these men had a major impact on the emerging protest movement, it was black women's decade-long struggle against mistreatment and abuse by white bus drivers and police officers that launched the boycott. Without an appreciation for the particular predicaments of black women in the Jim Crow South, it is nearly impossible to understand why thousands of working-class and hundreds of middle class black women chose to
walk rather than ride the bus for three hundred and eighty one days.

Women walked, Parks claimed in an interview in April 1956, not merely in support of her, but because she “was not the only person who had been mistreated and humiliated.” “Other women had gone through similarly shameful experiences,” Parks said, “some even worse than mine.”These experiences propelled African American women into every conceivable aspect of the boycott. African American women of means, professional women like Jo Ann Robinson, and society women like Irene West, brought their own gifts to the boycott, even though many did not ride the buses. Erna Dungee, MIA financial secretary, said women “really were the ones who carried out the actions.” “We organized the parking lot pick ups...drove the cars” and did “the little day to day things, taking care of the finances, things like that. When all the dust settled,” she told an interviewer, “the women were there when it cleared. They were there in the positions to hold the MIA together.”

Class status did not dictate women’s roles. More than any single individual, the city’s domestic workers put the Montgomery City Lines out of business. “The maids, the cooks, they were the ones that really and truly kept the
buses running,” Georgia Gilmore recalled. “And after the maids and the cooks stopped riding the bus,” Gilmore added, “well, the bus didn’t have any need to run.”

During the first few months of the boycott, Willie M. Lee, a researcher from Fisk University, went to Montgomery to figure out why so many domestic workers were determined to stay off the buses. “I’ll crawl on my knees ‘fo I get back on dem buses,” one woman said while waiting at a carpool dispatch center. Her friend agreed, “I ain’t ‘bout to get on dem buses...I’ll walk twenty miles ‘fo I ride ‘em.”

Irene Stovall, a mother and domestic servant told Lee that she was “never gon git back on dem ole buses” because the bus drivers sexually harassed her. They “say nasty thangs and dey talk under folks’ clothes,” Stovall said, “they ain’t gittin no more of my dimes.”

A tall, stately maid named Mrs. Beatrice Charles told Lee a long story about why she refused to ride the buses. She said she was staying off the buses because the abuse black women suffered had “been happening since [she] came here before the war.” Bus drivers “make you get up so white men could sit down,” she testified. “But we are sure fixing ‘em now and I hope we don’t ever start back riding. It’ll teach them how to treat us,” she said. “We people, we are not dogs or cats.” Then she told Lee about a recent
dispute with her white employer, Mrs. Prentiss. When Prentiss asked her if she rode the bus, Mrs. Charles replied, “I sure didn’t.”

Prentiss seemed shocked at the woman’s brazen response. “Why, Beatrice, they haven’t done anything to you,” she said.

“Listen, Mrs. Prentiss,” Charles replied, “you don’t ride the bus, you don’t know how those ole nasty drivers treat us and further when you do something to my people you do it to me too...I don’t have anything in my heart but hatred for those bus drivers.”

Mrs. Prentiss attempted to mitigate her employee’s anger by arguing that she had “always been nice” and then added, “I just can’t see white and colored riding together on the buses.” “It just wouldn’t come to a good end,” Prentiss proclaimed. Prentiss hinted at the underlying fears white Southerners harbored after the Brown decision. Many worried that bus integration was merely an entrée to “social equality” or interracial sex. For example, Sam Englehardt, the local leader of the Citizen’s Council, warned whites February 1956 that the bus boycott was “piddling stuff.” What protestors are really after, he insisted, was “complete integration, even to intermarriage.”
Beatrice Charles set Mrs. Prentiss straight about who wanted to sleep with whom. “You people started it way back in slavery,” she said. “If you hadn’t wanted segregation, you shouldn’t got us all mixed up in color….right now I can sit on my porch and when it starts getting dark, I can look down the street by those trees and see colored women get in the cars with policemen. And what about that colored boy who had to leave town ‘cause that white woman out here was going crazy about him? So you can’t tell me that it’s over.”

By bringing up the issue of white men prowling around black neighborhoods searching for black women, and the double-standard applied to black men caught with white women, Mrs. Charles gave voice to the sexual and racial components of the protest movement.

When Mrs. Prentiss threatened to participate in the White Citizen’s Council’s plan to starve the maids for a month, her maid laughed. “I sure won’t starve. You see, my husband is a railroad man, my son and daughter have good jobs, and my daddy keep plenty of food on his farm. So I’m not worried at all, ‘cause I was eating before I started working for you.”

Beatrice Charles spoke for many women who beamed with a new sense of what Martin Luther King Jr. called “somebodiness.” Jo Ann Robinson articulated that newfound
sense of power and pride at a mass meeting in late March 1956. “The whole world is watching the boycott,” she said with glee. “The whole world respects us…. You go downtown now and people show respect. Negroes are proud now, they hold their heads high and strut,” Robinson said. “I have never been so proud to be a Negro.” Martin Luther King Jr. often rhapsodized about a “New Negro” emerging out of the black freedom movement who replaced self-pity with self-respect and self-doubt with dignity, In Montgomery,” he boasted, “we walk in a new way. We hold our heads in a new way.”

The fear that had immobilized African Americans for so long seemed to disappear as the boycott continued into its second month. This sentiment was audible at the many car pool pick-up locations around Montgomery, where domestics gathered to wait for rides from black volunteers. Willie Lee listened in on many of these conversations, recording them for posterity. “We got these white folks where we want ‘em,” Dealy Cooksey, a forty-year-old domestic servant said. “Dere ain’t nothing dey can do but try to scare us. But we ain’t rabbit no more,” she warned, “we done turned coon…it’s just as many of us as the white folks and dey better watch out what they do.”
Mrs. Allen Wright a forty-five year old cook agreed: “They bit off more than they can chew when they put one of our fine ladies in jail,” she proclaimed. “Clyde Sellers [the new police commissioner] might as well give up,” she said, “’cause we ain’t gonna be pushed down no more. Our eyes is open and dey gonna stay open.” 406

At least one woman in the group threatened to meet white resistance with violence. Whites “think they bad ‘cause they got guns,” Willie May Wallace, a store maid argued, “but I sho hope they know how to use ‘em, ‘cause if they don’t, I’ll eat ‘em up with my razor.” A white man “bet not come up on me and hit me cause...he’ll be in pieces so fast he won’t know what hit him.” 407 Then Wallace told Lee a story about her confrontation with a white female co-worker. When Wallace told her colleague that she was never going to ride the buses again, the white woman “bristled all up lack she wanted to hit me,” the maid said. But “I told her...a white woman ain’t been born that would hit me and live.” Even though the police may come, she boasted, “when they do you’ll be three D: Dead, Damned and Delivered.” The maid was proud to note that “that huzzy ain’t did nothing but spoke to me since den. When they fine you ain’t scared of ‘em,” she shortled, “they leave you ‘lone. Son-of-a-bitches.” 408
At the weekly mass meetings, hundreds of African Americans gathered to renew spirits and reenergize tired bodies. Photographs of the crowds invariably reveal large female majorities. Here they shared their stories of defiance and testified about their degradation, transforming bitter memories and shame into weapons of protest. Reverend Robert Graetz, a white minister who became active in the bus boycott, recalled that when women told their stories, the “people would cheer” for their new heroines. The “maids were the soldiers,” he said, “they rallied the leaders.”

At an evening assembly in March 1956, one woman stood up and said she was with the protest because she had been called a “nigger” on the bus. Worse, she argued, “I was asked to give a white man a seat,” she said. “I am filled up to my bones in this, it’s way down in my bones and when there ain’t no protest,” she said, offering a profound defense of her humanity, “I’m still gonna have it. I’m still gonna have my protest.” After her moving testimony, the congregation sang the Negro spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” translating the troubles they had all seen into “Glory, Hallelujah.”
Women at the mass meetings demanded that they be treated like human beings, worthy of protection and respect. The male leaders of the boycott made sure that women’s actions were celebrated in the community. One minister praised a group of women whom he saw “walking in pride and dignity.” They “would do justice to any queen,” he declared. Another preacher honored the “ancient” Mother Pollard, a well-known elderly black woman, who refused to accept a ride or an exemption from the boycott because of her frailty. “My feets is tired,” she said, “but my soul is rested.” These weekly testimonies gave boycotters a sense of worth and agency and united the “walking city” as individual burdens were universalized and spread out over the whole.

The mass meetings fostered a sense of community that did not exist before the boycott. “Everybody walked together. We rode together,” Zelia Evans, a teacher at Alabama State and WPC member, recalled. “There was a togetherness that I hadn’t seen before. We had suffered and sacrificed so long,” she added, “we were ready...to support a movement.” “It was the first time in the history of Montgomery,” Robert Nesbitt, the Secretary for the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, recalled, “that all the ministers threw away their little egos...and united.”
In order to fund the daily operations of the Montgomery Improvement Association and finance the expensive alternate transportation system, Montgomery’s African Americans had to raise enormous amounts of money. A fleet of nearly 300 private automobiles picked up passengers at forty-two locations and ferried the former bus riders around town. The city’s black social clubs held dances and sponsored activities to raise funds. Black churches took up a collection every Sunday. The Federated Women’s Clubs threw parties to raise needed cash and women went door-to-door, canvassing neighborhoods for donations. Their efforts paid off. Within the first few months of the boycott, when donations from outside organizations like the national NAACP were rare, members of the MIA raised a quarter of a million dollars primarily from local blacks.415

The most consistent local fundraiser was Mrs. Georgia Gilmore, a nurse, midwife, and defiant mother of six, who used her experience as a cook to raise money. Gilmore was a “pretty, smooth-complexioned black woman as large in kindness as she [was] in body,” said B. J. Simms, leader of the MIA’s transportation system. But, he warned, “don’t rub her the wrong way. Would you believe that this charming woman once beat up a white man who had mistreated one of
“her children?” he asked. “He owned a grocery store and Mrs. Gilmore marched into his place and wrung him out!”

