

READING

African American Parents Organize Bus Monitors

Judge Garrity's ruling in favor of the NAACP in *Morgan v. Hennigan* was celebrated by African American Bostonians as a victory for educational justice. At the same time, the plan that he put in place to desegregate Boston's schools for the 1974–75 school year concerned many African American parents. According to the plan, African American students from the Roxbury neighborhood were going to be sent to school in South Boston, a poor white neighborhood known for its hostility toward Black people.

"Those of us who had lived in Boston all of our lives knew that this was going to be a very, very difficult thing to pull off," said NAACP activist Ruth Batson. "I just felt that they made it very clear that they didn't like black people. And I was prepared for them not to want black students coming to the school."¹

Batson also said that she worried that city and the school leaders had not done enough to make sure that all of the changes to the schools that year would go peacefully and smoothly.

In the afternoon of the first day of school, buses taking African American children home to Roxbury from their new schools in South Boston were attacked with rocks and bricks by white residents. Ellen Jackson was the director of Freedom House, an organization that supported Black families during the desegregation process. She recalled:

The kids were crying. They had glass in their hair. They were scared. And they were shivering and crying. Talking about how they wanted to go home. We tried to gently usher them into the auditorium. And wipe off the little bit of bruises that they had. Small bruises and the dirt. Picked the glass out of their hair.

Roxbury parents were furious and frightened. They were angry at Ellen Jackson because she had encouraged them to send their children to school that day. They were also angry at Kevin

¹ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam, 1990), Kindle edition, 596.

White, Boston's mayor, who had promised to protect all of the city's children. Jackson demanded that the mayor come to speak to the Roxbury parents that evening.

At the meeting with parents, Mayor White promised that their children would never be attacked like that again, and he asked parents to send their children back to school the next day. Jackson described the response from the crowd:

There was a pause in the room, and you could feel the silence. People were fighting with themselves, their consciences. Whether or not they should allow their kids to go. Should they take this chance? How could they be assured? Should they trust his word again? When that silence came, someone . . . yelled, "No, we're not going to have it. We're going to have our own people there. If it's going to be like this, we're going to send our own people on these buses."

A group of the Roxbury parents stayed late into the night to organize groups of them to follow the buses in and out of South Boston to monitor their children and ensure their safety. The Boston police commissioner warned the parents not to monitor the buses, but to let police do it instead. According to Jackson, the parents responded:

You haven't been responsible for us up to now, so we'll take the responsibility on our own. We'll be responsible for ourselves . . . We've encouraged these people to participate in this process. And therefore we have a responsibility.²

² Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, Kindle edition, 602–05.