



Washington History in the Classroom

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“Teachable Moment” essays start with a document, map, or image, that invites close analysis to understand its deeper lessons. The features are also windows into how their historian/authors analyze and interpret primary sources to discover layers of context and meaning.

“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.”**



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.

Teachable Moment

Mobilizing the Community in an Era Before Social Media

BY BRIAN ROHAL

In January 1966 Marion Barry, the new leader of the local office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, led a bus boycott in response to a proposed fare increase. Though the SNCC-led boycott lasted only one day, it rallied more than 100,000 people to take action and had an enduring impact on the local civil rights movement and life in the city.

In the mid-1960s transportation in Washington was limited to cars and buses. Electric streetcars had stopped running in 1962, and the subway system that would open as Metrorail was still a decade in the future. The city bus system was operated by a single private company, D.C. Transit, owned by O. Roy Chalk. A child of Russian émigrés, Chalk married into the New York real estate business before establishing a small Caribbean airline. When Chalk bought the bus company in 1956, he initially won favorable press for purchasing air-conditioned buses and adding stewardesses on several lines.¹

Over time, however, Chalk came to be seen less favorably, in large part because of frequent requests for fare increases and what critics deemed his excessive profits (\$500,000 in 1964 alone). In September 1965, less than a month after Chalk signed a new agreement raising the pay of transit union workers, D.C. Transit called for yet another fare hike. The cost of a single fare would rise from 25 to 30 cents, with the cost of four tokens rising from 85 cents to \$1. Chalk's motives were immediately challenged—union president George Apperson claimed that Clark had pushed to resolve the labor contract more quickly than he had in previous years “so he could apply for a new fare increase.” Fare increases required approval by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Commission, which had approved a similar increase only two years earlier. The MATC announced public hearings on the fare hike to begin that November.²

The news of the proposed fare increase sparked outrage across the city, as critics noted that lower-income workers dominated the bus riding population. The *Evening Star* editorialized against the proposal because, “[a]part from the hardship on individual passengers, each new increase in fares inevitably discourages some segment of the metropolitan area population from riding public transit.” A number of community organizations and churches rallied to fight the fare increase, but the most prominent player was SNCC.³

Since its creation in 1960, SNCC had focused on registering African Americans in the rural South to vote, and it had not been very active in Washington. In spring 1965, though, SNCC members sensed an opportunity to organize the black community because “no one else is doing anything effective” in D.C. despite “the existence of a body of people who want to move.” Marion Barry, who came to the city in spring 1965 to take over the local SNCC office, saw the fare dispute as a local issue that could motivate people to participate in an organized protest.⁴

SNCC mobilized community opposition. It launched a petition to MATC opposing the fare hike, and by mid-November Barry bragged to the press of having 15,000 signatures. On November 7, the night before the MATC hearings began, SNCC hosted a rally at Shiloh Baptist Church in Shaw, with representatives from many of the leading local civil rights groups. Among the speakers was veteran activist Julius Hobson of the Associated Community Teams. Hobson called for a boycott that would involve “getting 300 or 400 people with cars and running free transportation service down the main bus lines.” A boycott, Hobson pointed out, would both tie up traffic and cost Chalk's company money. Reverend Edward A. Hailes, executive director of the local NAACP, endorsed the call for a boycott as did a number of ministers who condemned Chalk's outsized profits.⁵

Following the rally, SNCC began implementing Hobson's boycott plan. Community leaders met at the SNCC offices on Rhode Island Avenue, NW, in Bloomingdale, and on December 28 Barry announced a one-day boycott to take place on January 24; it would show “that the Washington area public is united in its opposition to the fare increase.”⁶

To mobilize the community to join, SNCC produced 175,000 copies of flyers such as the one on the following pages. In addition to distributing the flyers, SNCC workers manned three sound trucks that circulated through African American neighborhoods announcing the boycott. Double-sided and dense, the flyer explained the reasons for the boycott, described how it would work, and encouraged community members to join by walking, staying home, or seeking alternative transportation on January 24.⁷

Despite temperatures in the 20s on January 24, SNCC claimed that 130,000 people boycotted the buses that day, costing D.C. Transit at least \$30,000. Barry declared the boycott “90

BUS BOYCOTT

MONDAY, JANUARY 24th ^A

NO BREAD FOR HUNGRY CHILDREN



but
\$7 MILLION
for the
**"BULGING
POCKETS"**

"BUSLORD" CHALK ^C

- What does a nickel bus fare increase mean to a Washington family? ^D
If both parents work, it means 20¢ a day. It means a loaf of bread a day that won't get in the stomachs of HUNGRY CHILDREN.