Gilmore had a long history of standing up herself and fighting for justice. She refused to follow bus drivers’ demands and insisted on being treated with dignity. A Montgomery minister recalled Gilmore’s reputation: “Even the white police officers let her be,” he said. “The word was ‘Don’t mess with Georgia Gilmore, she might cut you.’” “But Lord,” he reminisced, “that woman could cook.” When the MIA announced its plan to boycott the buses for one day, Gilmore immediately called her friends and enlisted their talents for the boycott.

“What we could do best,” Gilmore proudly declared, “was cook.” That day, Gilmore recalled, she and a handful of her friends “collected fourteen dollars amongst ourselves and bought chickens, bread and lettuce and started cooking.” “We made a bundle of sandwiches,” she said, to sell at the mass meetings at Holt Street Baptist Church. From there, Gilmore and her fellow chefs began preparing and selling full dinners, pies and cakes. They called themselves the “Club From Nowhere.”

The ambiguous club name was strategic: it helped safeguard the women from “the police and laws” who, Gilmore complained, “go around trailing our members and giving them
traffic tickets the way they were doing with so many colored folk.” And it provided anonymity when selling their wares. Each day, the women sold their savory sandwiches and chicken dinners door to door and to hungry downtown workers, black and white. “When we’d raise as much as three hundred dollars for a Monday night rally,” Gilmore explained, “then we knewed we was on our way for five hundred on Thursday night.”

When the call for collections came at weekly mass meetings, Gilmore would stand up and shout, “We’re the Club from Nowhere!” and walk the women’s profits up to the front of the church. Gilmore’s proud strolls to the collection plate became one of the most anticipated weekly rituals. As Gilmore strutted back to her seat, boycotters rattled the church rafters with “dignified applause, foot stomping, and exclamations of ‘Aaaamen, Amen!’” The excitement and support for the Club from Nowhere, Gilmore explained, encouraged “other ordinary folks” to do “the same thing in their neighborhoods—competing with us to raise more than us.”

It was hard to compete with the Club from Nowhere. They raised “maybe a hundred and fifty or two hundred dollars or more a week,” Gilmore recalled. Inez Ricks, a black woman who lived on the other side of town, was up for
the challenge. When she set up a competing women’s club, the “Friendly Club,” the rivalry heated up. The collegial competition enlivened the meetings while inspiring other women.

Gilmore and her Club From Nowhere “represented more than the actual cash they contributed each week,” B. J. Simms insisted. “This fine woman and her team represented the grass-roots type of support and enthusiasm that launched the boycott and kept it moving to the very end.”

Without support from working-class women like Gilmore, the bus boycott would have failed. And yet Gilmore, like all the women who risked their lives and livelihoods to make the thirteen-month protest possible, has been relegated to the footnotes of history. “We made the world take notice of black folks in Montgomery,” Gilmore said, but now “we’re all in the Club From Nowhere.” Simms agreed. “Most of the people who made indispensable contributions” to the boycott, he argued, “were soon forgotten and today are ignored as nobodies from nowhere.”

Those “nobodies” made the Montgomery movement possible by finding “ingenious ways to keep the boycott alive.” Though ministers like Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy filled public leadership positions, black women were “the power behind the throne,” as Erna Dungee,
WPC secretary and MIA finance manager put it. “We really were the ones who carried out the actions,” she insisted. Like Dungee, Hazel Gregory insisted that it was working-class women whose collective refusal to ride the buses “made it work.” “If you hadn’t had those people, you would not have been able to [succeed],” she said.

Besides serving as the boycott’s foot soldiers, handling the day-to-day business of the MIA and leading local fundraising drives, black women helped keep the carpool running. At least twenty-nine women worked as regular carpool drivers or dispatchers. Ann Smith Pratt, a hairdresser, was the chief dispatcher. She worked the Ham radio “directing taxi drivers and the church station wagon crew to urgent pickups at thirty-two designated sites.” After Rosa Parks lost her job as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair on January 7, 1956, she often filled in as a dispatcher, sometimes working from sunup to sundown. And Alberta James was, according to her peers, “unquestionably the best driver employed by the MIA transportation committee.”

Middle-class women who had their own cars, mostly black but some white women, used their vehicles and their free time to transport their less-affluent neighbors. One of the boycott’s classic sights was when Mrs. A.W. West, an
eighty-year-old widow, rambled down the streets in her green Cadillac limousine every morning between seven and eleven in the morning “to chauffeur people about." 

“And that’s why,” Virginia Durr, a white activist noted, “Mrs. West was called a queen.” Mrs. West was regaled by other women for her daily contributions. She was the kind of woman “who did not have to do it,” Durr said. “Because she could have stayed at home and said that she was, you know, elderly.”

Since black women provided the backbone of the boycott, they were also the primary targets of white retaliation. Aside from getting fired from their jobs, which was the most common reprisal, African-American women walking to work remained vulnerable to physical and sexual harassment. Whites in passing cars pelted pedestrians with “water balloons and containers of urine…rotten eggs, potatoes and apples.”

Jo Ann Robinson was terrified when two white men threw a brick through her window. Shortly thereafter, she saw two policemen pour acid on the hood of her car. The next morning, the car “had holes as large as a dollar” all over its’ hood and roof, she said. Armed whites stood on street corners and jeered at the walking women. “Look at dem red bastards over der watching us,” a domestic protested. “Dey got dem guns, but us aint skered.”
“I don’t mind dying,” she said, “but I sho take one of dem with me.”

The fact that white men with guns could not force black women back into their “place” indicated the sense of power and pride the boycott aroused among African Americans. King argued that this new sense of pride and power was a crucial component of the movement. One “can not understand the bus protest,” King said later, “without understanding that there is a new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity and destiny.”

Segregationists, however, had little interest in Negroes, old or new. City commissioners, angered by the success of the boycott and their inability to quell it, launched a city-sponsored intimidation campaign on January 23, 1956. Mayor Gayle called it his “get tough” policy. Denouncing the MIA as a “group of Negro radicals,” Gayle claimed he was “tired of pussyfooting around” and ordered police to “break up Negro car pools by diligent enforcement...of all traffic regulations” and to charge African Americans waiting for rides at dispatch stations with loitering. “Every black person would get a traffic ticket two and three times a week...there was no need arguing with police,” Georgia Gilmore recalled. Gilmore alone received over thirty tickets. “We just took [them]” she
stated. “Policemen would give hundreds and hundreds of tickets every day to black people.”  

One day after Gayle’s “get tough” announcement, he and Commissioner Frank Parks publicly declared their support for and membership in the White Citizen’s Council.

The official announcement, Clifford Durr pointed out, "was quite naturally taken by the denizens of the woodwork and the underside of rocks to be a signal to come out and do their worst." Those “denizens” dynamited Martin Luther King’s home on January 30 and bombed E. D. Nixon’s house two days later. At an MIA meeting on February 2, members of the executive committee decided to employ armed guards for the homes of key individuals thought to be the most vulnerable to attack. A number of women were at the top of the list, including Rosa Parks, Erna Dungee, Jo Ann Robinson, Euretta Adair, and Maude Ballou. Parks was especially worried. “Some strange men have been coming into my neighborhood inquiring about this woman who caused all this trouble,” she reported. Parks then asked for the MIA to provide night watchmen.

She had reason to be afraid. On February 10, just over a week after Rosa Parks helped Nixon’s wife clean up the mess made by the bomb, more than ten thousand whites attended what they billed as the “biggest pro-segregation
rally in the United States since the Civil War.” There, Mississippi Senator James Eastland, a rabid racist, told the cheering crowd that the prescription for a segregationist victory was to “organize and be militant.”442 Other speakers, surrounded by hundreds of Confederate flags, boasted that they would “give the niggers a whipping” and teach Rosa Parks a “harsh lesson.”443 By singling Parks out for special punishment, Citizen’s Council members implied that they wanted to do more than physically abuse her. Ironically, after they threatened her, Mayor Gayle and Commissioners Sellers and Frank Parks promised to “hold the line against Negro integration.”444 Gayle did everything he could to hold that line, including turning a blind eye to the Citizen’s Council’s public declaration to “abolish the Negro race” with “guns, bows and arrow, sling shots and knives.”445

While the WCC did Gayle’s dirty work, the mayor harnessed the city’s institutional power to harass boycotters and shut down the car-pool system. On February 13, local prosecutors summoned over two hundred African Americans to testify about who was behind the boycott. The special grand jury, impaneled by Judge Eugene Carter, who had sentenced Claudette Colvin nearly a year earlier, was charged with investigating whether or not African Americans
violated a 1921 statute outlawing boycotts “without just cause or legal excuse.” On February 21, the grand jury returned indictments against Rosa Parks, Reverend King and eighty-seven others, over a dozen of whom were women. It was, according to Taylor Branch, “the largest wholesale indictment in the history of the country.”

Mayor Gayle’s attempt to frighten boycotters with the threat of arrest and jail time—something African Americans had special reason to fear—backfired when a fearless E. D. Nixon, marched to the courthouse and turned himself in. “Are you looking for me?” Nixon asked the sheriff. “Well, I am here.” Parks followed Nixon’s example, and soon hundreds gathered around the courthouse applauding and celebrating the bravery and courage of those arrested. “We took the news as a joke, a pretense, an excitement for the moment,” Jo Ann Robinson noted. Outside the courthouse, she remembered, “Negroes laughed, determined to stand their ground. They were defiant, willing to go to jail, ready to let Americans and the world know that they could not and would not take any more.”

