

Morgan (later Kirkaldy), Irene (Amos) (1917–2007)

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Irene Morgan

Credit: *Washington Afro American*, January 4, 1947. Courtesy of

Douglas Morgan.

Irene Morgan (Kirkaldy) was a pioneer of the 20th-century civil rights movement in America. Her bold refusal to submit to racial discrimination in July 1944 led to a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling against segregation in interstate public transportation.

Early Life

Born April 9, 1917, in Baltimore, Maryland, Irene Amos had family roots on her mother's side in Gloucester County, Virginia, that extended back to the slavery era. She was the sixth of nine children born to working class parents Robert and Ethel Amos.¹ Devout Seventh-day Adventists, the Amos family belonged to the Berea Temple Church in Baltimore. To help support the family during the Great Depression, Irene did domestic work as a teenager and did not complete high school.²

She married Sherwood Morgan, a stevedore employed at Baltimore's inner harbor, with whom she would have two children, Sherwood, Jr. and Brenda (Bacquie). As the nation became involved in World War II, Irene found employment on the production line at Martin Aircraft Company in Baltimore, helping to build B-26 Marauders.³

A Bus Ride That Changed the Nation

After a visit to Gloucester for rest following a miscarriage, Irene Morgan boarded a Greyhound bus headed back to Baltimore on July 16, 1944. She had a doctor's appointment at which she anticipated getting medical clearance to return to her job at the defense plant. The bus was crowded so at first she had to stand with other black passengers in the aisle near the back. Eventually she found a seat vacated by a departing passenger, alongside another black woman who was holding an infant.

Her seat was in the third row from the back and thus within the section designated for blacks. Nevertheless, because a white couple was seated behind her, Morgan was technically in violation of a Virginia segregation law prohibiting racially mixed seating in public transportation. She thought that the driver would not make an issue of it, and he might not have had not another white couple boarded the bus at Saluda, Virginia. The driver then yelled out an order to Morgan and her seatmate to give up their seats to the white couple, in accordance with a further stipulation of Virginia law that required them to do so if no others were available.

Morgan offered to exchange rows with the white couple behind her. But when the driver angrily insisted that she stand in the aisle as the trip proceeded, she refused. The driver summoned law enforcement but when a Middlesex County sheriff's deputy handed Morgan an arrest warrant, she tore it up and threw it out the window.

⁴ She later described what she did after the deputy grasped her arm to yank her out of the seat:

That's when I kicked him in a very bad place. He hobbled off, and another one came on. He was trying to put his hands on me to get me off. I was going to bite him, but he was dirty, so I clawed him instead. I ripped his shirt. We were both pulling at each other. He said he'd use his nightstick. I said, "We'll whip each other."⁵

The two officers finally subdued and jailed the 27-year-old mother of two. Irene's mother, apparently with the help of a local pastor, arrived later that day to post the \$500 bond for her release.⁶

Irene Morgan v State of Virginia (1946)

Irene Morgan's dramatic resistance to racial segregation on July 16, 1944, was not planned in advanced but came on the spur of the moment. She was not connected with any civil rights organization. It was simply a personal refusal to accept unjust and inhumane treatment, as she later explained to an interviewer: "I'd paid my money. I was sitting where I was supposed to sit. And I wasn't going to take it."⁷

However, the incident might have been entirely forgotten if not for Morgan's courageous course of action in her legal case subsequent to her arrest. The expected thing would have been simply to not appear for trial and forfeit the bail money. Instead, Morgan showed up in Middlesex County Circuit Court on October 18, 1944, representing herself in a courtroom overflowing with spectators of both races, with a Ku Klux Klan charter posted on the courthouse door.⁸ She pled guilty to resisting arrest and paid the \$100 fine. But she refused to

pay the \$10 fine plus court costs for violating the segregation law, arguing that Jim Crow laws in Virginia did not apply to interstate passengers. The judge rejected her argument, not surprisingly, but she announced her decision to appeal the decision to the Virginia Supreme Court and all the way to Washington, if necessary.⁹

It was in thus challenging an unjust law with a persistence born of a deep personal commitment to principle, not simply by a one-time act of resistance, that Irene Morgan made history. According to one family member, she was driven to take up this responsibility by “the pent-up bitterness of years of seeing the colored people pushed around.”¹⁰ Her father, Robert Amos, observed that Irene was “taught to believe that all men are equal before God and should be treated with equal respect in their daily living.”¹¹

