

MORE THAN A BUS RIDE©

This story begins when the United States government was formed and when Congress passed the Bill of Rights, the very first Civil Rights. The Bill of Rights was necessary to ensure that citizen rights would not be abridged by government as had been done in Great Britain. However a problem was created when the Bill of Rights included only wealthy white males (landowners, slaveholders, merchants, bankers, etc). And in glaring contradiction, the Congress continued to legalize the imprisonment and enslavement of Africans and people of African descent.

Many northern states outlawed slavery in the early 1800's and wanted to stop its spread into new territories. Southern slave holding states saw this as a threat and eventually Congress reached a settlement called the Missouri Compromise where a state would be admitted to the Union as free or slave as long as a balance was maintained. Federal rule overruled state laws regarding slavery and the idea of states rights did not reach the court until the Dred Scott decision of 1857.

Dred Scott, an enslaved African sued for his freedom under a law that granted an enslaved person freedom living in a free state after he and his wife were denied their freedom. Scott's challenge eventually made it's way to the U.S. Supreme Court where the court ruled against Scott declaring that he and all people of African descent had no standing in court because they were not citizens and could never be. The judges also invalidated the Missouri Compromise, let stand a vicious Fugitive Slave Act and court actions led the country into the Civil War of 1861-65. The Scott case was the first time states rights became a demand from Southern states.

Southern States ceded from the Union formed their own government in an attempt to protect the slavery institution. And after the war many of the former confederate leaders were allowed to return to their former legislative posts and they immediately begin to enact legislation called blue laws with the intention of returning Blacks to virtual slavery. Abolitionists like Fredrick Douglas helped repelled those state laws and local ordinances with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and Civil Rights Act of 1866 and 1875.

In 1896 Homer Plessy challenged a Louisiana Rail Car Act that permitted the separation of passengers on rail cars by race as long as they were equal. The U. S Supreme Court agreed with Louisiana and declared that separate but equal was legal even though it violated the 14th Amendment provision of the Constitutional clause of equal justice and due process of law. And out of Plessy would grow this enormous set of laws known as jim crow laws that virtually placed Blacks, women, immigrants, handicapped, and any others determined by the states into second class citizenship. Segregation was established in every sphere of life to include schools, theatres, hotels, eateries, bathrooms, water coolers, graveyards, bus seating, etc.

The problem to those citizenship arrangements were resolved when on February 1, 1956, four women, Colvin, Browder, Smith, and McDonald supported by the Montgomery Improvement Association filed a class action lawsuit, *Browder V. Gayle* in Federal District Court, Montgomery, Alabama charging the city of Montgomery, the State of Alabama, and the National City Bus Lines with operating buses in a racially segregated way that denied them, and others similarly situated, their 14th Amendment rights of: "due process and equal justice under the law". The Browder lawsuit was birthed out of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Browder v Gayle barely gets a nod from historians and is seldom mentioned in textbooks even though it corrected errors of the United States Supreme Court of 1896, reversed the Plessy ruling, ended the Montgomery Bus Boycott, removed the color lines on intra-city buses and virtually opened the doors of citizenship to all Americans. "Rivers of Change/More Than A Bus Ride" is a story to inform the public of the "unheralded role" women played in 1955-56 to secure those rights, and the living struggle for our rights today.