Jail could not possibly be worse than death, many reasoned, and African Americans were, according to Robinson, ready “to die for justice and freedom.” The crowd grew larger and more celebratory as more and more
blacks voluntarily turned themselves in, transforming the jailhouse, a place to be feared and avoided at all costs, into a place of honor. Sheriff Butler, clearly peeved by the “perversion of the penal spirit” demanded silence. “This is no vaudeville show,” he shouted to no effect.451

Watching the crowd mock the police, Jo Ann Robinson realized the world she had always known had somehow changed. The fear that had held black people down had begun to evaporate. “If there was any nervousness or uneasiness,” she argued, “it was on the part of the whites.”452 Whites seemed especially tense when scores of black domestics descended upon the courthouse. “From the alleys they came,” B. J. Simms gleefully recalled. “Black women with bandannas on, wearing men’s hats with their dresses rolled up. This is what scared white people.” When a policeman tried to get control of the crowd, the women surged forward. “All right, you women get back,” the officer shouted as he reached for his Billy club. Then, “these great big old women with their dresses rolled up,” Simms recalled, “told [the officer], ‘Us ain’t going nowhere. You done arrested us preachers and we ain’t moving.’” When the officer reached for his gun, the fearless women dared him to use them. “I don’t care what
you got,” one woman said. “If you hit one of us, you’ll not leave here alive.”

The public confrontation between black women and the police in Montgomery was a long time coming. That night, black women served notice that they were no longer going to be violated by or pushed around by white police officers. They put their bodies on the line in defense of their humanity, something anyone watching could see. “This trial,” the editor of the Christian Century argued in 1956, “marks the first fateful assertion of their full dignity as human beings.”

On March 19, twenty-eight black women asserted their full dignity and their right to protest abuse on the buses at the only trial held after the mass arrests. Prosecutors tried Martin Luther King Jr. for conspiracy and held the other eighty-nine indictments in abeyance. They believed that if they could remove King as leader of the boycott, it would quickly fall apart. At first, the defense played dumb. Most witnesses feigned ignorance of King’s role in the boycott and some acted as if the boycott was simply a figment of the prosecutor’s imagination. Gladys Moore seemed to take offense at the suggestion that King started the protest. “Wasn’t no one man started it,” she insisted.
"We all started it overnight."\(^{455}\) Estella Brooks testified that King had nothing to do with her decision to stay off the buses. She told the judge she had not been on a bus since August 12, 1950, the day a policeman shot and killed her husband for arguing with a bus driver. “No one told me to stop riding the buses,” Gladys Moore said after prosecutors tried to get her to blame King, “I stopped because we had been treated so bad down through the years that we decided we wouldn’t ride the buses no more.”\(^{456}\) Finally, in what seemed like an effort to shame the judge into ruling for the defense, King’s attorneys “summon[ed] a stream of Negro women to the stand to testify about cruelties they had seen and endured on the buses.”\(^{457}\)

*Time* magazine reported that the women eagerly testified, often without any prompts. The black women, *Time* noted, “began talking before defense lawyers asked their names; others could hardly be stopped.”\(^{458}\) By detailing one insulting experience after another, a group of core women activists denounced the system that denied their humanity on a daily basis. Almost all of them testified that they stopped riding the buses because white drivers humiliated them or abused them.

Martha K. Walker said she stopped riding because drivers constantly heaped abuse upon her and her blind
husband, who was a veteran of World War II. Gladys Moore testified that bus drivers treat women “just as rough as could be...like we are [not] human.” Bus drivers, Georgia Gilmore declared, mistreat people “positively for nothing.”

Henrietta Brinson said the mistreatment was too much: “I am just fed up with these bus drivers...just fed up to my neck.” They “don’t want to treat us the right way,” she said. Referencing one particularly mean operator, she told the court that he said, “all you niggers are pushing like a passle of cows.” She stared at the judge. “Cow,” she said, that’s what he called us.”

Judge Carter sat in stony silence, completely unmoved. At the end of the trial, he pronounced King guilty of conspiracy to violate the 1921 law and ordered him to pay a five hundred dollar fine or serve a year at hard labor. Like Judge Carter, national newspaper and magazine reporters waiting outside for the ruling, ignored black women’s testimonies that detailed decades of mistreatment and denied King’s leadership in the boycott. Instead, the media turned King into a an apostle of civil rights. A reporter for the New York Times recorded the time, down to the exact minute that King emerged from the courthouse. It was 4:39 PM. A throng of supporters erupted in cheers when
King emerged, many of them shouting, “Behold the King!” and “Hail the King!” as though he really was “Alabama’s Modern Moses,” as Jet magazine called him.\(^{462}\)

At Holt Street Baptist Church, where thousands of African Americans gathered that night, ministers presented Reverend King as a Christ-like figure sent to Montgomery to deliver blacks from their misery. “Here is the man,” one minister proclaimed when introducing King to the mass meeting, “who today was nailed to the cross for you and me.”\(^{463}\) While the exultation of King fit into a distinctly black Christian tradition, it obscured other leaders. “From that day onward,” Rufus Lewis recalled later, “Rosa Parks became a secondary figure.”\(^{464}\)

It was not just Rosa Parks, the radical activist, who was written out of the story of the Montgomery bus boycott. Jo Ann Robinson and her army of women in the WPC, as well as the thousands of working-class women who made Montgomery “the Walking City” were reduced to the footnotes of history. While the media is partly to blame in framing the story around King, other civil rights organizations, in an effort to use Montgomery’s success to spark similar civil rights campaigns throughout the South, recast the bus protest as a movement led by ministers.
Shortly after the boycott ended on December 21, 1956, nine months after the trial that turned Martin Luther King Jr. into a modern Moses, the Fellowship of Reconciliation [FOR] published a comic book that cast King as a fearless freedom fighter and experienced organizer who led his people out of bondage. In FOR’s retelling of the bus protest, Reverend King and his cavalry of militant ministers came to the rescue of Rosa Parks, who refused to move from her seat “because she was tired and her feet ached.” The cartoon featured a nervous King, worried sick about Parks’s arrest, who stayed up all night planning a response. “Something ought to be done,” King, visibly upset, said to his wife. “Rosa is a good woman and not a trouble maker. They had no right arresting her.” A helpless Coretta, seated next to King, asked, “But what can we do?” The next frame portrayed King as an organizer, standing in front of a roomful of men demanding a public response. “We ought to protest,” he said, pointing at the men, “and not ride the buses for a day.” In the next image, King stands over a mimeograph machine with his shirtsleeves rolled up. He and another man ran off “a few hundred” copies of the announcement calling for a one day boycott. And the rest, as they say, became history. \(^{465}\)
Unfortunately, this King-centric and male-dominated version of events obscured the real history of the Montgomery bus boycott as a women’s movement for dignity. The focus on King is so absolute that even today many historians overlook the fact that it was four female plaintiffs, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, Mrs. Aurelia Browder, and Mrs. Susie McDonald, who filed the lawsuit that finally ended segregation on public transportation and put teeth into the Brown decision.

On December 17, 1956, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark Browder v. Gayle decision that segregation, even outside public schools, violated the due process and equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The ruling signaled the death knell of the “separate but equal” doctrine established by the Supreme Court in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision. But it also heralded something significantly more important. The Browder decision determined more than where one could sit on a bus. It was an affirmation of African Americans’ humanity. The Supreme Court, as Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “ruled that we have the right to sit with dignity.”

Response to the decision indicated its powerful emotional impact. At an enormous mass meeting in Montgomery
that night, Reverend Solomon S. Seay Sr., burst into tears at the pulpit when he cried out, “God is on our side.” A hush fell over the ecstatic crowd when Reverend Graetz, the lone white minister in the movement, walked to the front of the church and began to read from Corinthians I; “When I was a child, I spake as a child,” he said. “I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things.” The passage struck a nerve. Before Graetz could finish his reading, the mostly female crowd rose to their feet and cheered. “Several women,” according to the Montgomery Advertiser, “screamed with what appeared to be religious ecstasy.”

Graetz captured the essence of the Supreme Court victory. Though even the biblical language was gendered, the women in the audience that night understood that the Browder decision signaled African American’s arrival as full human beings, as men and women worthy of recognition and respect. While the legal ruling made segregation on public conveyances unconstitutional, the boycott was never just about integration. It was about what Martin Luther King Jr. later called the “thingification” of white supremacy. By walking hundreds of miles to protest humiliation and testifying publicly about physical and sexual abuse, African-Americans—mostly women—reclaimed
their bodies and demanded the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

The legal and moral victory over white supremacy in Montgomery gave African Americans around the country a sense of hope for the future, an inspirational and powerful figurehead in Martin Luther King Jr., and an organizing model—nonviolent direct action, which they hoped to use throughout the South to dismantle Jim Crow. Segregationists intent on thwarting black advances launched their own war to retain their position of power in the South. A swirling storm of white resistance had been gathering since the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. As African Americans in Montgomery returned to the buses and some southern schools took baby steps toward compliance with the Brown decision, the “massive resistance” movement thundered through the South. Drawing on whites’ deepest fears about integration and interracial sexuality, Citizen’s Council members and other die-hard segregationists used economic intimidation, sexualized violence, and terror to derail desegregation and destroy the developing black freedom movement. Between the Montgomery bus boycott and the student sit-in movement in 1960, African Americans hoping
to recreate the Montgomery experience faced the forces of Jim Crow, sparking some of the fiercest battles for manhood and womanhood of the modern civil rights movement.
Epilogue
We all lived in fear for years

Recy Taylor turned eighty-nine on December 31, 2008. I met her and her youngest brother at his tidy ranch house just down the street from the Rock Hill Holiness Church in Abbeville, Alabama the same day Barack Obama became president of the United States. As one million Americans gathered in Washington D.C. to witness the inauguration of the country’s first black President and First Lady, I talked with the slight, spry woman whose courage and testimony in 1944 helped inspire the modern Civil Rights Movement. Recy, Robert Corbitt, and I watched the inaugural events on television in a sunroom filled with family photos and lush houseplants. The little cabin where Recy and Robert’s father, Benny Corbitt, lived out his final days was visible through the windows, reminding us, as William Faulkner put it, that “the past is never dead, it isn’t even past.”469

This seems to be especially true in Abbeville, where Taylor’s family and the families of her assailants have lived nearly side-by-side for decades. “You’d be surprised at how close they lived. We were very segregated--but we were neighbors,” Robert, a lean man with a warm smile and a soft voice, said the night before the inauguration. That
night, fifteen family members crowded into his spacious living room to talk about what happened to Recy. “It’s just that we were in the grey houses and they were in the nicer houses.”

