

Railroads in the African-American Experience

By Samuel Augustus Jennings

Theodore Kornweibel, Jr.'s *Railroads in the African-American Experience* thoroughly documents – in painstaking and often tedious detail – the history of the connection between railroads and African-Americans. It is not always a pleasant history and the author plainly details the suffering and violence inflicted on African American – and female – railroad employees and passengers throughout the history of the United States. Chapter 1, for example, illustrates how slave and convict labor were used to construct and maintain railroads.

Kornweibel writes: “From Reconstruction into the early 1900s, southern courts purposely convicted large numbers of blacks – many for minor property crimes – and sentenced them to lengthy prison (not jail) terms to ensure railroads and railroad construction companies, as well as mine and plantation owners, could obtain cheap labor from the state.”

The book goes on to detail how 19th century, pre-Civil War era, slaves were often leased from plantation owners to work on track gangs...without pay, of course.

In the 20th Century, Kornweibel accurately recounts how segregation on trains, buses, and stations in the north and the south was justified largely out of fear.

He writes: “To many whites, segregation was necessary for the protection of white female virtue.”

Court cases, ICC regulations, presidential mandates, Supreme Court decisions – and civil disobedience by southern and northern rail and bus lines – are documented here. After the Supreme Court legitimized *separate, but equal* with the Plessey v. Ferguson decision in 1896, *separate and unequal* persisted until that ruling was struck down by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

There was, however, a rail

connection. In *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) the Supreme Court reversed itself and ruled that segregating interstate passengers was an “undue burden on interstate commerce.” Indeed, as the author reveals, Irene Morgan had kicked and screamed as she was dragged from a Greyhound bus in Virginia.

I have my own memories of rail travel in these days. I remember being kicked out of lounge cars by surly conductors on the *West Coast Champion* and *Royal Palm* when I was a kid traveling between Florida and Detroit during the 1950s, while also having to give up my seat for whites on Greyhound and Orlando, (Fla.) city buses. All the while, black porters in the same era and dining car waiters were expected to enforce dining car segregation.

Until President Harry Truman’s 1948 mandate outlawing segregation in dining cars, blacks were either banned from the diner altogether or were forced to sit behind a curtain at the two tables closest to the steaming hot kitchen.

As Kornweibel notes, “even after dining car segregation was outlawed, some southern railroads still ordered [white] stewards to avoid seating whites and blacks at the same tables.”

Simply put, it was either the back of the bus or the front of the train – behind the engine and baggage car or compartment – for hearty black passengers in those days.

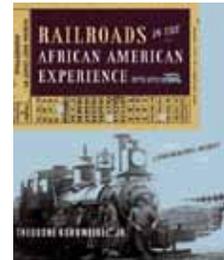
As a long term student of black railroad history I figured it’s all been said before, so what else is new? Kornweibel has thankfully answered

many questions that have lingered in my mind for many years. He has especially educated me on the historic role of women on the nation’s railways and filled me in on so much more! For example, I was very surprised to learn that women – especially black women – had always performed men’s work and were not just used as fillers during World War II.

Railroads in the African American Experience is worth a trip to your local independent book store. Okay, order from Amazon if you have to. Besides the narrative, Kornweibel’s photographic journey is filled with rare vintage photos of blacks on tracks which speak more than a thousand words.

This inspirational masterpiece is about survival, overcoming adversity, and the triumph of the human spirit. I often got so angry while reading this book I had to put it down and cool off before returning to atrocities fueled by institutionalized racism that seemed to forever face African Americans merely trying to realize the American dream guaranteed in the Constitution. And I thought I had it bad growing up in the segregated 50’s. However, my ancestors’ perseverance has made me even prouder to be an African American railroader. 

Mr. Jennings is both an Amtrak conductor Northeast Corridor and a RAIL reader. He is also the author of Blacks on Tracks – Railroading Through Black History.



*“If within the cruel Southland you have chance to take a ride
You the Jim Crow cars have noticed, how they crush a Negro’s pride
How he pays a first class passage and a second class receives
Gets the worst accommodations ev’ry friend of truth believes.”*

- Excerpt from *Blacks on Tracks – Railroading Through Black History*
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