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# NEGRO BOYCOTTS OF SEGREGATED STREETCARS IN VIRGINIA

1904-1907

by AUGUST MEIER AND ELLIOTT RUDWICK\*

THE prelude to the civil rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century was the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956. Unknown at the time was the fact that the transit boycotts of the 1950s had their predecessors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when segregation was inaugurated on the trolley cars in southern cities. Such protests occurred in all the states of the former Confederacy. In Virginia they were more numerous than in any other state, and the list included nearly every important city in the Old Dominion: Richmond, Danville, Lynchburg, Portsmouth, Norfolk, and Newport News.

Virginia enacted a series of Jim Crow streetcar laws between 1901 and 1906. In February 1901 the legislature provided for segregation on one line only when it required the Virginia Passenger and Power Company to separate the races on its route from Richmond to Seven Pines in Henrico County.<sup>1</sup> The following year, the legislature empowered the trolley car lines in the Alexandria area to segregate Negroes. The original version of that bill actually covered the entire state and was bitterly opposed by the traction companies, which viewed the regulations as difficult to enforce and potentially

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Due to a lack of manuscript and archival materials in the field of Negro history for the period covered by this article, and because such collections as are available to scholars (most notably the Booker T. Washington Papers) contain almost no references to streetcar boycotts, it has been necessary to rely mainly on newspaper sources.

In the footnotes below all of the Virginia papers referred to are white dailies except for the Richmond *Planet*. The *Planet* and all newspapers from other states which are cited are Negro weeklies. Occupational data on the leaders were gleaned from a variety of sources: the newspaper reports of the boycotts; city directories; and, for the major figures, from our own earlier research in the period (August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* [Ann Arbor, 1963]; Elliott Rudwick, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership* [Philadelphia, 1960]).

A comprehensive discussion of the streetcar boycott movement in the South as a whole can be found in the authors' "The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906," *Journal of American History*, LV (1968-1969), 756-775. The reader's attention is also called to an earlier treatment of the Richmond boycott, based on the Richmond *Planet*, which is to be found in J. Wesley Smith, *The Strange Way of Truth* (New York, 1968), Chapter 9.

<sup>1</sup> *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, during the Extra Session of 1901* (Richmond, 1901), pp. 212-213.

expensive since many Negro customers would be discouraged from riding.<sup>2</sup> Articulate Negroes attempted to make clear their vigorous opposition to streetcar segregation laws. John Mitchell, Jr., former city councilman, editor of the *Richmond Planet*, and president of the Mechanics Savings Bank of Richmond, warned that Negroes "shall protest and protest. We shall agitate and agitate. We shall never willingly submit." When the 1902 bill was successfully amended to cover only Alexandria and Fairfax County, however, Mitchell acknowledged that the legislators had ignored the Negroes' protests and that the streetcar companies had actually turned the tide.<sup>3</sup>

Although it was not until 1906 that the legislature enacted a law requiring segregation on all trolley cars throughout the state, in 1904 it passed an act which "authorized and empowered," but did not make mandatory, the separation of whites and Negroes on these vehicles.<sup>4</sup> The Virginia Passenger and Power Company was evidently the only traction company to change its seating patterns in accordance with the 1904 law, and announced that effective April 20, 1904, it intended to inaugurate Jim Crow rules on its lines in Richmond, Manchester, and Petersburg.<sup>5</sup> The company's motivation is unclear, although publicly its manager claimed that the action was taken to forestall the Virginia General Assembly from forcing all-Negro streetcars upon the traction industry.<sup>6</sup>

The Negro press expressed the anger and humiliation of the Negro community. To editors like Mitchell, the whites who demanded streetcar segregation represented a new kind of Richmond, far different from the old community where Negroes and whites had lived together "harmoniously" if paternalistically. The pages of the *Planet* pointed to proofs of that "traditional" harmony in two recent funerals of an "old mammy" and a church sexton, both of whom were buried from the churches and homes of the white Richmond patricians whom they had long served. The *Planet* maintained that "no act since the close of the Civil War has tended to arouse a more bitter feeling of racial antagonism."<sup>7</sup> It mocked the *News Leader* for arguing

<sup>2</sup> *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, during the Session of 1901-2* (Richmond, 1902), pp. 639-640; *Richmond Planet*, February 15, March 8, 1902. See also *Washington Colored American*, March 15, 1902, and *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 15, 1902.

<sup>3</sup> *Richmond Planet*, March 8, 15, 1902.