Hugo Wilson’s house is within sight of Lewey Corbitt’s sprawling bungalow. The sagging ranch that Billy Howerton lived in is right across the street from Will Cook’s old place. Joe Culpepper’s peeling two-story colonial is around the corner from Three Points. Although the cow pastures surrounding Abbeville are fallow and the sharecropping shacks (those “grey houses”) were torn down and replaced by modern apartments and fast-food restaurants, the physical layout and population of the tiny rural outpost remains nearly the same as it was in 1944.

For the Corbitt family, those county roads and old homes surrounding Abbeville will always be crime scenes—there has been no resolution or reconciliation; no justice. The violence resonates through generations.

“I used to watch for them,” Robert said, referring to the assailants, most of whom stayed in Abbeville until they died. Many of their children and grandchildren are still there. Robert used to drive past their houses whenever he was in town and kept an eye on their comings and goings.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said, “but I was angry.”
At seventy-two he is still haunted by what happened to his oldest sister more than six decades ago. When he returned to Abbeville in 2001, after living most of his adult life in New York City, he spent days searching through microfilmed copies of the local newspaper, and pestering locals about what they remembered. Not surprisingly, most whites denied it ever happened, while blacks remembered it well.

“For 65 years I’ve been thinking about it,” Robert said, his voice even softer than usual. “A whole week didn’t go by without me thinking about it. She was like a mother to me,” he said, recalling how their mother died when Recy was seventeen and he was one. “She raised me and took care of all six of us, so when I came back here, I tried to dig up something on it.”

Recy’s other brother, R.J., the oldest son in the family and an octogenarian, had clear memories of the day he found out about the assault. He had been out of town, “putting down pipe” for Hennison, Black and Green, a construction company, and heard about the rape from migrant farm workers passing through town. He rushed home and asked his father to name the men so he could find them and retaliate.

“He sat me down and talked to me,” R.J. recalled.
“Now listen,” Benny Corbitt said to his son, “you know how these folks is here. She’s safe. Just be quiet on it for a while. Don’t try to do anything or see anybody. You ask them that done it, you might get in trouble. Somebody could put you up. Best be cool and let me handle it.”

R.J. remembered that his father would often go to the police station and ask Deputy Lewey Corbitt if they had made any progress on the case, but he was always turned away.

“On things like that,” R.J. said, “you didn’t go and get into they [white folks’] business. You stay out of it. See, back then if you say anything or do anything and if you weren’t a good worker or something they’ll send you to prison. They wouldn’t even think nothin’ about it. So you had to be very quiet. ‘Cause they didn’t take no chances on you. When they come on ya, they come on ya with a cry. Daddy always talked to me. He said, ‘Recy all right. Just stay out of it.’”

Arthur, a stocky, strong-jawed nephew, shook his head slowly. According to the family, he is the spitting image of Benny Corbitt.

“You got to remember,” he said, squinting at me, “at that time, black men were lynched. They held back because
if they got lynched they couldn’t protect the family. If you dead, you can’t protect anyone.”

Another sister, Mary Murry, agreed. “Daddy wasn’t scared, but he couldn’t do what he wanted to do because he had no money, no transportation, didn’t have an education. It handicapped him.”

“It affected him emotionally,” Robert said to a chorus of “mm--hmms.”

Recy’s sister, Alma Daniels, a feisty woman with a sharp tongue and a sparkle in her eye, nodded. “But Daddy stayed mad at them [the police] for a long time,” she said. “He always got back at them.”

A few years after the attack, Lewey Corbitt’s wife asked Benny to kill some chickens for her. “He said ‘okay,’” Alma said, as she started to giggle. “Daddy had a whole case of chickens. He took every one of those chickens and snatched their heads off and threw them down on Lewey Corbitt’s front yard.” Lewey Corbitt just stood there, bewildered by Benny’s behavior. “There were chickens everywhere,” she said, laughing.

For a few years after the attack, Recy stayed close to home and surrounded herself with family and friends. “I was so afraid they were going to hurt me,” she said. “They did tell me they were going to kill me if I told.” She and her
sisters only went out during the day, stayed away from Will Cook’s store, and never walked at night. She did not have any other children.

It wasn’t until most of the assailants left town and joined the army that Recy finally felt safe. “I felt like I was back with my good friends and wouldn’t be bothered anymore,” she said. But local whites treated her poorly; most wouldn’t talk to her, or looked the other way when they saw her. The police continued to deny the crime ever happened.

“Lewey Corbitt just laughed at me,” she said. “He denied he was there.”

“The city let her down so bad,” said Robert.

In 1965, Recy, her husband Willie Guy Taylor, and their daughter Joyce Lee moved to a small town in central Florida, where they had been picking oranges for many years. In 1967, Joyce Lee died in a car accident; she left behind one child. Recy’s husband died shortly thereafter.

“Recy had a hard life,” Robert said. “When our mother died, everyone fell in her hands. She had to take care of all the children. The school she went to was tiny—the teacher went no higher than 6th grade. It was a tough life livin’ in the grey house.” She is still “very hurt,” he
said. “I didn’t realize the effect rape took on people until it happened to my sister. After all that,” he said with a sigh, “she lost her only daughter.”

“I never had nothin’,” Recy said, her grey hair tied up with a shiny red wrap. “I still don’t have nothin’.”

The next morning, Recy, Robert and I gathered together to watch the inauguration before they took me on a tour retracing Recy’s steps that late summer night in Abbeville, 1944. The past and the present, normally so incongruent, seemed to merge when Michelle Obama, the great-great granddaughter of slaves and slave-owners, cradled Abraham Lincoln’s Bible in her palms, and extended her hands towards her husband for his oath of office. I turned to Taylor and asked if she ever believed an African American woman would become the First Lady. “Not in my lifetime,” she said.

Growing up in the Jim Crow South, Taylor knew that black women were not even considered ladies. From slavery through most of the twentieth century, African American women were denied the most basic citizenship and human rights, especially the right to ownership and control of their own bodies.
To see Michelle Obama take her place among a pantheon of distinguished American women was to bear witness to African American women’s centuries-long struggle for dignity and respect. Understanding that struggle, Michelle Obama told the Washington Post before the 2008 election, “is a process of uncovering the shame, digging out the pride that is part of that story—so that other folks feel comfortable about embracing the beauty and the tangled nature of the history of this country.”

The brutal rape of Recy Taylor in 1944, and the sexual exploitation of thousands of other black women in the United States before and after the Civil War, is a central part of our history that has been grossly understated and unacknowledged for far too long. Though it may seem unnecessary, even lurid, to examine the details of sexual violence, it is crucial that we hear the testimonies black women offered at the time. Recy Taylor’s willingness, for example, to identify those who attacked her and to testify against them in two grand juries broke the institutional silence surrounding the long history of white men’s violation of black women, countered efforts to shame or stereotype her as unchaste, and made white southern leaders, including the governor of Alabama, recognize her personhood. As a result, her testimony, like so many
others, was a momentous event that deserves our recognition. Until we come to terms with the past—even its most shameful secrets and their legacies—we can neither really understand the past nor appreciate the present.

NOTES TO PROLOGUE


2 I-Corbitt 3. I-Corbitt & RTC. Corbitt, Recy’s youngest brother who was a witness to the events that followed the attack, corroborated nearly every detail in the Governor’s report.

3 “Report”, 7. According to reports, seven men were in the car, but only six participated in the gang rape. Billy Howerton claims he did not have sex with her. The other assailants corroborated Howerton’s testimony. See “Report,” 9-10.


5 Peter Wallenstein, Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage and Law—an American History (New York, 2002), 15.

6 On the way gender and sexuality structured slavery, see, for example, Kathleen Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs (Chapel Hill, 1996), 128-36; Kirsten Fischer, Suspect Relations: Sex, Race and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina (Ithaca, 2002); and


8 Hall, in Snitow et al., 330.


10 Chana Kai Lee, For Freedom’s Sake: the Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Urbana, 1999), 9-10.

11 Maria Bevacqua, Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault, (Boston, 2000), 21.


13 Bevacqua, 24.


15 Ibid., 86-7.
NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

16 Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, Rosa Parks: My Story (New York, 1992); Population estimate for Abbeville in 1940 was 2,080 people, about 30% of whom were African American; see The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama, (Tuscaloosa, 1941), 343. Professional genealogists at ProGenealogists Family Research and Ancestry Research charted Rosa Parks’s family lineage using census records and death certificates. They put their findings, which parallel historical and autobiographical accounts, online. See http://www.progenealogists.com/parks/aqwn01.htm (Accessed October 22, 2007).

17 Parks with Haskins, 8.


19 Parks with Haskins, 9.


21 Parks with Haskins, 15.

22 Ibid., 12-18; “belligerent attitude,” 16.

23 Douglas Brinkley, Rosa Parks (New York, 2000),16.

24 Leona stayed behind, Parks with Haskins, 9; “don’t put up with bad treatment,” ibid., 15.


26 I-Corbitt 3, I-RTC.

27 Petitions and letters signed by Parks in folder 4, CS.
Statement of Recy Taylor, in "Report," 8. Recy and her brother Robert remember events differently. In interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009, they both say that Will Cook did not pick up their father and did not search for the assailants. Instead, they say that Benny Corbitt went searching for his daughter on his own and met her on the roadside near the intersection of Elm Street and East Alabama. Given Will Cook’s reputation among blacks as a brutal racist and his dishonesty in the report itself, I tend to believe Corbitt and Taylor’s account. Cook had a vested interest in portraying himself as a respectable policeman who followed standard procedures when the Governor’s investigators interviewed him in 1944. See I-RTC, I-Corbitt 20.

I-Corbitt 3.


Statement of George H. Gamble, ibid, 3.

John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (Madison, 1988), 139.

“Supplemental Report,” folder 1, CS.


Glenn Feldman, Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949 (Tuscaloosa, 1999), 16.

