

This unheralded woman actually organized the Montgomery bus boycott

Jo Ann Robinson is unfortunately overlooked by history



Jo Ann Robinson's booking photo after her arrest for helping organize the boycott. (Alabama State University)

Earlier this week, the nation celebrated the birthday of civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. – a custom that originally began in 1986. There is no denying that King deserves a holiday – not least because he paid the ultimate price in the struggle to secure equal rights for black people in the United States.

Yet, so many activists who worked closely with him – and even those who might not have crossed his path – are worthy of this national honor but will most likely never receive it. Jo Ann Robinson is one of these individuals – a name unfamiliar to many Americans. Interestingly, however, Robinson's political activities helped to propel King's career, making it possible for him to become the prominent figure we memorialize each year.

Born in Georgia in 1912, Robinson became a professor at Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama. Active in her local community, Robinson was a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and later became president of the Women's Political Council (WPC), an organization of several hundred black women in Montgomery. Established in 1946, the WPC's central goal was to tackle the challenges African Americans faced because of inhumane treatment on city buses. Robinson, whom white bus drivers had verbally abused, became president of the WPC and led efforts to improve conditions on public transportation. In 1953, the WPC collected hundreds of complaints from black men and women across the city who had endured similar mistreatment on segregated city buses.

One year later, on behalf of the WPC, Robinson wrote a letter to the mayor of Montgomery. She made three forceful demands and threatened a boycott of the city bus system. First, she called for the creation of a law that would end segregated seating on city buses. Robinson also called for an end to the humiliating practice of asking black people to pay at the front of the bus and then proceed to enter at the back. Third, she requested that, "buses stop at every corner in residential sections occupied by Negroes as they do in communities where whites reside." "Mayor Gayle," Robinson wrote, "three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate."

Her words fell on deaf ears. Not surprisingly, the mistreatment of black people on city buses continued. When Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 – for refusing to move to the back of the bus – Robinson "went into high gear," seizing the opportunity to launch a boycott she and the other members of the WPC had been planning. The night of the Parks's arrest, Robinson printed out 35,000 fliers announcing the beginning of a citywide bus boycott on December 5, 1955. The next afternoon she and other members of the WPC handed out the fliers to black residents in Montgomery, and even volunteered to participate in the carpool system to help those who needed a ride to work. On December 5, 1955, as Robinson and the WPC had planned, local black residents in Montgomery stopped riding city buses.

Recognizing the success of the boycott, local civil rights leaders decided to establish the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an organization that oversaw the boycott and worked to keep it going until conditions improved. They elected Martin Luther King, Jr., a new minister in town at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, to serve as the president of the MIA. In effect, King became the public face of the movement and its spokesperson. The Montgomery bus boycott lasted 381 days, and the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ordered the city to integrate the bus system.

It represented one of the most significant developments in the modern Civil Rights Movement. A direct challenge to segregation in the South, the Montgomery bus boycott stood as the first successful example of mass nonviolent resistance in the United States. Significantly, it underscored the crucial, if hidden, role that Black women played in the modern Civil Rights Movement – as organizers, participants, and leaders.

While Robinson took on more responsibilities behind the scenes – she served as a member of the executive board and edited the organization's newsletter – King's public visibility increased. His position in the MIA essentially functioned as his debut to the nation. The success of the Montgomery bus boycott helped to catapult his political career, setting the stage for many of the opportunities that followed in his life.

In this way, Robinson's efforts, though largely unknown, played no small part in shaping Martin Luther King, Jr.'s political trajectory. There is no national holiday to recognize Robinson's life and legacy – or any of the other women activists in the movement. Yet, her story should inspire us, and remind us of the extraordinary power of ordinary individuals – often those who are hidden from public view – to help change the world.