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Resisting Jim Crow segregation on buses

For decades during Jim Crow, thousands of Black interstate bus passengers traveling from the North to the segregated South suffered the indignity of having to change seats or even stand once they crossed into Virginia. Those who resisted risked arrest, jail and violence, and because Alexandria was the first city buses often reached in Virginia, many of those arrests occurred here. Fortunately, some passengers received support from members of Alexandria's Black community.

In 1931, Allan and Annie Lowen, a couple from New Jersey, were traveling with their 6-month-old baby to North Carolina on Colonial Bus Lines when the driver directed them to move further back. They declined and when the bus reached Alexandria, the driver alerted the police, who arrested the Lowens.

Dr. Oswald D. Durant happened to see the mother and baby being put into a police vehicle. He immediately called attorney Alfred H. Collins, who went to the police station. The Lowens faced fines of \$25 each, but with the attorney's in-

tervention, the charges were dropped and both were released. Durant drove the family to the bus terminal in Washington, D.C. so they could continue their trip.

The following summer, two women who refused to move from their seats did not receive the same leniency as the Lowens. Bessie Nelson of New Jersey and Mamie Kinchlow of New York were traveling by Greyhound to different destinations in Virginia for family emergencies.

After leaving the District, the bus driver directed both women to move to the back but they refused. When they reached Alexandria, the driver contacted police and two officers dragged the women from the bus and arrested them for disorderly conduct.

Unable to pay their \$25 fines, the women served time in jail. By the time funds arrived to pay Kinchlow's fine and secure her release, she had already missed her mother's funeral. Nelson remained in confinement for several days and was required to work in a laundry before her release. Both women later sued but the



Black passengers in Washington, D.C., preparing to board a bus to Richmond, 1941.

PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

courts ruled against them.

As late as 1946, this practice continued. After visiting her mother in New York, Tonita Holmes was on her way home to Johnson City, Tennessee, when the driver told her to change seats as they approached Virginia. She refused and when the bus reached Alexandria, a police officer boarded and ordered her to move.

Before Holmes could gather her belongings, the bus driver assaulted her and dragged her off the bus. She was charged with disorderly conduct and held on a \$25 bond, which community activist Annie B. Rose posted to obtain her release.

Rose had the injured woman recuperate at her home and arranged for attorney James H. Raby, who had handled similar cases, to represent Holmes. Al-

though she was convicted and fined \$14.25, Holmes hoped her case could "be the beginning of the colored race freedom in the whole South."

That June, another interstate bus challenge finally succeeded when the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Irene Morgan, who had been arrested in Virginia two years earlier for refusing to change seats to accommodate white passengers.

Today in Alexandria, the Oswald Durant Center and Annie B. Rose House bear the names of these two leaders who, among their many other impressive actions, came to the aid of courageous passengers they did not know.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.