Parks with Haskins, 30.

Feldman, 54-55.
38 Parks with Haskins, 31.

39 Ibid. 48.

40 Brinkley, 27.

41 Parks with Haskins, 55-60.

42 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 84-85.


44 Brinkley, 38.

45 “Nigger rape case,” in Carter, 12; stunning rapidity and harsh sentence, ibid., 50; “cold blooded ‘illegal’ lynching, ibid., 49; “synonymous with” ibid., 50.

46 For the best summary of African-American activism in Alabama in the 1930s and early 1940s, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

47 Parks with Haskins, 75.

48 Brinkley, 58; Parks with Haskins, 79.


51 Brinkley, 70; Parks with Haskins, 84-85.
52 Petitions and letters signed by Parks in folder 4, CS.

53 Fred Atwater, "$600 to Rape Wife? Alabama Whites Make Offer to Recy Taylor Mate!", CD, January 27, 1945, 1.


57 I-Corbitt-3.

58 For more on Alabama’s “Popular Front” politics, see Kelley, 152-192 passim. Biondi calls the coalition between radical or leftist Black organizations, labor unions, and more middle class, traditional organizations like the NAACP, the “Black Popular Front.” Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, 2003), 9.

59 Over thirty national labor unions and many more locals supported Recy Taylor. See "Press release," February 3, 1945, folder 4, box 430, ECC. Other organizations that played an active role in Taylor’s defense include the National Council of Negro Women, the International Labor Defense, and the Montgomery branch of the NAACP: “Partial Sponsor List,” December 28, 1944, ibid.

60 SNYC held its first conference in Richmond, Virginia in 1937 and over five hundred delegates from thirteen states attended. While many leaders in SNYC were members of the Communist Party, its advisory committee was staffed by prominent, respectable middle class leaders like Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and sociologist Charles Johnson. The conference helped SNYC members lead a campaign to
organize five thousand tobacco workers into the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union, netting them a 20-33 percent wage increase. The third annual SNYC conference, held in Birmingham in 1940, was the “largest to date” and drew 650 delegates and much praise throughout the South as a beacon of hope and light amidst white repression. See Kelley, 201, 202.

Kelley, 222.

Kelley, 203.


Rosa Parks also served as E.D. Nixon’s secretary. Nixon was president of the Montgomery branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Voter’s League. He became president of the local branch of the NAACP in 1945 and served as a key organizer of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. For more on E.D. Nixon, see Thornton,; 28-32; 59-64 passim; 99-102 passim; Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters America in the King years, 1954-1963 (New York,1988), 120-36 passim;, Howell Raines, My Soul is Rested; Movement days in the Deep South Remembere, (New York, 1977), 37-39; 43-51


68 FBI report on the Southern Negro Youth Conference, December 11, 1944, 2; see also Agent Abbaticchio’s FBI report, dated 11/30 to 12/3 1944, HK. See also “Delegation to Ask Alabama Governor for Justice for Rape Victim,” *DW*, November 26, 1944, clipping found in Scrapbook Collection, ECC


70 Biondi states that New York City was the site of a post-war civil rights movement for jobs, equality, desegregation, and human dignity, which set the stage for the southern movement a decade later. “With its large Black population, progressive race leadership, strong trade unions, and progressive print media,” Biondi argues, New York City “became a major battleground in the postwar push for racial equality.” It was also home to the United Nations, which “Black Popular Front” coalitions petitioned “seeking some form of assistance or intervention to aid the Black freedom struggle in the United States,” especially the 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition submitted by the Civil Rights Congress. Biondi, 37, 57.

71 “Press Release,” 20 November 1944, box 370, folder 2, ECC.

72 Minutes from “Conference Held at Theresa Hotel, November 25, 1944 on Case of Mrs. Recy Taylor.” series IV, reel 6, NNCP-M. See Charles A. Collins, Executive Secretary of the Negro Labor Victory Committee to Governor Chauncey Sparks, November 30, 1944, folder 1, CS. The Negro Labor Victory Committee claimed to represent over 300,000 black workers in more than one hundred affiliated CIO, AFL and independent unions.
Moore was a Harlem activist, Garveyite, and member of the ILD and CPUSA, who fought on behalf of the Scottsboro boys in the 1930s. She headed up the New York branch of The Committee to Save Mrs. Rosa Lee Ingram, fought to desegregate Major League Baseball, and founded the first organization advocating Black reparations in 1955. Biondi, 281; See also McDuffie, “Long Journeys.”

“Delegation to Ask Ala. Governor For Justice for Rape Victim,” newspaper clipping, 26 November 1944, series IV, reel 6, NNCP-M

Minutes from “Conference Held at Theresa Hotel,” series IV, reel 6, NNCP-M. FBI reports show that at least fifty people participated in the panel discussion on “civil liberties” and Recy Taylor.

“Delegation to Ask Ala. Governor For Justice for Rape Victim,” newspaper clipping, November 26, 1944, series IV, reel 6, NNCP-M.


While it is impossible to know exactly how many letters came in, the postcards, petitions and personal letters that remain in the Chauncey Sparks papers number well over 500. If you count the number of signatures on the petitions sent in, they easily number in the thousands.

Mrs. Gretchen Coon to Gov. Chauncey Sparks, 29 November 1944, folder 1, CS.

A “Friend of the South” to Governor Chauncey Sparks, December 3, 1944, folder 1, CS.
Charles A. Collins, Executive Secretary of the Negro Labor Victory Committee to Governor Chauncey Sparks, November 30, 1944, folder 1, CS.

For an account of one of the worst racial pogroms in the United States during this time period, see Cecelski and Tyson, Democracy Betrayed. See also David Fort Godshalk, Veiled Visions: the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations, (Chapel Hill, 2009).


Tyson, “Wars for Democracy” in Cecelski and Tyson, 262.


Odum, 97-103.

Ibid., 97-103.

Ibid., 55.

Ibid, 57.

Ibid., 57-58.

Ibid, 64.


Johnson, 258.

Ibid, 258-259.

Ibid., 259.

Cecelski and Tyson, 267.

For more on the Detroit riot, see Dominic J. Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943 (Jackson, 1991).

Letter signed by thirty-three soldiers from "Somewhere in Belgium" to Sparks, January 27, 1945, folder 3, CS.

Eugene Henderson to Governor Sparks, January 16, 1945, folder 3, CS.

Ernest Scott to Governor Sparks, December 22, 1944, folder 3, CS.

Charles S. Seely to Governor Sparks, May 5, 1945, folder 4, CS.

Mr. and Mrs. Scott McCall to Chauncey Sparks, December 18, 1944, folder 3, CS.

Julius Crane to Governor Chauncey Sparks, January 18, 1945, folder 3, CS.

Robert Norrell, The Making of Modern Alabama (Tuscaloosa, 1993), 141-2. According to Norrell, German POWs received the same food and shelter as U.S. troops, played sports, and took classes in English, music, and theater.


"Alabama Officials Feel People’s Pressure in Mrs. Taylor’s Case," DW, December 12, 1944, 4.

Ibid. 4.

Postcards and Petitions for Recy Taylor found in folder 2, 3, 4, CS.

"Taylor Case is Now Nationwide," The Worker, December 31, 1944, p. 12, clipping, folder 8, box 104, JBM.
Though the article keeps the African American leader Conrad interviewed anonymous, I am confident it is E.D. Nixon—not only because he pledged support from his "organization," but also because he said he had a "dossier" of fifty similar cases. Given Rosa Parks' role in investigating racial violence, her meticulous record keeping and her interest in rape cases, along with her close relationship to E.D. Nixon (she was his secretary) I think there is enough evidence to conclude Conrad’s source was Nixon. Since Conrad also interviewed E. G. Jackson, it is reasonable to assume that Jackson put Conrad in touch with his colleague and close ally, Nixon. (When Nixon waged a fierce battle to oust Robert L. Matthews, the president of the Montgomery NAACP throughout 1945, E.G. Jackson used his paper to aid his campaign. Nixon finally became president of the Montgomery branch in December 1945.) See Thornton, 31.


118 “Fayetteville White Man Sentenced to 15 Years for Raping a Negro Girl,” CT, March 16, 1940. This case is interesting because of the relatively long sentence Davis received even after he was allowed to
plead a lesser crime, attempted assault. Apparently, sixteen year old black girls still could not be “raped.” Still, the local NAACP raised enough money in order to wage a court battle and win. The clothes Davis casually threw out the window turned out to be the main evidence used against him.

119 “Young Woman Charges Crime at Rifle-Point,” June 2, 1942, newspaper clipping, NAACP Papers, Alabama Chapter, 1940-1955, microfilm. See also Emory O. Jackson to Walter White, June 3, 1942, Box C2, Series II, NAACP Papers.

120 “Accused of Rape on Teen-Age Dunbar High School Girl,” ASP, July 17, 1942, 1. Thanks to Story Matkin-Rawn for finding this article for me.


122 Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 233-234. Strayhorn told her brother what happened and filed charges. Both men were arrested, tried, and ultimately convicted of rape. They were each sentenced to seven years in prison. The Virginia Supreme Court upheld the verdict. See Dorr, 299n. 98.


124 “Two Denied Bail in Rape Case,” PC, February 2, 1948, 5. The article about Berryhill and Gasque being held without bail was featured just above another article about a black man, titled “Stares Too Hard Gets Six Months.” The juxtaposition of these two stories highlighted the unequal system of justice in the South. Richard Sutton, a nineteen year
old African American from Plymouth, N.C., was sentenced to work six months on the County roads for “assault on a female” after he apparently frightened the woman by “staring at her in the County Courthouse Building.” According to the report, Sutton had an appointment with the sheriff and stopped at the window of the Recorder’s office. He asked directions to the office, but according to the young white woman, “stared at her so hard she became frightened and ran.”

Press release, February 25, 1948, box 123, Group III, NAACP Papers, Patterson managed to escape and told her story to the NAACP.