<sup>4</sup> *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, during the Session of 1906* (Richmond, 1906), pp. 92-94; *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, during the Extra Session of 1902-3-4* (Richmond, 1902), pp. 990-992.

<sup>5</sup> *Richmond Planet*, April 8, May 7, 1904; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 7, 20, 21, 1904; *Petersburg Daily Progress*, April 21, 28, May 4, 1904.

<sup>6</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, May 9, 1904.

<sup>7</sup> *Richmond Planet*, April 16, 1904.

that streetcar segregation was a safeguard against racial amalgamation: "Richmond Negroes and whites have been travelling upon the streetcars together for forty years. Has this transient acquaintanceship led to the amalgamation and mixing of the races?"<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the humiliation inherent in the Jim Crow arrangements, Richmond Negroes were deeply concerned over the fact that the new law gave police powers, including the right to carry guns, to conductors and motormen—a group of "poor white trash," already universally feared throughout the Negro community for their overbearing and insulting conduct. Commented the *St. Luke Herald*: "The very dangerous power placed in the hands of hot headed and domineering young white men . . . will certainly provoke trouble, when they order Negroes to this seat or that, to move from seat to seat at their sweet will."<sup>9</sup> In fact fear of the way in which streetcar employees would administer the law appeared to be the chief concern of a group of accommodating Richmond Negro leaders, mainly Baptist ministers, who had a conference on the matter with officials of the streetcar company on April 7, 1904.

The Negro Baptist clergy of Richmond were an influential group. Of the thirty-seven Negro churches in the community, twenty-eight were Baptist.<sup>10</sup> Among them was the venerable First African Baptist Church. The city also was the site of the most distinguished of the Negro Baptist colleges and seminaries—Virginia Union University, one of the finest Negro institutions of higher learning in the period.

At the conference, S. W. Huff, manager of the Virginia Passenger and Power Company, offered his solemn pledge to the clergymen that streetcar conductors would be carefully instructed to be courteous in assigning Negroes to rear seats. Given such assurances, the ministers agreed to cooperate with the new segregation policy. The *News Leader*, in reporting this meeting, noted that the religious leaders would "advise patience and forbearance and a strict regard for the law." This counsel was anathema to Mitchell and the *Richmond Planet*. Since the traction company was responsible for separating the races, he urged readers to seriously consider a boycott: "If the entire colored population, or at least 90 percent of it, would agree to make the sacrifice and walk for a year the agony produced on the

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<sup>8</sup> *Richmond Planet*, April 23, 1904. See also April 30, 1904.

<sup>9</sup> Wichita, Kansas, *Searchlight*, April 23, 1904; Washington *Colored American*, April 9, 1904; Richmond *St. Luke Herald*, n.d., cited in Washington *Colored American*, April 16, 1904.

<sup>10</sup> *Richmond and Manchester, Va. Directory, 1904* (Richmond: Hill Directory Company, 1904), pp. 1084-1085.

white man's nerve-centre, which is his pocket, would tend to cause an amelioration of our condition."<sup>11</sup>

Almost immediately he sent out invitations to fifty or sixty of the most "conservative and prominent" Richmond Negroes to attend a protest meeting. According to the *Richmond News Leader*, at least two hundred showed up. The reporter listed the names of about twenty of those present: five bank officials, four physicians, five insurance executives, two officials of benevolent organizations, one college professor, one attorney, and three undertakers. Significantly the paper commented that only a handful of clergymen attended. At the meeting Mitchell denounced the Baptist Ministers Conference, arguing that if the streetcar company were really sincere, it would rescind the segregation order scheduled to begin the next week. He maintained that some of the members of the ministers' conference now realized they had made a mistake and were advising their congregations to walk.

One of the members of the committee that had conferred with the officials of the Virginia Passenger and Power Company, spoke at length. He was W. P. Burrell, president of the Richmond Baptist Sunday School Union and, more important, general secretary of the United Order of True Reformers, the leading mutual benefit organization among American Negroes at the time. Burrell declared that he had been under the impression that the new law was obligatory rather than optional. Now that he was corrected, he planned to urge people to walk, thus avoiding trouble and standing up for their self-respect and their rights as citizens. Dr. R. E. Jones, president of the Richmond affiliate of the National Negro Business League, followed with a "hot speech," denouncing the "Jim Crow" Negroes whose acceptance of segregation only caused the white people to enact more of it. Others spoke in the same vein. Before adjourning, the assemblage formed a "permanent" organization with Mitchell as chairman, and called a rally at True Reformers Hall for April 19, the day before the streetcar segregation was to begin.<sup>12</sup>

