

encouraging thousands of Black Americans to register to vote in the early 1960s, changing the political face of the South.

Robinson was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on February 7, 1914. Her father, James Christopher Robinson, a bricklayer, was a union organizer, although his daughter did not know this until she became an activist herself many years later. Her mother, Martha Elizabeth Anderson Robinson, was a seamstress and homemaker. Both parents taught their children to be self-reliant and, in particular, to avoid relying on the white community. This would be an important factor for Robinson when she became politically active.

Finishing high school in the segregated system in Charleston, Robinson hoped to pursue studies in music. She decided to live with her sister in New York City and work in order to earn tuition for a music conservatory in Boston. Over the next ten years she held a variety of jobs in New York City in the garment industry, as a beautician, and in civil service. In 1947, when her parents became ill, she postponed her hope of entering the conservatory and returned to Charleston. By this time she had married and divorced and was raising a daughter, Jacquelyn, on her own.

Her time in New York heightened her awareness of racial discrimination and injustice, and when she returned to South Carolina she became active in the NAACP and the YWCA working on the issues of job discrimination and political disenfranchisement. In 1954, an aunt, Septima Clark, invited Robinson to attend a workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

The workshop experience was a pivotal one. There she worked with another South Carolina low country leader, Esau Jenkins, who spoke of the need for an adult education class to help rural Black residents learn basic literacy skills in order to pass the voter registration test. The Highlander Folk School and Jenkins joined forces to begin the citizenship education program in the Sea Islands. Septima Clark became director of the program and Robinson was asked to be the first teacher.

Reluctant at first, she eventually agreed, acknowledging that as an independent person (a beautician who did not rely on white customers) and as someone not wedded to formal ideas about teaching, she could play an important role in this unusual school. She told the students, "I'm really not going to be your teacher. We're going to work together and teach each other" (Carawan 1989). Robinson and Clark built the curriculum for the adult classes around the specific

needs and interests of the students. The schools were so popular they spread quickly throughout the Sea Islands. As word of them spread, requests came in from across the South for literacy classes aimed at political empowerment and for the training of teachers like themselves. The citizenship school program became the prototype for the southern voter education program that was eventually taken over by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Robinson spent the 1960s and 1970s as a civil rights activist and teacher. She worked first at Highlander, and later for SCLC. She traveled the South providing workshops on political empowerment. When she returned to live in Charleston, she was urged to run for the state legislature in 1972. Though unsuccessful, she remained active in local politics and community affairs. She served on Highlander's board of directors for many years.

Bernice Robinson continues to live in Charleston. She has been honored with a distinguished service award from the NAACP and from the Black caucus of the South Carolina State Legislature. She maintains a lively interest in political and social developments and urges people not to become complacent.

[See also HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL.]

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CANDIE CARAWAN

#### ROBINSON, JO ANN GIBSON (1912- )

As president in the early 1950s of the Women's Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery, Alabama, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson was one of several crucial

initiators of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56. Robinson was an influential and leading figure both during the two years of Black civic activism leading up to the boycott and as a major player in the significant events that transformed the arrest of Rosa Parks into a communitywide protest movement.

Jo Ann Gibson was born near Culloden, Georgia, on April 17, 1912, the youngest of twelve children. Educated in the segregated public schools of Macon and then at Fort Valley State College, she became a public school teacher in Macon, where she was briefly married to Wilbur Robinson. After their one child died in infancy, Robinson left Macon after five years of teaching and went to Atlanta, where she earned an M.A. in English at Atlanta University. In the fall of 1949, after teaching one year at Mary Allen College in Crockett, Texas, Robinson accepted a position at Alabama State College. She was a professor of English at Alabama State throughout the boycott.

In Montgomery she joined both the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and the WPC, which had been founded three years earlier by another Alabama State English professor, Mary Fair Burks. At Christmastime in 1949, Robinson endured a deeply humiliating experience at the hands of an abusive and racist Montgomery City Lines bus driver, and she resolved then and there that the WPC would target racial seating practices on Montgomery buses. Many other Black citizens had had similar experiences, and for the next several years the WPC repeatedly asked city authorities to improve racial seating practices and address the conduct of abusive bus drivers. In May 1954, more than eighteen months before the arrest of Rosa Parks but just several days after news of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision began to sweep the country, Robinson wrote to Montgomery's mayor as WPC president, gently threatening a Black boycott of city buses if abuses were not curtailed.

Following Rosa Parks's arrest in December 1955, Robinson played a central role in beginning the protest by immediately producing the leaflets that spread word of the hoped-for boycott among the Black citizens of Montgomery. She became one of the most active board members of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the new Black community group created to lead the boycott, but she remained out of the limelight in order to protect her teaching position at Alabama State as well as those of her colleagues. In 1960, Robinson left Alabama State (and Montgomery), as did other activist faculty members.

After teaching one year at Grambling College in Grambling, Louisiana, Robinson moved to Los An-

geles, where she taught English in the public schools until her retirement in 1976 and where she was active in a number of women's community groups. Robinson's health suffered a serious decline just as her memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, was published in 1987. She was honored by a 1989 publication prize given by the Southern Association for Women Historians, but was unable to accept the award in person.

[See also MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT; WOMEN'S POLITICAL COUNCIL, MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA.]

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DAVID J. GARROW



*As a professor of English at Alabama State College and as president of the Women's Political Council of Montgomery, civil rights activist Jo Ann Robinson was an influential and leading figure in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56.*