“I don’t think it would be too much,” Jones said, “if each branch in each state and each city…would ask each member to donate a small amount to see that this man is convicted.” Franklin Williams, an assistant special counsel for the NAACP assured Jones that “representatives of the Association are looking into the matter” and hoped to bring the “guilty person before the bar of justice.” Mrs. Joy B. Jones to Arthur Springarn, July 31, 1947; Franklin H. Williams to Mrs. Joy B. Jones, July 31, 1947; Mrs Joy B. Jones to Arthur Springarn, n.d.; “Rape of Girl, 11, Charged; No Action,” n.d., newspaper clipping; “Alleged Rape on Girl Goes Unnoticed,” n.d., newspaper clipping. All found in Box 123, Group III, NAACP Papers.

Press release, “Negro Girl Beaten, Raped in Meridian,” August 22, 1947; Edward Knott, Jr. to Walter White August 19, 1947; Oliver W. Harrington to Robert Ratcliffe, August 21, 1947; Box 123, Group III NAACP Papers. Press release states that “NAACP officials in this city were attempting to arouse sufficient public opinion to guarantee the prosecution” of Perry. See also, “Charge Woman’s Rape to Mississippi
Oil Man," *CD*, August 30, 1947, 8. Perry’s strategy was similar to that employed by the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor.


129 Payne, 15.

130 Marian Wynn Perry to Edward Knott, Jr. 22 August 1947

131 This strategy had proven relatively effective in the campaign to end lynching. Payne posits that negative nationwide publicity, coupled with the falling price of cotton, electoral changes wrought by mass migration out of the South, and pending federal anti-lynching legislation, made the South subject to more scrutiny than ever before. “By the 1930s, newspapers in larger southern cities typically criticized lynchings, at least in principle. By the 1940s, their criticisms were clearly linked to fear of such scrutiny.” The fact that the United States was engaged in a global war against fascism and racism abroad made lynching African Americans a foreign policy faux pas and helped to decrease the public “spectacle” lynchings popular in the early part of the twentieth century. Payne, 19; of course, these pressures did not end white violence against African Americans, as evidenced by the brutal murders and sexual attacks in Mississippi in the 1940s.

132 “Alabama Has No Race Problem, Claims Official,” *CD*, March 31, 1945, 11. Conrad’s articles appeared as a series of three separate essays in early spring 1945, but drafts found in his papers suggest that he conducted the interviews with residents in Montgomery, Abbeville, and Birmingham in late December 1944.

133 Mrs. (P.B) Margaret H. Moss to Governor Sparks, n.d., found in folder 3 CS.
"Governor Sparks to Press Charges Against Rapists Following Protests," PC, December 23, 1944, 1.


Ibid. 5.

Ibid. 14.

Ibid. 9

"Supplemental Report," 4


"Supplemental Report," 5-14

Ibid. 10-12.

Agent Abbaticchio’s FBI report, dated 1/11/45 to 1/27/45, box 45, HK

"This Evening," BN, February 21, 1945 and "The Henry County Case," BN, February 25, 1945, 6, clippings found in folder 2, CS.


Esther Cooper Jackson to James Jackson, n.d., Personal Papers of James and Esther Cooper Jackson. The letter is now part of the James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers at the Tamiment Library in New York City. Thanks to Sara Rzeszutec for mailing me the letter.

"Strange As It Is," n.d. clipping found in NAACP-Alabama Files, 1940-1955, microfilm. I-Corbitt 3; Corbitt verified the move. He said Rosa Parks came to Abbeville to move Taylor to Montgomery. Recy and her husband stayed in Montgomery for two to three months, living in a rooming house on South Jackson Street.

Clara Hard Rutledge was the wife of a state highway engineer. Her liberal views and actions were unusual at the time. Rutledge was joined
by other white liberal women including Miss Juliette Gordon, a librarian, Mrs. Olive Andrews, the wife of a local insurance agent; Mrs. Bea Kaufman, the wife of a wholesale grocery executive; Mrs. Frances P. McLeod, the wife of a Methodist minister, and (after 1951), Virginia F. Durr, the wife of attorney and New Deal appointee, Clifford Durr. See Thornton, 36. Clara Hard Rutledge to Earl Conrad, n.d., folder 6, box 365, EC.

151 Henrietta Buckmaster to Dorothy Laing, 1 March 1945, folder 19, box 8, Series II Political Activities, AKL. Thanks to Jacki Castledine for finding this material for me.

152 Governor Chauncey Sparks to Alexander Nunn, April 2, 1945, folder 1, CS.

153 Glenda Sullivan to Executive Board Members, April 2, 1945, NNCP-M.

154 Press release, March 30, 1945, NNCP-M

155 Glenda Sullivan to Executive Board Members, April 2, 1945, NNCP-M.


157 In Montgomery, for example, E.D. Nixon and Rufus A. Lewis organized competing voter registration clubs. After Smith v. Allwright ended the white primary in 1944, Nixon’s Alabama Voters League and Lewis’s Citizens Club had helped 813 African Americans register to vote—3.7% of the city’s black population. By 1955, the number had doubled. They also waged battles against police brutality, and mobilized community action
to defend other black women who were assaulted in the late 1940s and early 1950s. See Thornton, 28-35.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO


163 Thurgood Marshall to T. T. Allen, August 4, 1942, box 113, Series II, B, NAACP Papers. It is unclear how Allen handled the case after Marshall alerted him to Jones’ beating, but it is worth noting that Allen was considered by local activists a do-nothing leader, which caused blacks to oust him and elect E.D. Nixon in the next NAACP election. See Dorothy A. Autrey, “The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Alabama, 1913-1952,” (unpublished
dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1985), 244. See also, Yeakey, 62.


165 Ibid. 194.


167 Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill, 1999), 51. African Americans emerged from World War II more determined than ever to force the United States to reconcile the wartime rhetoric of democracy with the reality of Jim Crow. Steven F. Lawson, ed., To Secure These Rights: the Report of President Harry S. Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights, (Boston, 2004), 5. World War II ushered in dramatic changes in the domestic political landscape. Two million African Americans left the South during the war as a result of many forces, including the mechanization of farming, which reduced southern dependency on sharecroppers and the lure of defense jobs, which pulled hundreds of thousands of African Americans North, dramatically altering electoral politics. By 1948, African Americans had enough voting power in the North to tip the balance in any presidential contest. Black ballots determined political victors in 16 non-South states. In the South, Smith v Allwright led to renewed registration efforts and black registered voters rose from 250,000 in 1944 to over a million in 1952. See Steven F. Lawson, Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969. (Lanham, 1999), 139. For other ways the South changed during the war see John Egerton, Speak Now Against the Day (New York, 1994), 347-361. The emerging Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the


169 Egerton, 366: "Georgia and Alabama were the principal killing fields." Each state had at least seven confirmed racial murders in 1946 alone.


171 Egerton, 362-363.


173 “In their place,” Egerton, 367; Maceo Snipes story in Sullivan, 213.

174 Wexler, 82.

175 Egerton, 369. Loy Harrison spoke freely about his role in the lynching in 1981 to Clinton Adams, who witnessed the murders when he was ten years old. Harrison and his accomplices were never prosecuted. In 1992, Adams broke his silence and told the FBI and reporters at the *Atlanta Constitution* what he had seen in 1946. He named four of the murderers (deceased at the time) and said that one of the five cars at the scene was a state police car.


Frederick Douglass quoted in Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven, 1997), 206.

Egerton, 370.

Egerton, 371. See also Lawson, *To Secure These Rights*, 8. Harris survived and later identified five of the murderers. An all white jury acquitted the men after deliberating five hours in February 1947.

Sullivan, 214


Ibid., 9; See also Dudziak, 23.

Dudziak, 20.


Ibid. 179, 31.

Egerton, 476-477.

Thornton, 59.

Parks with Haskins, 84.

Ibid., 85.


Ibid. 399.

Ibid.,397.

Ibid. 398.

The Civil Rights Congress was formed at a conference in Detroit, on April 27-28, 1946. By the mid 1950s, it consisted of sixty chapters across the nation, most on the East and West coasts; only ten chapters

199 Dray, 397: "no white man had ever been executed for rape in Mississippi."


201 Willie McGee to Rosalie McGee, May 7, 1951, box 48, folder 14, ACB.

202 “Mississippi Whites Roar Approval As Willie McGee dies in the Chair,” *CD*, May 19, 1951, 5.


204 Rise, 2.


207 “Assault...at 75 Feet,” pamphlet distributed by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. box 128, Series II B, NAACP Papers.


209 Dray, 405.

210 Parks with Haskins, 86.

211 “Young black men:” Parks with Haskins, 85; Yeakey, 182; See also Parks with Haskins, 85-86. The Montgomery NAACP challenged Reeves’
sentence in the state supreme court, which upheld the death sentence. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down his conviction and returned the case to lower courts, which found him guilty again. The State Supreme Court reaffirmed the lower court's decision and Reeves was executed in 1957. See also, Jeremiah Reeves, Jr. v. State of Alabama, 246 Ala. 476; 88 So. 2d 561; 1956 Ala. Lexis 392.

212 Parks with Haskins, 86.

213 Martin Luther King Jr., Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (San Francisco, 1958), 32.


215 Parks with Haskins, 94.

216 Marcel Reedus, George King, and Vertamae Grosvenor, "Cradle of the Confederacy," Episode Six of WTCBU

217 "Ibid.; S. S. Seay, I Was There by the Grace of God (Montgomery, 1990), 130-31. "All kinds of sexual relations" in Worth Long with Randall Williams, interview with Solomon Seay Sr., http://unbrokencircle.org/focus_week03_seay.htm (February 2, 2006); I-SS; See also: MA, April 5, 1949, 8A; April 6, 1949, 1B; April 7, 1949, 2A; April 15, 1949, 8A; April 17, 1949, 3A; April 20, 1949, 3A; April 21, 1949, last page; May 3, 1949, p 1A; May 21, 1949, 1A; May 27, 1949, 12A; AT, April 22, 1949, 1; April 29, 1949, 1; PC, June 4, 1949, 3. See alsoThornton, 34-35.

