



COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

Signpost to Freedom, a compelling one-hour documentary produced by Louisiana Public Broadcasting, recounts a now mostly forgotten story from the early civil rights movement: the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott. Two years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, African-American citizens in the capital of Louisiana organized the first protest of segregated seating on city buses. As in Montgomery, it represented a nonviolent form of mass civil disobedience. The documentary recreates Baton Rouge in the 1950s and provides historical context for the chain of events that precipitated the boycott. During the eight-day boycott, protesters quickly organized an alternative transportation system, including carpools. The boycott received national media attention. To tell this story, the producers interviewed distinguished civil rights scholars. Also featured are the personal stories of many of the principal participants, including that of Rev. T.J. Jemison, then a young preacher who was the leader of the protest, and attorney Johnnie Jones, who filed the lawsuit against the city of Baton Rouge to desegregate city buses. *Signpost to Freedom* tells the story of the boycott in a creative and vivid way, using video recreations, archival film footage and photographs, and featuring period blues and gospel music. This well-produced documentary reminds us of an important episode in the struggle for civil rights.

Louisiana Public Broadcasting | Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Christina Melton, *Producer and Co-writer*
Keith Crews, *Photographer and Editor*
C.E. Richards, *Co-writer*
Clay Fourier, *Executive Producer*

EXCERPT

NARRATOR: In 1953, African Americans made up 70 percent of the Baton Rouge Bus Company's business. Yet, like everywhere else in the Jim Crow South, black riders were restricted to the "colored" section of buses.

ADAM FAIRCLOUGH: Bus segregation was universally detested. . . . Many aspects of the unfairness of the psychological symbolism of sitting in the back of the bus, the engine is at the back, the seats in the summer are scorching hot, the bus drivers being rude and being ordered about and so on.

NARRATOR: This abuse was nothing new to black Louisianans, and neither were protests against segregation. In 1892, Homer Plessy boarded a train bound for Covington, Louisiana. A descendent of free blacks in Creole New Orleans, Plessy sat in the "white" section of the train. His arrest led to a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision establishing "separate but equal" citizenship for blacks. In practice, however, conditions were anything but equal—especially in the South.

LEWIS DOHERTY, BATON ROUGE COUNCILMAN, 1952–1956: The law was segregation. It was unequal facilities for black people as compared to white people, and I was aware of that. The law, the history and the culture had been one of segregation, and of course this was something that was understood by both the white and the colored people at the time.

NARRATOR: Baton Rouge's black community had a particular grievance against the city's bus service. In 1950, the city council revoked the licenses of nearly forty African American-owned bus services that transported residents from black neighborhoods to jobs and businesses with the city.

JOURNALIST WILLIS REED: It wasn't very long before they stopped the black buses from running because the black buses were getting in competition to regular white buses.

NARRATOR: The Baton Rouge Bus Company demanded a monopoly franchise on the city's public transportation routes. In return, the company pledged "full and fair" services to all riders. But the practical realities of segregation would make that pledge nearly impossible to keep.



Christina Melton



Keith Crews

REED: We got on the bus, you only fill up a certain number of seats with blacks and when then they'd say that's all, no more, no more blacks, no more blacks, no more room, and they'd have seats lie vacant ready for somebody to use. No blacks. You'd have to get back.



Signpost to Freedom premiered on Louisiana Public Broadcasting on November 16, 2004. It can be ordered for \$25.00 in DVD or VHS formats at <https://secure.lpb.org/shop/lpb/> or by calling 800.973.7246.