

3b - First Person: The Right to Ride

By Elizabeth Jennings

Segregated transportation was not limited to the Southern states. In fact, some historians trace the first use of the term "Jim Crow" to segregated railroad cars in the North. There, as in the South, Blacks asserted their right to ride with Whites. In 1854 — a century before Rosa Parks' now famous act of civil disobedience — Elizabeth Jennings was forcibly removed from a segregated trolley car in New York City. Outraged by her mistreatment, Jennings sued the streetcar company. Her legal victory, along with further pressure from New York's African American community, helped end segregation on the city's public transportation. Following is Jennings' account of the incident that prompted her to file the suit.

Sarah E. Adams and myself walked down to the corner of Pearl and Chatham Sts. to take the Third Ave. cars; I held up my hand to the driver and he stopped the cars, we got on the platform, when the conductor told us to wait for the next car; I told him I could not wait, as I was in a hurry to go to church. ... He then told me that the other car had my people in it, that it was appropriated for that purpose; I then told him I had no people. It was no particular occasion; I wished to go to church, as I had been going for the last six months, and I did not wish to be detained.

He insisted upon my getting off the car ... but I did not get off the car. ... He then said I should come out and he would put me out. I told him not to lay his hands on me; he took hold of me and I took hold of the window sash and held on; he pulled me until he broke my grasp and I took hold of his coat and held on to that, he also broke my grasp and from that (but previously he had dragged my companion out, she all the while screaming for him to let go).

He then ordered the driver to fasten his horses, which he did, and come and help him put me out of the car; they then both seized hold of me by the arms and pulled and dragged me flat down on the bottom of the platform, so that my feet hung one way and my head the other, nearly on the ground.

I screamed murder with all my voice, and my companion screamed out "you'll kill her; don't kill her."

The driver then let go of me and went to his horses; I went again in the car, and the conductor said you shall sweat for this; then told the driver to drive as fast as he could and not take another passenger in the car; to drive until he saw an officer or a Station House; they got an officer on the corner of Walker and Bowery, whom the conductor told that his orders from the agent were to admit colored persons if the passengers did not object, but if they did, not to let them ride.

When the officer took me there were some eight or ten persons in the car. Then the officer, without listening to anything I had to say, thrust me out, and then pushed me, and tauntingly told me to get redress if I could.