Mitchell, in describing this meeting for the *Planet*, wrote, "The discussion was conservative and it was the opinion of the body that the colored people should do all in their power to promote peace and avoid any clash or disorder on the streetcars." Clearly he and others feared that some Negroes might protest by sitting in the front section of the trolleys. This could provoke arrests or possibly a race riot. Mitchell even suspected that enemies of the race would attempt "to goad the colored people into resistance," and use that state's armed power to "slaughter" them. Accordingly he insisted that

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<sup>11</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, April 8, 9, 1904; *Richmond Planet*, April 9, 1904.

<sup>12</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, April 15, 1904.

the best thing would be to stay off the cars. However, he repeatedly urged Negroes who did board the trolleys to obey the law and sit in the rear; he sternly advised, "Do not get on the streetcars to assert your rights." For him and other leaders the boycott was the only effective, safe, and "conservative" way to protest.<sup>13</sup>

At least six hundred Negroes filled True Reformers Hall for the rally marking the official beginning of the trolley car boycott. For whites, fearful that Negro leaders were preaching violence, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reassuringly reported:

The judgment of a half score of leaders, at the front of whom stood John Mitchell, Jr. . . . prevailed with the mass, and there was no turbulence, no fierce denunciation and no fire-eating, as many had feared. On the contrary, conservatism was urged, and in a measure adopted, and peace and harmony proclaimed.

Aside from Mitchell the speaker who made the greatest impression was Mrs. Patsie K. Anderson, manager of the Women's Union Grocery Company who, as the only woman speaker, excited "the most unbounded enthusiasm" in saying: "Negroes usually talk too much. Don't argue the question; don't get into controversy; don't say anything, but walk." The *Times-Dispatch* was impressed by "the class of men" present, including prominent physicians, professors at Virginia Union University, and leading businessmen connected with the fraternal orders, the mutual benefit societies, and their affiliated banks. On the other hand, the newspaper observed only one minister in the Hall. Several speakers acidly commented on the absence of the clergymen. George St. Julian Stephens, a printer, condemned the preachers for having said that the boycott movement did not represent the real sentiment of the race: "This is a lie and I wish some of them were here, that I might hurl it back in their teeth."

Probably the most electrifying moment of the entire evening was the announcement that the owners of Richmond's four Negro banks had agreed to provide the financial support for a Negro transit line. In typically conservative tones the bankers' statement declared that such an enterprise would not be in competition with the Virginia Passenger and Power Company, and would have as "its sole purpose a desire to promote harmony between the races."<sup>14</sup>

It was clear that Mitchell had behind him the executives of the leading fraternal, insurance, and banking enterprises of the Negro community, and

<sup>13</sup> *Richmond Planet*, April 9, 16, 23, 1904.

<sup>14</sup> *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 20, 1904; *Richmond Planet* April 23, 1904; see also *Richmond News Leader*, April 20, 1904.

all six of the black newspapers—even those that were officially church periodicals.<sup>15</sup> Ranged against this elite group which supported the boycott were those Baptist ministers which were not connected with the businesses. The *News Leader* observed that there appeared to be two clearly-defined factions—one who saw nothing to “quarrel over” in the law; and the other, which “aims to have any attempt at a color line fought to the finish.”<sup>16</sup>

In the face of all the support for the boycott, the Baptist ministers took pains to mitigate the effectiveness of the denunciations that they were “Jim Crow” Negroes. In a letter to the daily press they explained that the colored clergy had not attended the mass meeting at True Reformers Hall because they “thought it best to let the citizens hold their own meeting unmolested by the pastors.” However the ministers complained of having been misrepresented in the white press, and asked that “the following correction” be made: “That while we strongly advocate peace and conservatism, this is not to be construed to mean that we are in any way in accord with this change in our streetcar service.”<sup>17</sup> Yet they continued to deny support to the boycott, and their example was followed by the influential Baptist Deacons Association.<sup>18</sup> Only those clergymen whose primary identification was with the business enterprises appear to have backed the boycott.

