

Column on Public Transportation in Birmingham, Alabama published in B-Metro Magazine January 2020

What's the worst thing about Birmingham? The fact that it's in Alabama, of course!

Our host state has just concluded the three-year-long celebration of its Bicentennial, and unless we succeed in any secession efforts, we're stuck here for at least the next 200 years as well.

So, what is an "Alabama", and how did it get here? Well, first of all - the land that Alabama now occupies has been tread upon for thousands of years by members of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Koasati, and Alibamu tribes. Everything was just hunky dory until the 16th century, when Europeans got a hankerin' for a little colonializin', and made their way out west. After some drawn out tusslin' by European super-powers, Alabama was close to standing on its own as a bona fide state in a newly-formed experimental utopia called The United States of America. In 1817, what we now know as Alabama was playing the role of trusty sidekick in the Mississippi Territory, until that territory's namesake got a big head, and got admitted to the Union. Two years later, our home celebrated any landmass's most coveted rite of passage, and became the 22nd State on December 14th, 1819.

While the name "East Mississippi", or "West Georgia", may have been more geographically accurate, the name "Alabama" stuck. A former attorney general of our state popularized the idea that Alabama means "He We Rest", but no expert has ever corroborated this romantic etymology. More likely, the name comes from Choctaw, and essentially means "herb gatherers" (which, considering the state's stance on marijuana legalization, is quite ironic).

We've got a pretty good idea what happened in the years from Statehood to Reconstruction. Like the rest of the South, Alabama fought for its right to continue enacting unspeakable human atrocities, lost, and then tried to figure out slightly more subtle ways to continue the legacy of white supremacy. The infamous 1901 Constitution of the State of Alabama (now the longest and most amended constitution still operative anywhere in the world) helped establish policies like a poll tax and literacy tests, that disenfranchised pretty much all black people, and many poor whites as well.

The rich oppressing the poor--the haves stifling the potential for advancement (*and potential rebellion!?*) of the have-nots, is a patently universal tragedy, but there's something particularly obnoxious about the way it's done in Alabama. Our state's history is mired with cases of corruption and extreme wealth inequality. A Special Rapporteur from the United Nations recently toured rural areas of the state, and described the poverty he saw as "very uncommon in the First World." Attempts by the bastard liberal stepcity (Birmingham) to do anything that would help its poorest citizens, like raising the minimum wage in the city limits, are met with derision, and overturned by the State Legislature. While we're first alphabetically, Alabama is known as somewhat of a laughingstock and a punchline around the country. We consistently rank close to last on several key indicators of quality of life--education, poverty, healthcare, prison conditions, and economic opportunity.

I probably won't be seen as too nutty of a conspiracy theorist if I suggest that the needs of the state's largest city, and the city with the third highest black population (by percentage) in the country, have been intentionally neglected by the ruling class in Montgomery. And while it may take a concerted effort over the next two centuries to bring justice, equality, and equity to the state's most disregarded citizens,

there is one major policy priority that could singularly have the greatest and most positive impact on the lives of Alabama's working class: funding public transportation.

While efforts such as the establishment of a new microtransit program (called Birmingham On-Demand) do supplement our bus system, the only way to truly fix our woefully public transportation is to receive dedicated state funding. Alabama is one of only five states that provides no state funding for public transit. In 1952, one of those amendments to our state's absurdly long constitution decreed that gas tax revenues could not be used for anything but road and bridge construction, maintenance, law enforcement, and highway-related debt payment. In 2018 Alabama received \$430 Million from its gas tax. According to Alabama Arise, an organization working to help alleviate poverty in the state, \$7 of every \$100 of Alabama's state budget goes to transportation, but none to public transit. Investment in public transit could help the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority operate its buses 7 days a week, rather than its current 6, and keep the buses running past 7pm. Countless studies have concluded that investment in public transportation has significant catalytic impact on economies. Investing in public transit not only gets people to jobs, it helps create jobs. According to the American Public Transportation Association, every \$1 Million spent on public transit capital improvements creates 24 full-time jobs, and every \$1 million spent on operation creates 41 full-time jobs. If Alabama wants to heal, and rectify the sins of its past, investing in public transportation may very well be the most important first step.