It means **NO BREAD FOR HUNGRY CHILDREN**
but it means **\$7 MILLION** for the "BULGING - POCKETS" of "BUSLORD"
CHALK !!!

- What does a nickel bus fare increase mean to a Washington family?
It means \$75.00 a year out of "ALREADY-BARE-POCKETS." It means a month of groceries. \$75.00 is a lot of money regardless of income.

It means **NO BREAD FOR HUNGRY CHILDREN**
but it means **\$7 MILLION** for the "BULGING - POCKETS" of "BUSLORD"
CHALK !!!

- What does a nickel bus fare increase mean to a Washington family?
The Washington **POVERTY PROGRAM** will spend less than **\$7 MILLION** in 1966.

"NO BREAD FOR HUNGRY CHILDREN"
"BUSLORD" CHALK'S "BULGING - POCKETS" will **GRAB \$7 MILLION** out ^E
of "ALREADY-BARE-POCKETS."

- An estimated 140 million rider-trips in 1966 (140,000,000 x .05 equal \$7 MILLION.)

WHAT TO DO

• Contact, write or phone: **SNCC** BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS
107 Rhode Island Ave. N.W. phone: **387-7445**

LARCA
GAYNLO

- ^A The boycott was timed to influence the MATC's pending decision on the fare increase.
- ^B Artist Sammie Abbott donated this drawing. The Takoma Park, Maryland, activist had formed the Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis in 1965, which helped block planned city freeways.⁸
- ^C O. Roy Chalk is shown as a devil-horned "buslord" for what critics deemed his greedy treatment of the riding public. Abbott's caricature evokes those drawn by Thomas Nast of the notorious 19th-century "Boss Tweed" of New York City.

- ^D Organizers hoping to mobilize low-income residents emphasized the effect of the fare hike on Washington's poorest families.
- ^E Organizers charged that the five-cent increase would yield \$7 million in profit for Chalk, ignoring his claim that the increase was needed to offset increased labor costs.⁹
- ^F Though other organizations and churches were involved, SNCC was the boycott's point of contact.

[1966]

G CITY-WIDE BOYCOTT JANUARY 24

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS ask every citizen of the city to show their opposition to a bus fare increase by NOT NOT NOT riding D. C. Transit buses on MONDAY, January 24.

- Everyone walk MONDAY January 24.
- H ● Domestic workers tell your employer that they must pick you up on MONDAY January 24.
- I ● Students in junior and senior high school organize walk-ins on MONDAY January 24.
- Everyone "hitch-a-ride" with a fellow citizen and make MONDAY January 24 "GET - ACQUAINTED - WITH - YOUR - NEIGHBOR - DAY."
- Everyone driving "pick-up-a-rider" and "GET - ACQUAINTED - WITH - YOUR - NEIGHBOR."
- If you can't walk or find a ride, STAY HOME FROM WORK on MONDAY January 24 and call your employer and tell him why you are not going to work on MONDAY January 24.

MASSIVE J BENNING ROAD BOYCOTT

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS is calling for a MASSIVE BOYCOTT on MONDAY January 24 of the U-2, U-4, U-6, U-8, X-1, X-2, X-3, X-5, X-9 bus lines in the Benning Road area.

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS has decided to concentrate all resources on these lines in order to stage a dramatic, visible protest of opposition to demonstrate the overwhelming sentiment of the people of this city against this proposed ECONOMIC RAPE.

K CAR ASSEMBLY POINTS

L BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS has established four CAR ASSEMBLY POINTS.

Benning Road & East Capitol, S. E.	18th & Benning Road, N. E.
34th & Benning Road, N. E.	6th & H Street, N. E.