After the boycott began, the city’s daily newspapers almost completely ignored it, except to pronounce it a dismal failure. The *News Leader*, for example, considered that “only a small percentage” of Negroes were walking; yet on the same date the paper also observed that “many of the cars saw white people sitting in the rear, when no negroes were aboard.”<sup>19</sup> The *Planet* retorted that a hard look would disclose that as many as eighty to ninety percent of the local Negroes were participating in the boycott.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Prominent among these leaders were Mrs. Maggie L. Walker, head of the Independent Order of St. Luke, editor of the *St. Luke Herald*, and president of the St. Luke Savings Bank; and the Reverend Dr. W. L. Taylor, president of the United Order of True Reformers and of the True Reformers Bank. Mitchell himself played comparable multiple roles, for his Mechanics Savings Bank was the depository of the funds of the Virginia Knights of Pythias of which he was grand chancellor. The part played by the fraternal and mutual benefit orders in the development of Negro business is discussed in Abram L. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist* (Philadelphia, 1936), and W. J. Trent, Jr., “Development of Negro Life Insurance Enterprise,” (unpublished M. B. A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1932). On the True Reformers and their importance see especially, W. P. Burrell, *Twenty-Five Years History of the United Order of True Reformers* (Richmond, 1909); Harris, *Negro as Capitalist*, pp. 62-67; W. E. B. Du Bois, “Possibilities of the Negro,” *Booklovers’ Magazine*, I (July 1903), 5-7; Du Bois, editorial in *Crisis*, III (November 1911), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, April 20, 1904.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, April 20, 1904; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 21, 1904.

<sup>18</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, April 25, 1904.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, April 20, 1904; see also *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 21, 1904.

<sup>20</sup> *Richmond Planet*, April 30, May 7, 1904; see also July 23, 1904.

To keep morale high the editor of the *Planet* reprinted encouraging comments from Negro newspapers all over the South, such as the Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Appreciator*; the Baltimore *Afro-American Ledger*; and the Mound Bayou, Mississippi, *Demonstrator*.<sup>21</sup> He also published poems about the "Jim Crow" car, one of which ran in part:

... rain may fall and wind may blow,  
I'll not take the "Jim Crow" car . . .  
If you can't see an insult when  
'Twould you your rights debar,  
Go, cringe and crawl and grin and then  
Ride on in the "Jim Crow" car.<sup>22</sup>

For many, if not most, of the boycotters, walking continued to be the principal means of travel. No Negro transit line was organized despite the bankers' earlier promise. The *Planet* commented that fish salt and witch hazel were in great demand because of the nightly foot-soaking of many of the boycotters. The more affluent among them used their own buggies, or rode on the vehicles owned by Negro hackmen. Several undertakers provided what amounted to a "bus" service, and many Negroes hitched rides on passing delivery wagons. Black laborers largely walked, "and the drays, produce, and delivery wagons haul quite a number down town free of charge."<sup>23</sup>

Despite the earlier fears of violence, Negroes who entered the streetcars almost always obeyed the new segregation rules. In the first six weeks of the boycott, only one Negro was arrested—a visitor from New York who had adamantly refused to leave the front section. "To hell with the Jim Crow car," she told the conductor. A week later police arrested a black postman for refusing to sit in the rear.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, whites constituted most of the violators of the segregation regulations. Many were determined to sit where they wished and resented the peremptory manner of the conductors who told them to move to the front of the cars.<sup>25</sup>

There is a discrepancy regarding how long the boycott lasted. As indicated earlier, the white press said it was a failure from the very beginning. On May 20 the *News Leader* remarked that "to all appearances the Negroes of Richmond have quietly acquiesced in the operation of the new streetcar

<sup>21</sup> Richmond *Planet*, April 23, May 7, 1904.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, May 28, 1904.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, July 23, April 23, June 4, 1904.

<sup>24</sup> Richmond *News Leader*, May 31, June 10, 1904.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, April 21, September 21, 1904; Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, April 22, 1904; Richmond *Planet*, April 30, 1904.



laws." The Negro ministers, in refusing to participate, seriously weakened the movement, and Mitchell later charged that the traction company helped to break down the boycott by giving free passes to a number of leaders.<sup>26</sup> Yet in October 1904, a half year after the boycott began, the *Planet* declared that except for the hottest summer days, eighty or ninety percent of the Negroes were still avoiding the trolleys.<sup>27</sup> When, during the summer, the transit company went bankrupt,<sup>28</sup> the Negro press attributed it to the loss of colored patronage.<sup>29</sup> As late as June 1905 Mitchell asserted that "hundreds have refused to return to the streetcars. . . . Some ride only when absolute necessity forces them, others use it to carry boxes and bundles, regarding this as a method to get even."<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, like the boycotts elsewhere, the Richmond protest gradually petered out.

