

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



African American Women and Public Transportation: Edna Smith and Her 1921 Defiance of Nashville's Racially Segregated Transportation

Throughout the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, African American women have borne the burden of racial segregation on public transportation. Edna Smith, a young African American teen residing in Nashville, was a forerunner to the women of the Modern Civil Rights Movement who also fought racial segregation on public transportation. Prior to Rosa Parks refusing to relinquish her seat on the Montgomery, Alabama, Cleveland Street bus driven by James F. Blake, at least four African American women fought to desegregate public transportation. Parks' refusal and resulting arrest became the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the subsequent success of the Modern Civil Rights Movement. One hundred years earlier, similar events unfolded in four northern cities where African American women rejected the racial impediments preventing them from riding segregated streetcars.

On July 16, 1854, a driver viciously ousted 24-year-old African American school teacher Elizabeth Jennings from a New York streetcar. Jennings experienced significant injury and a three-year legal battle ensued, during which time attorney Chester A. Arthur, a junior partner at Culver Parker, represented her. Arthur later became the 21st U. S. president. In 1855, Judge Rockwell of the Brooklyn Circuit Court ruled in Jennings' favor. Her victory served as a catalyst, but it did not end racial segregation. It took another 20 years before New York desegregated the city's streetcars. A driver similarly disembarked Charlotte Brown of San Francisco from a streetcar on two occasions in 1863. Her suit set into motion an 1893 decision by the State of California to legislate equal public accommodations. During her visit with President Abraham Lincoln in 1864, a streetcar conductor physically assaulted Sojourner Truth. Exasperated with the indignities of racial segregation in Washington, D. C.'s public transportation system, she sued the conductor for battery. Truth won her case and the consequential lawsuit caused the company to desegregate public transit in the District of Columbia. In 1867 another African American woman, teacher and civil rights activist Caroline Le Count, the first African American in Philadelphia to pass the teacher's exam, fought to desegregate the city's streetcars. Le Count was refused admittance to a Philadelphia streetcar despite local

laws against transit segregation. With her attorney Octavius Catto, she successfully sued to achieve the right for African Americans to ride alongside whites. In 1884, seven years after the end of Reconstruction, the conductor of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company asked anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells of Memphis, Tennessee, to move from her seat in the ladies' car to the smoking car at the front of the train. She refused the conductor's request, and he ordered her to get off the train. Again, she refused to leave the seat that she had paid for as a customer. Wells was forcefully removed from the train, and upon her return to Memphis, she immediately hired an attorney to sue the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company. She won her case in the local circuit courts, but the railroad company appealed to the Supreme Court of Tennessee, which reversed the lower court's ruling. The U.S. Supreme Court codified the separation of the races when the Court issued its "separate but [un]equal" ruling in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Although the focus of this case was railway transportation, it became the legal basis for racial segregation in all aspects of American life that relegated African Americans to second-class status. The litigation and local organizing against segregated rails that led to the *Plessy* decision and the streetcar boycott took place across twenty-five southern cities from 1900 to 1907, with Nashville among them.

Following the nadir of Reconstruction, African Americans (inclusive of women) also fought against racial transit segregation in the South during the era of Jim Crow. Prior to Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat in 1955, several women preceded her in an act of defiance. These women include Irene Morgan, who in 1944 refused to change seats on a segregated bus in Virginia; Sarah Keys, who refused to surrender her seat on a North Carolina Coach Company charter bus in 1952; Claudette Colvin, who in March 1955 refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus; and other instances involving Aurelia Browder on April 19, 1955 and Susie McDonald and Mary Louise Smith, on October 21, 1955. While the courageous actions of these women in the 1940s and 1950s helped dismantle the racially discriminatory practices of the Jim Crow era, a 17-year-old Edna Smith made history in 1921

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when she defied Nashville's streetcar segregation laws.

Born on January 4, 1904, Edna Smith was reportedly the granddaughter of Robert "Bob" Green, affiliated with Belle Meade Plantation and known as the foremost authority on breeding in the thoroughbred horse industry. The same year of Smith's birth, Councilman Waddle introduced a bill segregating African Americans and whites on public transportation, and one year before, Davidson County's Representative Charles P. Fahey introduced Bill No. 87 "to separate white and colored passengers on streetcars." However, during her short life, Smith, like other women of the Jim Crow era, fought against the discriminatory practices that public transportation companies enforced. Edna Smith was the second of five children born to Kaiser and Mackie Green Smith. Very little is known about Edna Smith's life prior to her defiance of the city's racial segregation laws at age 17. In August 1921, she and another woman refused to yield to the request of the conductor and the segregation laws of the city, state, and indeed the nation. Like 15-year-old Claudette Colvin—who in 1955 refused to relinquish her seat to a white woman on a Montgomery, Alabama, segregated bus—Smith boarded a Nashville streetcar on the Broadway and West End Line. Ordered by the streetcar conductor H. H. Webb to sit in the non-white section of the streetcar, she refused. When ordered to disembark from the streetcar, Smith refused and law enforcement subsequently arrested her for noncompliance. The 17-year-old Smith ended up in criminal court and was fined \$250. Notice of Smith's criminal court case appeared in the *Tennessean* on August 24, 1921. Little is known of Smith's life after her criminal court case. Tragically, she contracted tuberculosis and succumbed to her infectious respiratory disease on August 25, 1925. Despite her short life, Edna Smith is among the pantheon of African American women who defended their self worth and dignity against the inequalities of racial segregation on public transportation. Lost in the annals of Nashville's history, Smith's story became known in 2019, when country music singer and film producer Stokes Nielson was researching the Eighth Avenue, South reservoir. Among the materials he found in a 2019 Nashville Public Library blog post was a document of *The State v. Edna Smith* about her criminal court case.

H. H. Webb operated the streetcar that Smith boarded. When Smith boarded the streetcar, she refused to take the seat which Webb assigned to her. She also refused to leave the streetcar when instructed to disembark. Referencing Smith's refusal to leave the streetcar, the last portion of the transcript notes, "Edna Smith did

not leave the streetcar, but did remain thereon, against the peace and dignity of the State." Neilson took Smith's act of bold defiance before the Metro Council, the State of Tennessee, and to the national level.

Stokes Nielson appeared before the Metro Council urging the city to name a street for Edna Smith. At the urging of Neilson, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee issued a proclamation on August 25, 2024, officially recognizing the "enduring legacy of Ms. Smith's defense of dignity." Governor Lee joined Nielson's effort to honor Edna Smith and proclaimed that August 25, 2024 be officially recognized as a day of recognition to honor the remarkable bravery and enduring legacy of Ms. Smith's defense of dignity. He also felt that the nation should recognize Smith. Though a mere teenager when she made a stand and earned her place in American history, Nashville's Edna Smith is among those great African American women who refused to relinquish their dignity and self worth to the racially exclusive laws on the local, state, and national levels.

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