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS is asking people from all over the city to drive to any one of these four points as early as possible on MONDAY January 24. These CAR ASSEMBLY POINTS will be manned by staff volunteers beginning at 4:30 a.m. (Why not call BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS and volunteer your services, your car and your church bus.) M

RIDE-IN STATIONS N

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS has established 34 RIDE-IN STATIONS throughout the Benning Road area in churches, barber shops, laundramats and other heated buildings. People should walk to these stations to get rides into the city.

BUS BOYCOTT HEADQUARTERS asks all the residents throughout the Benning Road area NOT NOT NOT to form their own car-pools. But drive your cars to the nearest RIDE-IN STATION as early as possible on MONDAY January 24 (anytime after 5:00 a.m.)

LEAVE HOME EARLY on MONDAY, JANUARY 24

The location of the RIDE-IN STATION will be publicized by posters in businesses, leaflets circulated by volunteers door-to-door and by MASS RALLIES.

DONT BOYCOTT the BOYCOTT O DRIVE to BENNING ROAD JANUARY 24

G Plans called for a city-wide boycott, but it focused on routes heavily used by African American workers.

H In 1965 the Urban League reported that 31 percent of employed African Americans worked as domestics. Most were women traveling to work in the white suburbs who paid round-trip bus fares plus an additional fare to transfer to suburban routes. On January 24 some domestic workers took cabs or got rides from their employers; one suburban employer complained that the boycotters were "hurting me more than they're hurting O. Roy Chalk."¹⁰

I Barry praised students who "although many are taking their final exams, have taken time to help." Predominantly black Spingarn High School reported that one-third of its 1,763 students observed the boycott, about six times the usual absentee rate.¹¹

J Barry said he focused on Benning Road in order to "stage a dramatic, visible protest of opposition to demonstrate the overwhelming sentiment of the people of this city against this proposed economic rape." He denied that this route was chosen because it was "the poorest area in the city."¹²

K SNCC organized a network of "Freedom Bus" and "Freedom Car" drivers who carried boycotters during morning and afternoon rush hours.¹³

L The boycott office used ten telephone lines, with one reserved for police use. The Metropolitan Police Department took no stance on the boycott but cooperated in the planning to be better prepared to handle any possible disturbances.¹⁴

M Community organizations, churches, funeral homes, and individuals provided vehicles and drivers.¹⁵

N Other leaflets and posters located the 34 ride-in stations. Many businesses and churches opened early so that riders could wait in heated rooms. Volunteers also lined the Benning Road routes to remind would-be bus riders.¹⁶

O On January 20 the MATC asked riders to ignore the boycott, claiming that the day's lost revenue would only be passed on to riders in other ways. SNCC responded that it was "shocked" that MATC would take a position.¹⁷

percent effective" along the Benning Road, NE, routes that served mostly black riders and 40–45 percent effective city-wide. Company officials told the *Evening Star* that a number of buses in the morning rush had been returned to headquarters because they were not needed.¹⁸

Support was not universal, however. As the boycott ended that evening, Barry reported that SNCC had received "6 or 7 false bomb threats," and that one of the ride-in locations had received one as well. Someone called the SNCC operations center impersonating a volunteer, telling the drivers that the boycott was off and that they could all go home. Flyers telling people to boycott the boycott were distributed as well.¹⁹

As a boycott driver, white journalist Sam Smith saw a racial divide when he stopped to pick up people at bus stops. "Most of those waiting for the bus were white," he wrote. "Some pretended they didn't hear me and looked the other way. Other stared as if I were a little crazy. Still others shook their head in that nervous, embarrassed way people do when they're refusing to buy pencils from a crippled man on the street corner." Smith transported 71 people that day, only five of whom were white.²⁰

Two days after the boycott the MATC denied the requested fare hike. In its decision the MATC praised the service provided by D.C. Transit, but it cited costs and accounting issues

in turning down Chalk's request. The boycott was not mentioned in the decision, and MATC Executive Director Delmer Ison specifically said that it played no role. An *Evening Star* editorial concurred that the boycott had no effect.²¹