In 1904 the *Planet* had warned that if Richmond Negroes submitted to the Jim Crow regulations, streetcar segregation would be forced upon the race all over Virginia.<sup>31</sup> Its prophecy was fulfilled when the General Assembly enacted the 1906 law, which went into effect June 14, 1906. Negroes from the cities not previously covered by the segregation legislation unsuccessfully attempted to forestall passage of the measure by holding protest meetings and sending memorials opposing the bill to the Assembly.<sup>32</sup>

Shortly before the law went into effect, a group of Lynchburg Negroes issued a circular calling upon the Negro ministers to lead a boycott:

Lynchburg is a very small city, and it will not make us very tired, weary, or footsore to walk . . . . The "Jim Crow" car law is a gratuitous insult, and a needless and bitter humiliation to every one with a drop of Negro blood. . . . Let us touch to the quick the white man's pocket. 'Tis there his conscience often lies.

The Lynchburg *News* condemned the document as "intemperate and inflammatory." Yet this protest succeeded in making a "very noticeable" dent in the streetcar company's revenues, and the local paper observed that the circular, combined with "the exhortations of several colored preachers and the speeches delivered by some of the members of the race Thursday night, all urging the Negroes to walk, have had considerable effect."<sup>33</sup> In Newport News, where another boycott occurred, the Virginia Negro Business League

<sup>26</sup> Richmond *Planet*, June 10, 1905.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, October 15, 1904; see also Baltimore *Afro-American*, June 11, 18, 1904; Cleveland *Gazette*, August 6, 1904.

<sup>28</sup> Richmond *News Leader*, July 30, 1904.

<sup>29</sup> Cleveland *Gazette*, August 6, 1904; Richmond *Planet*, August 20, 1904.

<sup>30</sup> Richmond *Planet*, June 10, 1905.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, June 18, 1904.

<sup>32</sup> See especially Newport *Daily Press*, January 21, 25, 30, 1906.

<sup>33</sup> Lynchburg *News*, June 9, 15, 1906.

held a conference and urged the repeal of the law. In Danville, the *Register* reported "a noticeable decrease" in trolley car passengers, with "few Negroes" riding.<sup>34</sup>

Other boycotts were reported in Portsmouth, Berkley, and Norfolk. In Portsmouth, journalists commented that "the most noticeable falling off of colored traffic is on the Piedmont Heights and Pinner's Point division, both lines running through closely built colored sections." By the following week Portsmouth Negroes had obtained a "double horse wagonette" seating about thirty passengers, and were making regular trips through Piedmont Heights, Brighton, and the lower end of Prentis Place.<sup>35</sup> In Norfolk and Berkley "Negro traffic" fell off "materially."<sup>36</sup> On July 14, William H. Thorogood, a Negro Republican politician, announced that inspired by the success of the Portsmouth wagon, Norfolk Negroes had held mass meetings and formed a stock company to finance their own line. Five weeks later the Metropolitan Transfer Company placed a yellow herdic on the streets, the first of a fleet of eight scheduled to arrive. However, shortly afterwards, the newspaper noted that few Negroes were patronizing the vehicle, since by then most had returned to the streetcars.<sup>37</sup>

It would appear that none of these boycotts except the one in Newport News was long-lived. As late as the summer of 1907, an observer reported to the *New York Age*, a Negro weekly, that Newport News Negroes were still avoiding the streetcars.<sup>38</sup> By October, it is likely that this one, like all the others, had ended in defeat.<sup>39</sup>

In retrospect the failure of the streetcar boycotts seems to have been inevitable. In the context of the race relations of the period, which was marked by the climax of the efforts to disfranchise and segregate Negroes in the South and by increasing acceptance of southern white views in the North, what is notable is not that these protests failed, but that some of them lasted as long as they did, and that, indeed, they had ever taken place.

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<sup>34</sup> Danville *Register*, June 20, 1906.

<sup>35</sup> Norfolk *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1906; Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot*, June 26, 1906.

<sup>36</sup> Norfolk *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1906.

<sup>37</sup> Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot*, July 15, August 24, 29, 1906.

<sup>38</sup> New York *Age*, August 1, 1907.

<sup>39</sup> In a discussion of streetcar segregation in Virginia in *New York Age*, October 10, 1907, there is no reference to any boycotts in the state.