218 "Court Denies 2 Petitions in Rape Case; Mayor Needn’t Identify, Nor Sheriff Arrest Accused Men," MA, April 29, 1949; "Drew Pearson Changes Mind; Criticizes City," MA, May 3, 1949, 1.

219 "Rape Cry Against Dixie Cops fall on Deaf Ears," BAA, April 9, 1949, 1.
Yeakey, 152; See also: Stewart Burns, ed., Daybreak of Freedom: the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Chapel Hill, 1997), 7.

Seay, 131, 135, 136.


Thornton, 33, 591 n. 28.

Thornton 33–36 passim. He documents a number of crimes white police officers committed against black men and women throughout the 1940s and claims that police brutality was the number one issue affecting the black community in the decade preceding the bus boycott.


“Racial Discord is Promoted by NAACP, Says Mayor,” MA, April 15, 1949. See also MA, April 5, 1940, 8A; April 6, 1949, 1B; April 7, 1949, 2A; April 15, 1949, 8A; April 17, 1949, 3A; April 20, 1949, 3A; April 21, 1949, last page; May 3, 1949, p 1A; May 21, 1949, p 1A; May 27, 1949, 12A

Seay was arrested two weeks before the grand jury hearing for disorderly conduct during a public meeting about the Perkins affair. His arrest and short stint in jail roused the local ministers, who were relatively conservative and less outspoken than Rev. Seay. It served as a catalyst for more ministerial involvement in the Perkins protest.
An all-white jury sentenced John C. Howard and Jack Oliver to more than 40 years in prison for raping Melinda Jackson, 22, and Annie Grayson, 24. Howard and Oliver robbed a group of African Americans at gunpoint on April 25, 1948, stealing money and a truck. They pushed Jackson and Grayson into the truck, drove them to a secluded area, and then raped them at gunpoint. They were arrested immediately and held without bail. County prosecutor U.G. Jones urged the jury to bring in a verdict that would "show the world that the Negro can get justice in the courts," and that the "people of Elmore County will not tolerate such conduct." The lengthy sentence was a first for Elmore County, if not Alabama as a whole. According to the Chicago Defender, the sentences "appeared to meet with full approval of both white and colored citizens, more than 300 of whom attended the trials." See "Alabama Lily-White Jury...JAILS 2 WHITE RAPISTS," CD, December 11, 1948, 1; "White Gets 45 Years for Raping a Negro," NYT, December 3, 1948, 28; "Man Gets 45 Year Term for Rape of Alabama Negro," WP, December 3, 1948, 1; "Found Guilty of Raping Negro; Gets 45 Years," CDT, December 3, 1948.
According to documents, Flossie Hardman died five years after her attack from shock “which her mother claims was caused by her never recovering from the ordeal she went through.” See Case #2, Box 30, Folder IV, 14 MLK.


Thomas Gilliam, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56," in Garrow, The Walking City, 198; Yeakey argues that African Americans made up approximately 70% of riders, most of them being domestics, maids, cooks, service workers and day laborers. African Americans made up 39.9 percent of Montgomery’s 106,525 people in 1950. Montgomery was home to more black women than black men. 23,847 black women accounted for 56% of the black total population. Of these, 54.5% worked in private households as domestics. Another 18.7% did “service work” (attendants, beauticians, housekeepers, cleaners, janitors, cooks, waitresses, etc.” A total of 73 percent of these African American women worked as domestics or service workers, the majority of whom relied on public transportation to get to work. 48% of black men were common laborers,
249
domestic or service workers. See Yeakey, 9-13. Yeakey also notes that
even a "cursory survey of those who had run-ins with bus drivers
reveals a preponderance of women involved in such incidents," 226.

Yeakey, 20. This information is taken from the 1950 census.

Yeakey, 352; See also Greer, 17.

Burns, 70.

Robinson, 26.

William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstadt eds.,
Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the
Segregated South (New York, 2001), 9.

Robinson, 36.


See Yeakey, 209-213. For information on similar bus conditions in
Birmingham, Alabama, see: Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture,

Yeakey, 220. Certainly some women preferred not to sit anywhere near
white men, given their historic mistreatment of black women

Burns, 62.

Yeakey, 209.

Yeakey, 197, n. 2.

Interview with E.D. Nixon, in Earl Selby and Miriam Selby, Odyssey:

Yeakey, 198

Interview with Rosa Parks, in Selby and Selby, 54

Ibid..

Yeakey, 47.

Yeakey, 12-13, 48. Eight percent of Montgomery’s female labor force
could be classified as professionals in 1950. Most of the 671
professionals were elementary and secondary school teachers, college professors and librarians. Only two percent, just 161 black women, were stenographers, typists, secretaries, and file clerks.

Yeakey, 54.

Yeakey, 49.

Yeakey, 100.


Yeakey, 110.


Burks, 78.

Burks, 79. The date of the formation of the WPC is unclear. Mary Fair Burks says she formed the organization in 1946; Jo Ann Robinson concurs in her memoir. J. Mills Thornton claims the WPC was founded in 1949. Jo Ann Robinson became president of the WPC in 1950, but Mary Fair Burks was president for at least a few years before Robinson took the reins. Therefore, I am inclined to believe Burks and Robinson.

Burks, 79. Some of the women Burks recalled being at the first meeting also became "pioneers" of the WPC. They are: Cynthia Alexander, Elizabeth Arrington, Sadie Brooks, Albertine Campbell, Mary Cross,

Burks, 80.

Robinson, 29. It is important to point out that Lewis employed a number of canvassers, who went door to door signing people up to register to vote. Almost all of them were women: Mrs. Ethel Alexander, Mrs. Viola Bradford, Mrs. Hattie Carter, Mrs. Gloria Jean German, Mr. Leon Hall, Mrs. Delores Glover, Mrs. Bertha Howard and family, Mrs. Yvonne Jenkins, Mrs. Gwendolyn Patton, Mrs. Bertha Smith, and Mrs. Barbara Williams.

Burks, 80.

Thornton, 32.

Burks, 74

See Greer, 29, 30.

Robinson, 16.


Burks, 81.


“A Call to Negro Women,” pamphlet, box 13, LTP.

Here the STJ refers to Rosa Lee Ingram, a black sharecropper, widow, and mother of twelve, who was convicted and sentenced to death for the self-defense slaying of a white man in Ellaville, Georgia on November 4, 1947. She had served four years of a commuted death sentence when “A Call” was issued. Ibid.
McDuffie, 46.


What exactly transpired the day Stratford died is hard to reconstruct. Whether Rosa Lee grabbed the gun from Stratford as they fought, and then beat him herself, or whether her sons used other farm tools to beat him to death is unclear. All the testimony used to sentence the Ingrams was provided by white men and women. The Ingrams each gave statements. Rosa Lee first claimed that she killed Stratford herself, but her sons told different stories after they were separated. None of them spoke to an attorney and none were advised of their right to remain silent. While all the white officials involved in questioning the Ingrams swear they did not use coercion or intimidation to extract statements, the children were doubtless terrified. The trial record indicates that they were not defended in any meaningful way, and that their interests were not represented. The trial took place on Monday January 26, 1948 and ended the same day, with a unanimous guilty verdict from an all-white, twelve-man jury. The guilty verdict, rendered without consideration of mercy, sentenced them to death. Throughout the trial, white prosecutors portrayed Mrs. Ingram as a kind
of monster, brutish and overpowering, while Stratford was presented as a weak, wimpy old man who did not have the strength to fight. See transcript of Supreme Court Case file #1624, 1623, Rosa Lee Ingram v. The State of Georgia, Georgia Archives, Atlanta, Ga. The question of whether Stratford attacked Ingram sexually never came up at the trial, but Ingram claimed later in an exclusive interview that Stratford had tried on numerous occasions to "go with her." "He was mad because I wouldn’t go into the cotton house with him," she claimed. "He had tried three times to make me go into the cotton house and have something to do with him." He never tried to rape her, she said, "he just tried to compel me." Robert M. Ratcliffe, "He Tried to Go With Me," PC, March 20, 1948,1. See also, Shadron, 145-147; 151-153. The Courier’s portrayal of Ingram as another victim of white men’s lust rallied readers and supporters to the cause. The Courier made the Ingram story their main news item each day for the entire year of 1948, drawing new subscribers and $37,933 in donations for her defense. The NAACP fought the Ingrams’ case in the courts, raised money for the family’s well-being, and organized local campaigns to pressure state officials. In March 1948, the NAACP persuaded Judge W. M. Harper to commute their sentences, but could not convince him to grant the Ingrams a new trial altogether. As the NAACP appealed to the Georgia Supreme Court, the CRC used the Ingram case to mobilize left-wing pressure groups by presenting it to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. When the Georgia Supreme Court refused to reverse the life sentence and grant a new trial, the NAACP began to quietly pursue a strategy for parole or pardon. The NAACP also raised thousands of dollars to provide for Ingram’s nine other children and built the family a new house. Rosa Lee Ingram was finally released from prison on August 26, 1959, long
after the CRC and the STJ had dissolved. See Martin, 260-266, and Shadron, 235-238.


298 Robinson, 42.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

299 Burns, 74; Interview with Claudette Colvin, MBd


300 Testimony of Claudette Colvin, May 11, 1956 in Burns, 75. See also, Thornton, 53.

301 Gary Younge, “She Would Not Be Moved,” The Guardian, December 16, 2000. Greer rightly notes in her master’s thesis that this statement indicates that defying segregation laws on the buses was relatively common and that either Colvin had refused to give up her seat for whites in the past, or that she witnessed other black passengers refuse to abide by the segregation laws. See Greer, 36.

