NEWS & ADVICE

What It Was Like to Fly as a Black Traveler in the Jim Crow Era

Airlines sometimes bumped Black passengers off of flights to make room for white travelers, even during refueling stops.

BY MIA BAY

March 23, 2021

More welcome on planes than trains, many early Black flyers took to the air with enthusiasm. "Breakfast in Kansas; dinner in Los Angeles!" reported J. A. Rogers, a novelist who worked as staff correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier,* in 1936. "Colored youth take notice! The airplane will someday supercede the railroad as the latter did the covered wagon." But flying would prove less ideal than many hoped, at least when it came to avoiding Jim Crow.

[I]n 1945 the Chicago and Southern Airline (one of Delta's precursors) admitted that it practiced Jim Crow seating on its Dixie-bound flights.

"It is true that Negro passengers are requested to assume the forward seats on the airplane," an official for the airline wrote to Theodore Allen, a Black federal government employee who protested when one of the airline's stewardesses made him reseat himself in the front of the plane, after he and the white man with whom he was traveling had taken seats in the middle of the plane. The airline's representative was unapologetic about the practice and suggested that "from the standard of personal comfort, these [forward seats] are the most desirable seats in the aircraft. Thus it should be made clear that the practice rather than one of discrimination is one of offering Negro accommodations and facilities which are equal or superior to those offered

In the fall of 1951, however, some of the airlines' Jim Crow tricks would be revealed in a criminal complaint filed against American Airlines. Gabriel Gladstone, a twenty-two-year-old Jewish New Yorker, had begun a job as a reservations agent in the American Airlines office at LaGuardia earlier that year. But after working there for two months, he was dismissed for refusing to follow the Airlines "special instructions on how to handle Negro passengers." As a trainee, Gladstone "was instructed to mark reservations with a symbolic E111, if the passenger was a Negro, or in the case of a telephone reservation, was presumed to be Negro." These codes, he was informed, would be used to implement the airline's policy of "segregating Negro passengers on flights and preferring white applicants for airplane accommodations on waiting lists." When Gladstone began taking reservations, a supervisor observed him failing to mark "a reservation with a code even though the applicant had a southern accent," and fired him on the spot. Gladstone reported his experience to the American Jewish Congress, which helped him file a complaint charging American Airlines with violating New York civil rights law.

Gabriel Gladstone's complaint underscored that Black flyers suffered indignities that went beyond segregated seats. American Airlines' policy directed its employees to put Negro passengers "on waiting lists for reservations," a practice that appears to have been widespread. Black travelers were first in line for any kind of travel disruption, and were sometimes bumped to make room for white passengers. According to one post–World War II letter writer who wondered whether American democracy was worth fighting for, such interruptions could involve something as direct as an "airline agent saying 'I'm sorry but your reservation has been postponed due to an unexpected request from a white passenger.'"

Not even well-known African Americans were spared such slights, as Jackie Robinson and his wife found out when they traveled from Los Angeles to Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1946. Hired to play for the Montreal Royals that year, Robinson was due to begin spring training as the first Black player ever to play major league baseball. Excited to be traveling in style, the couple arrived at LAX dressed to the nines for their American Airlines flight, and were embarrassed when Robinson's parents saw them off with a supply of sandwiches that seemed more suited to a cross-country journey in the Jim Crow [train] car. But the food came in handy. The Robinsons were bumped from their first flight during a layover in New Orleans, and ended up spending twelve hours at the New Orleans airport, which did not serve Black customers in its coffee shop

roadside restaurants along the route. By then their sandwiches were long gone, and they were

too insulted to order food to go, so they sustained themselves on that twelve-hour leg of the journey by eating apples and candy bars.

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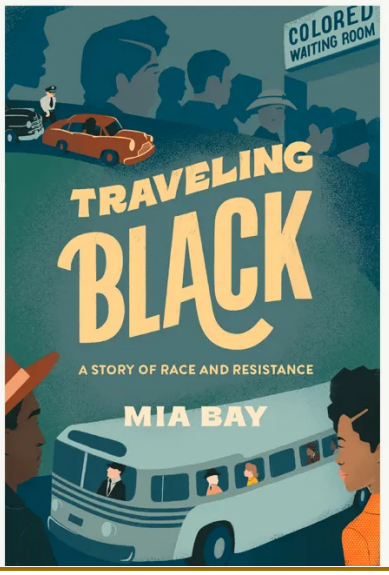
Likewise, jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald was bumped off a plane in Honolulu in 1954. On her way from San Francisco to Sydney, Australia, for a concert tour, Fitzgerald was traveling with an accompanist and her secretary, who were also African American, when her journey was cut short. After getting off the plane when it stopped to refuel in Honolulu, Fitzgerald and her companions were not allowed to reboard, not even to retrieve the clothes and other personal items they had left behind. They then had to wait three days before they could get another flight. Pan American Airlines claimed that they were bumped through "inadvertence," but Fitzgerald sued the company for racial discrimination and won, receiving $7,500 in damages.

As more Blacks began to fly, southern segregation ordinances were eventually extended to airports, but the process was piecemeal and took some time, producing discriminatory practices that varied from airport to airport. "Segregation in air transportation is not uniform in Southern areas," NAACP lawyer Robert Carter noted in 1949, "principally because it is a new means of transportation and age-old customs and usages do not immediately take hold."

Congressman Charles C. Diggs of Michigan, who was an early Black frequent flyer, actually witnessed the development of segregation at airports. When he first began flying in the late 1940s, he was "heartened to see that this newer mode of conveyance was not into the old pattern of segregation and discrimination established by railroads and bus lines." But this sense of satisfaction did not last long. He was soon disappointed to find that "undemocratic practices" were becoming common in airports, as he noted in a 1955 complaint to the president of Continental Airlines. In southern airports, he routinely encountered waiting rooms marked "for white only," separate water fountains, "the refusal of limousines and taxi companies to carry Negroes . . . [and] discrimination and/or segregation against Negroes in airport restaurants."



A Black Air Force officer who stopped for a drink at the New Orleans airport's bar in 1955 was greeted by an attendant who informed him that "the only way. . . . [he] could be served was if he agreed to take his drink outside the building."

Airport segregation could be humiliating even to Black passengers who never experienced it directly. On planes that stopped to refuel in the South, white passengers were told "to depart for lunch in the terminal's restaurant," while "Blacks were instructed to stay on the plane and eat boxed lunches because blacks were not allowed in the terminal's restaurant."

[T]he complete desegregation of American airports would not be accomplished until 1963, after a long series of public protests and Department of Justice lawsuits. Likewise, months of freedom rides, federal pressure, and an order from the U.S. Supreme Court were required to bring about the 1961 desegregation of interstate buses and bus stations in the South, while segregation remained in effect in many roadside restaurants and hotels until well after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Despite Black travelers' sustained opposition to the segregation of public accommodations, the shaky legal ground on which segregated interstate travel facilities stood, and the complications they imposed on businesses, travel segregation proved difficult to

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