Barry, however, claimed victory. "The boycott helped them make up their minds," he insisted, arguing that the MATC could not admit the effect the boycott had on its decision because doing so would concede "that the people have the power." In a thank-you letter to supporters, Barry crowed, "Not only did we win an economic victory but a psychological one. The people now believe in themselves. They know that they have power. They know that they can influence decisions in the city even though they don't have home rule."²²

Though the victory was temporary—in early 1967 MATC authorized a new fare increase, and before long fares were up to 40 cents—the January 1966 boycott helped foster a new era of activism in D.C. by confirming SNCC's belief that the people of Washington could be mobilized to take action for a cause. Barry used the boycott as a fundraising tool, helping him to develop the "Free D.C." movement and other social action projects as he began a five-decade career in D.C. politics.

Brian Rohal is a high school social studies teacher in Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. Robert L. Asher, "O. Roy Chalk: 'You Might Say I'm a Success,'" *Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 1965.
2. "D.C. Transit Urged to End Dividends," *Evening Star*, Dec. 17, 1965; Lee Flor, "D.C. Transit is Expected to Ask Fare Rise," *Evening Star*, Aug. 29, 1965; "D.C. Transit Asks for 30-Cent Fare," *Evening Star*, Sep. 19, 1965.
3. Ernest Lotito, "Rights Groups Urge Boycott in Bus Fare Fight," *Washington Post*, Nov. 8, 1965; "Same Old Cycle," *Evening Star*, Sep. 25, 1965.
4. "A Proposal for an Action Plan in Washington D.C.," Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 166, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
5. "Rally Planned Sunday to Fight Bus Fare Rise," *Evening Star*, Nov. 4, 1965; Lee Flor, "Lower Bus Fare Urged for Senior Citizens," *Evening Star*, Nov. 18, 1965; Ernest Lotito, "Rights Groups Urge Boycott in Bus Fare Fight."
6. Staff Meeting Notes, Dec. 13, 1965, Reel 56, Subgroup C, Series I, file 154, SNCC Papers; "1-Day Bus Boycott Set as Fare Protest," *Evening Star*, Dec. 28, 1965.
7. Press Release, Jan. 18, 1966, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 167, SNCC Papers; Marion Barry to Ministers, Jan. 28, 1966, Archives Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 157, SNCC Papers.
8. Jan. 18, 1966 Press Release, file 167, SNCC Papers.
9. "D.C. Transit Urged to End Dividends," *Evening Star*, Dec. 17, 1965.
10. Testimony of Urban League to MATC, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 167, SNCC Papers; Bill Gold, "The District Line: The Executive Mind at Work," *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 1966.
11. Jan. 24, 1966 Press Release, SNCC Papers; "Bus Rider Loss 130,000, Boycott Leaders Say," *Evening Star*, Jan. 25, 1966.
12. Jan. 18, 1966 Press Release, SNCC Papers.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Sam Smith, "The Day the Buses Ran Empty," *The Idler* [Washington, D.C.], March 1966, 3–7; "Carefully Planned, Orderly Bus Boycott Slated by Civil Rights Group's Leaders Tomorrow," *Evening Star*, Jan. 23, 1966.
15. Jan. 24, 1966 Press Release, SNCC Papers.
16. Jan. 18, 1966 Press Release, SNCC Papers; "Carefully Planned, Orderly Bus Boycott Slated," *Evening Star*.
17. Jan. 21, 1966 Press Release, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 167, SNCC Papers.
18. "Bus Rider Loss 130,000, Boycott Leaders Say"; "Buses Hit by Fare Boycott, Benning Rd. Effect Held 90%," *Evening Star*, Jan. 24, 1966.
19. Reel 58, Subgroup C, Series II, file 79, SNCC Papers.
20. Smith, "The Day the Buses Ran Empty," *The Idler*.
21. Lee Flor, "Court Appeal Expected in Ban on Fare Boost," *Evening Star*, Jan. 27, 1966; Jack Eisen, "Transit Board Rejects Higher Bus Fare Plea," *Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 1966.
22. "Further Local Boycotts Are Considered by SNCC," *Washington Post*, Jan. 28, 1966; Marion Barry to SNCC members, Jan. 28, 1966, Reel 57, Subgroup C, Series I, file 167, SNCC Papers.