302 Testimony of Claudette Colvin, May 11, 1956, in Burns, 75.

303 Interview with Claudette Colvin, MBd.

304 Testimony of Claudette Colvin in Burns, 75. See also Lynne Olson, Freedom’s Daughters: the Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970 (New York, 2001, 93.
Most accounts of the Montgomery bus boycott portray Colvin as out of control. In *Rosa Parks*, Brinkley claims Colvin was an “unruly tomboy with propensity for curse words” (89-90); Branch says she was “immature—prone to breakdowns and outbursts of profanity” (Parting the Waters, 122.) Colvin denies swearing, screaming, or kicking. Testimony from the court trial, including testimony from the bus driver, Cleere, and the officers present, all corroborate Colvin’s claim. The real question then, is why is this characterization so persistent? Thornton, 53; Younge, “She Would Not Be Moved.”

Yeakey, 239.

Yeakey, 245; and in King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 41.

Robinson, 39.

Yeakey, 246; Thornton, 55


Parks with Haskins, 112.

Thornton, 56.

Gray quoted in Olson, 94.

Yeakey, 241, 242. Like police officers in Montgomery, historians claimed Colvin was unruly as well. Taylor Branch notes in his *Parting the Waters* that Colvin was “immature and prone to breakdowns and outbursts of profanity” but the evidence available does not support this. Colvin herself denies using profanity or acting out in any way, as do witnesses. See Branch, 120.

Thornton, 54. See also MA, March 19, 1955, 7A.

Yeakey, 244, 245.

Robinson, 42.

Robinson, 42.

Willie M. Lee interview with Mrs. A. W. West, January 23, 1956; box 4, folder 4, PBV.


Yeakey, 269

Robinson, 39.

Yeakey, 270.

Ibid. Colvin states that she was not sexually active, but that her pregnancy was the result of statutory rape. Interview with Claudette Colvin, MBd


Yeakey, 271.

Yeakey, 271.

Raines, 38–39.

Greer, 44.

Parks with Haskins, 112.

Branch Parting the Waters, 123.

Olson, 94.

Yeakey, 271; Smith later denied this and argued that her father never drank, nor did they live in a dilapidated house.

See Branch, Parting the Waters, 123–128; Olson, 94–95,” Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “'Dress modestly, neatly...as
if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in Gender in the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New York, 1999), 84. On respectability and the “culture of dissemblance,” see Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on a Culture of Dissemblance,” Signs 14 (Summer 1989), 912-920. For more on the silencing of sexuality during this era, see, Thaddeus Russel, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” American Quarterly 60.1 (2008), 101-128.


343 For more on the ways respectability, dignity, and manhood and womanhood shaped the strategies and goals of the middle and working class black activists during Reconstruction and the Progressive Era; see, for example, Glenda Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill, 1996); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The

344 Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 915.

345 See Chapter Two for more on Rosa Lee Ingram.

346 McMillen, 44.

347 Ibid., 159. State senators Walter Coats Givhan and Sam Englehardt were leaders of the Central Alabama Citizen's Council.

348 Thornton, 60; Parks with Haskins, 115.

349 Brinkley, 109.

350 Parks with Haskins, 115.

351 Ibid., 115-116.

352 Ibid. 101.

353 Ibid, 106.

354 Greer, 49.

355 Olson, 109

356 See post cards and petitions signed by Leona McCauley in folder 3, CS Parks with Haskins, 121.

357 Olson, 111.

358 Parks with Haskins, 125. See also the similar response Nixon gave to Steven M. Millner in an interview on July 27, 1977 in Garrow, The Walking City, 546.

360 Olson, 110.

361 Robinson, 45.

362 Robinson, 45. On the number of fliers created, see Robinson, 50.

363 Ibid.. 45-46. Italics mine.

364 Ibid.. 46-47.
Interview with Sidney Rogers, Pacifica Radio, April 1956, in Burns, 84.

Chappell et al., “‘Dress modestly, neatly...’” 87.

Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 133.

Brinkley, 128.

Olson, 115.

Ibid. 114.

Robinson, 57.

Parks with Haskins, 132.

Brinkley, 131.

Olson, 115.

Brinkley, 133.

Interview with E.D. Nixon, by Earl Selby and Miriam Selby in *Odyssey*, 60.

Ibid. 61.

Ibid., 61.


Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 137.

Interview with E.D. Nixon, in *Odyssey*, 60.


Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 139-141.

Ibid., 140
Transcript of mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, December 5, 1955. NYC-1A; NYC-1C, Martin Luther King Estate Collection, copy of which is online at http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol3/551205.004-MIA_Mass_Meeting_at_Holt_Street_Baptist_Church.htm, (accessed October 30, 2005)

Yeakey, 274.


On Robinson’s complaint about black men’s failure to protect black women on the buses, see her memoir, 37.

Burns, 15.

Robinson, 69.

Ibid., 66.

Donald T. Ferron interview with Rufus Lewis, January 20, 1956, box 3, folder 7, PBV. In a letter to Preston Valien from Ferron on January 21, 1956, Ferron said, “Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson seems to have been the key organizer for the protest. She is the backbone of this collective effort.” Box 1, folder 7, PBV.

Interview with Rosa Parks by Sidney Rogers on Pacifica Radio, April 1956, transcript in Burns, 86.

Steven Millner interview with Erna Dungee Allen, August 6, 1977, in Garrow The Walking City, 522-523.

Interview with Georgia Gilmore in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s (New York, 1990), 29. Mrs. A. W. West argued that the “working people” are the “ones who keep this movement going.” “The leaders could do nothing by themselves. They are only the
voice of thousands of colored workers.” See Willie M. Lee interview with Mrs. A. W. West, January 23, 1956, box 4, folder 4, PBV.

397 Willie M. Lee, "Statements heard in various places," January 27, 1956, box 4, folder 4, PBV.

398 Willie M. Lee, interview with Irene Stovall, February 1, 1956, box 4, folder 4 PBV. In Lee’s notes, she notes that Mrs. Stovall is a “large woman of brown complexion” whose “eyes became narrow slits while talking about her previous employer.”

399 Willie M. Lee, interview with Mrs. Beatrice Charles, January 20, 1956, box 4, folder 4, PBV.

400 Ibid.

401 Anna Holden interview with Sam Englehardt, February 8, 1956, box 3, folder 3/14 PBV.


403 Ibid.

404 Burns, 12. At a mass meeting on March 26, 1956, JoAnn Robinson gave a pep talk and argued that whites deny African Americans a sense of dignity. “Look at our schools...we have no titles, we are not respected--every man is entitled to a certain dignity...” She then goes on to argue that the boycott is restoring that sense of dignity. “Transcript—Mass Meeting, MIA,” March 26, 1956, box 3, folder 6, PBV.

405 Willie M. Lee interview with Domestic, January 24, 1956, in Burns, 229.

406 Willie M. Lee interview with Mrs. Allen Wright, January 24, 1956, box 4, folder 4, PBV.

407 Ibid.

408 Ibid.
Anna Holden, “Report from MIA mass meeting,” March 22, 1956, box 3, folder 6, PVB.

Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 149

Ibid..

Reedus et al., Episode 7, “Cradle of the Confederacy,” WTCBU.

Reedus et al., Episode 9, “My Feet is Tired, But My Soul is Rested,” WTCBU.

Yeakey, 372.


Greer, 83.

Jarret, “Club From Nowhere” *ChT*, December 12, 1975, 1.

Ibid..

Ibid..

Burns, 16.

Jarret, “Club From Nowhere” *ChT*, December 12, 1975, 1.

Ibid.

Brinkley, 147.


Robnett, 65.

Brinkley, 147.

Brinkley, 147.

Yeakey, 410.

Yeakey, 389.

Robnett, 65.
Jo Ann Robinson in Hampton and Fayer, 31.

Willie Lee, "Statements heard in various places," January 27, 1956, box 4, folder 4, PBV.

Greer, 98.


Clifford J. Durr to Mr. Nathan David, February 2, 1956, in Burns, 152.

Georgia Gilmore in Hampton and Fayer, 30-31.

Burns, 42.

Clifford J. Durr to Mr. Nathan David, February 2, 1956, in Burns, 152.

Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 2:00 P.M., February 2, 1956, in Burns, ed. 148-150; "List of Persons and Churches Most Vulnerable to Violent Attack," folder IV, 14 MLK.

Branch, Parting the Waters, 168.

Brinkley, 153-154; Burns, 153-154

Burns, 153

"Preview of the 'Declaration of Segregation'" in Burns, 154.

Branch, Parting the Waters, 168; Brinkley, 154.

Greer, 104. Greer notes that Robinson, Irene West, and Euretta Adair, all key members of the WPC were indicted. So were Ida Mae Caldwell, a local labor leader; Lottie Varner, owner of a beauty shop; Audrey Bell Lanford and Cora McHaney, both teachers; Lollie Boswell, Addie James Hamilton, a widow and housewife respectively; Martha L. Johnson, a student at Alabama State College; Alberta Judkins, Mrs. Jimmie Lowe,
and Alberta James. See also, “Indicted in Bus Boycott,” box 3, folder 1, PBV.

448 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 169.

449 Bayard Rustin, “Montgomery Diary,” *Liberation*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1956, 8. It was Bayard Rustin who instructed Nixon to turn the arrest into a badge of honor.

450 Robinsin, 150.

451 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 177.

452 Robnett, 151.


456 Transcript, *State of Alabama v. M.L. King Jr.*, March 19-22, 1956, in Burns, 64-65 (Walker); 67 (Brooks); 69 (Brimson); 72 (Moore). See also: box 3, folder 3, PBV.

457 Branch *Parting the Waters*, 184.

458 “New Sounds in the Courthouse,” *Time*, April 2, 1956, 24; See also, Greer, 105.


460 Ibid.

461 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 184.

462 Brinkley, 160.

463 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 184.

464 Brinkley, 160.

Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr. to Alabama Clergy, November 30, 1956, in Burns, 305.

Branch, Parting the Waters, 194.

Martin Luther King Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston, 1968), 123.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR


I-Corbitt.

Interview with Mary Murry, January 19, 2009, Abbeville, Alabama.

I-Corbitt.

Interview with Alma Daniels, January 19, 2009, Abbeville, Alabama.

I-RTC 30.

I-Corbitt 3.

I-RTC 30.

I-Corbitt.

I-RTC.

I-RTC.