

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

Secondary Source: “The Woman Who Refused to Leave a Whites-Only Streetcar”

By Allison C. Meier

On Sunday, July 16th, 1854, a young Black schoolteacher named Elizabeth Jennings was running late. She was heading to the First Colored American Congregational Church, where she was the organist, and needed to catch the Third Avenue streetcar. Although slavery had been abolished there since 1827, New York City was heavily segregated. The conductor of the arriving streetcar told Jennings to wait for the next which “had [her] people in it.” She declared she “had no people.” This second car was too full for her to board, so she got on the first, and refused to leave.

Jennings—who became Elizabeth Jennings Graham when she married in 1860—is featured in the Museum of the City of New York’s current [in August 2018] exhibition *Rebel Women: Defying Victorianism*. A century before Rosa Parks and the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, Jennings’s case against the streetcar company led to the desegregation of New York’s public transit.

In a 1990 article for *New York History*, author John H. Hewitt chronicles what’s known of her life, and considers why she isn’t better represented in American history. Hewitt researched newspaper archives, census reports, and records of Jennings’s own words to assemble a portrait of her life, including that sweltering day in 1854. After she demanded to stay on the streetcar, the conductor said, “Well, you may go in, but remember, if the passengers raise any objections you shall go out.” Jennings responded that she “was a respectable person, born and raised in New York” and “that he was a good for nothing impudent fellow for insulting decent persons while on their way to church.” This riled the conductor, who tried to pull her from the car where she clung to the window sash. She recalled:

[The conductor and driver] 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 (he) told the driver to drive as fast as he could and not to take another passenger in the car, to drive until he saw an officer or a Station House.

The police officer they found pushed Jennings out of the streetcar, dirtying her clothes, and, she stated, “tauntingly told me to get redress if I could.”

Her case was soon brought to court, taken on by a 24-year-old Chester A. Arthur, the future twenty-first president. “What may have started as one woman’s individual protest has really become a class action,” writes Hewitt. In February of 1855, she was awarded \$225 in damages. Furthermore, the New York State Supreme Court, Brooklyn Circuit ruled that African Americans could not be excluded from transit provided they were “sober, well behaved, and free from disease.”

Nevertheless, total desegregation of transit took years. “Inspired by the outcome of Elizabeth’s case, Rev. Pennington, born a slave in Maryland but by then free and the pastor of Shiloh Presbyterian Church, had in 1855 preached a sermon in which he observed that Black people could no longer be restricted in public transit facilities,” states Hewitt. Just weeks later, Pennington was ejected from a Sixth Avenue horsecar. Then Peter Porter, kicked off an Eighth Avenue trolley in 1856, settled “when the company agreed to change its policy so as to admit Black people to ride the same cars and on an equal basis with Whites.”

Jennings worked as a teacher until the 1860s, then in 1895 established New York’s first kindergarten for African-American children in her home on West 41st Street. She died on June 5th, 1901. “Openly discriminatory practices in public transportation did come to an end in New York City during Elizabeth Jennings’ lifetime, after the New York State legislature passed the Civil Rights Act of 1873,” writes Hewitt. “If only because she started something far larger than herself and laid the groundwork for the further progress that was to come, she deserves a place of honor in the history of civil rights in New York.”

Near where she made her streetcar stand, there is a public recognition of her legacy. In 2007, a street sign was installed at Spruce Street and Park Row, renaming this corner of Manhattan “Elizabeth Jennings Place.”

Source: Meier, A.C. (2018, Aug. 15). The woman who refused to leave a whites-only streetcar. JSTOR Daily.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/13/nyregion/thecity/the-schoolteacher-on-the-streetcar.html>. Reprinted with permission.

Primary Source: "Outrage Upon Colored Persons"

I held my gloved hand up 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 insisted upon my getting off, but I did not get off. He waited a few minutes, when the driver, becoming impatient, said to me, "Well, you may go in, but remember, if the passengers raise any objections you shall go out, whether or no, or I'll put you out."

I then told him that I was a respectable person, born and raised in New York, that I had never been insulted before while going to church, and that I did not know where he came from but that he was a no good for nothing impudent fellow for insulting decent persons while on their way to church. He then said that 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 onto that but previously he had dragged my companion out, she was all the while screaming for him to let go of me. A crowd gathered. The driver then went to his horses. I went again into the car. The conductor said, "You shall sweat for this."

He then told the driver to drive as fast as he could and not to take another passenger in the car, to drive until he saw an officer or a Station House. We saw an officer at the corner of Walker and Bowery and he without listening to anything that I had to say, thrust me out, and then pushed me down, and tauntingly told me to get redress if I could. I would have come up myself, but am quite sore and stiff from the treatment that I received from those monsters in human form yesterday afternoon.

Source: New-York Daily Tribune. (1854, July 19). Outrage Upon Colored Persons. Library of Congress Chronicling America. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1854-07-19/ed-1/seq-7/>

Primary Source: “Rights of Colored People Vindicated”

The hardships and insults so long suffered by the colored people of this city, in consequence of the general refusal of omnibus and railroad proprietors to permit them to enjoy equal rights as passengers, are, we hope, nearly at an end; the Supreme Court (Brooklyn Circuit, Judge Rockwell presiding) having made a decision which places that class of our citizens upon an equality with all others. The decision referred to was made in the case of Elizabeth Jennings vs. the Third Avenue Railroad Company... Miss Jennings who is a teacher in one of the public schools, and organist in one of the colored churches, got upon one of the Company's cars on the Sabbath, to ride to church. The conductor finally undertook to get her off, first alleging the car was full, and when that was shown to be false, he pretended the other passengers were displeased at her presence; but she saw nothing of that, and insisted on her rights, he took hold of her by force to expel her. She resisted, they got her down on the platform, jammed her bonnet, soiled her dress, and injured her person. Quite a crowd gathered around, but she effectually resisted, and they were not able to get her off. Finally, after the car had gone on further, they got the aid of a policeman, and succeeded in getting her from the car. She instructed her attorneys, Messrs. Culver, Parker and Arthur, to prosecute the Company, together with the driver and conductor. The two latter interposed no defence, the Company took issue, and the cause was brought to trial on the 22d ult. Judge Rockwell gave a very clear and able charge, instructing the Jury that the Company were liable for the acts of their agents, whether committed carelessly and negligently or wilfully and maliciously; that they were common carriers, and as such bound to carry all respectable persons: *that colored persons, if sober, well behaved, and free from disease, had the same rights as others; and could neither be excluded by any rules of the Company nor by force or violence...*

The plaintiff claimed \$500 in her complaint, and a majority of the Jury were for giving her the full amount; but others maintained some peculiar notions as to colored people's rights, and they finally agreed on \$225, on which the Court added ten per cent, besides the costs...

The Rev. Dr. [James W.C.] Pennington has complained to the Mayor of another similar case, which occurred on the Eighth Avenue Railroad, on Monday; Miss Caroline Stedman, of Brooklyn, a seamstress, on her way to Twentieth Street, being forcibly prevented, notwithstanding the extreme severity of the weather from entering a car. Dr. Pennington calls upon the Mayor “to restrain said Company and its conductors from such a course of conduct in future, and require them to observe the laws.” [...]

Source: *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. (1855, Mar. 10). *Rights of colored people vindicated*.

https://www.newspapers.com/clip/14361113/antislavery_bugle/

Photograph: Portrait of Elizabeth Jennings (Date Unknown)



Photo of Elizabeth Jennings. (n.d.). Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_jennings_01.jpg