Morgan’s resolve and character convinced attorneys with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Virginia that she would be an exemplary client, and they concluded that *Morgan vs. Commonwealth of Virginia* would make an excellent test case in their ongoing legal struggle against racial discrimination. In their appeal on her behalf before the Virginia Supreme Court, they did not challenge segregation in principle, but rather contended that because segregation laws varied from state to state, they placed an unconstitutional burden on interstate commerce. As expected, the Virginia court, on June 6, 1945, upheld Morgan’s conviction. A year later though, on June 3, 1946, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 6-1 decision, overturned the conviction, agreeing with the contention of NAACP lawyers, led by Thurgood Marshall, that Virginia’s “Jim Crow” transit law was unconstitutional.¹²

Irene Morgan’s legal victory was widely celebrated among opponents of segregation, and Irene herself rejoiced that “Jim-crow tension has been removed by the edict, and the insult and degradation to colored people is gone.”¹³ The following year an interracial group organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), embarked on the first “freedom ride”—a two-week Journey of Reconciliation, traveling by bus and train through four southern states to test implementation of the Supreme Court ruling. On their journey the “freedom riders” sang:

On June the third the high court said,
When you ride interstate Jim Crow is dead.
Get on the bus, sit anyplace.
‘Cause Irene Morgan won her case.
You don’t have to ride Jim Crow.¹⁴

It turned out that this was not yet the decisive national victory over legal segregation. A great deal more legal work and public protest lay ahead for the civil rights movement. But the Morgan case was an important element in the process. In December 1960, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Boynton vs. Virginia* broadened the 1946 *Morgan* ruling to include all accommodations in terminals such as waiting rooms, restrooms, drinking fountains, and lunch counters. CORE once again organized a Freedom Ride for 1961, modeled on the 1947

journey, to test the new ruling, this one far more dramatic and ultimately successful in galvanizing national opposition to racial segregation.¹⁵

A Remarkable Life Out of the Limelight

Irene Morgan never sought the limelight and disappeared from the public eye for half a century, her contribution to the advance of civil rights largely forgotten. By the time of the Supreme Court ruling in her favor in 1946 she had moved to New York City where she worked as a practical nurse. Her husband, Sherwood Morgan, died in 1948. Irene married Stanley Kirkaldy, who ran a dry cleaning business, in 1949. Later, the couple also owned an industrial cleaning service and a family-operated child care center.¹⁶

Still a civic-minded humanitarian, Irene Kirkaldy volunteered in soup kitchens and homeless shelters and developed a Thanksgiving tradition of inviting two homeless men into her home for dinner and laundry.¹⁷ Winning a scholarship in a radio contest in 1981 opened the way for Kirkaldy to fulfill a long-deferred dream of a college education. She earned a bachelor's degree in communications from St. John's University in 1985 at the age of 68 and a master's degree in urban studies from Queens College in 1990.¹⁸

After spending a few years in Baltimore, Kirkaldy returned to New York in 1997 to live with her daughter on Long Island. While there, she attended the Ebenezer Seventh-day Adventist Church in Freeport, New York.¹⁹

In 2002, Irene returned south to live in Gloucester, Virginia. Her husband, Stanley, died in November 2006. Irene Morgan Kirkaldy passed away on August 10, 2007, at the age of 90.²⁰

Contribution

Public recognition of Irene Morgan's role in America's civil rights saga began to revive in 1995 with the award winning public television documentary about the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation titled "You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow." She was honored during the 350th Anniversary of Gloucester County, Virginia, in 2000. *Washington Post* staff writer Carol Morello then told her story in a major feature article that summer, writing that "Irene Morgan's spirited and unflinching 'No' was a stick of dynamite in a cornerstone of institutionalized segregation."²¹

On January 8, 2001, U.S. President Bill Clinton awarded Irene Morgan Kirkaldy with the Presidential Citizens Medal along with Henry "Hank" Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Ruby Bridges, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and several other luminaries. Her citation read:

When Irene Morgan boarded a bus for Baltimore in the summer of 1944, she took the first step on a journey that would change America forever. . . . With courage and tenacity, she appealed her conviction and won a landmark Supreme Court victory that outlawed segregation in interstate transportation and helped make America a more just society.²²

In a letter read at her funeral ceremony held in Gloucester High School in 2007, Barack Obama, then a U.S. Senator from Illinois and later the 44th president of the United States, wrote that Irene Morgan helped “opened the doors of opportunity for people like me.”²³ Speaking for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, General Conference president Jan Paulsen wrote: “She modeled the qualities of true men and women, who will not be bought or sold, who in their inmost souls, are true and honest, who do not fear to call wrong by its right name, and who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”²⁴

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