

Individual Life

# **A Black Englishman in the Heart of the Confederacy: The Transnational Life of Paul Stephenson**

*Nick Juravich*

On a crisp Sunday morning in October 1964, Paul Stephenson arrived in Richmond, Virginia. The 27-year-old veteran of the Royal Air Force was enjoying his first tour of the United States, which had already taken him to New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Upon reaching the former capital of the Confederacy, he headed for the largest and finest hotel in the state, the Hotel John Marshall, where his hosts had booked him a room.

The John Marshall's lobby was packed with guests dressed in their Sunday best, perhaps part of a conference or convention. Conversation hummed gaily, but as Stephenson made his way through the crowd, he noticed an "eerie silence" descending. By the time he reached the reception desk, "everyone was glaring and staring" at him. The noise had died down to the point that all assembled heard him ask the receptionist if she had a room for Mr. Stephenson from England. After checking the ledger, she replied, "We have a reservation for Mr. Stephenson from England, but he hasn't arrived yet."

With all eyes on him, Stephenson replied calmly and pleasantly that he, in fact, was Mr. Stephenson from England. Despite his accent, the receptionist responded incredulously. "You're the Englishman?" In "total silence," Stephenson asserted, again, that he was, which left her momentarily dumbfounded. For though he dressed smartly, spoke the Queen's English, and claimed a reservation in his name, Paul Stephenson's skin was black, and no black man had ever stayed at the Hotel John Marshall without the accompaniment of a white master.

Stephenson, unaware of the novelty of his position, waited patiently as the receptionist walked slowly to where the keys were kept and returned with a set. Recovering her Southern hospitality, she handed them across the desk to him and said, "We hope you have an enjoyable stay here, Mr. Stephenson." The moment

she said this, two bellboys, whom Stephenson quickly realized were the only other people of color in the room, whisked him and his belongings into an elevator, and thence into a large and impressive suite. With formal pleasantries and wide eyes, they left him to unpack.

That evening, Stephenson joined his hosts, the Virginia State Conference of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Branches, for dinner. After introductions, one of the members of the group asked him if he was happy with his accommodations. Stephenson replied that he was, but that the luxury was hardly necessary. With a grin, his host replied, "Well, we thought you'd like to know that a few weeks ago, we got a promise by the management that they would allow black people in to the hotel, and you're the first one." They had gambled, correctly, that neither the hotel nor the white Richmond elites who patronized it would risk an embarrassing international incident by denying a Briton a room. Surprised and pleased, Stephenson replied jokingly, "I thought I'd come to give talks about racism in Britain, not to desegregate the South!" Everyone around the table had a good laugh, and proceeded with their planned discussions of racism and the black freedom struggle on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup>

Paul Stephenson OBE is known today in the United Kingdom as the youth-worker-turned-activist who organized the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963. The boycott forced the Bristol Omnibus Company and the Transport and General Workers Union to drop their color bars and offer equal employment opportunities to Bristol's Caribbean and Asian immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Celebrations of boycott's fiftieth anniversary in 2013 cited the campaign as a galvanizing force for black and white Britons alike. According to accounts in the UK press, the protests encouraged Harold Wilson, soon to become Prime Minister, to make public statements opposing color bars. They also inspired the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968, which took the first, halting steps toward outlawing and preventing racial discrimination in the United Kingdom. At the grassroots, the boycott encouraged activists to take on discriminatory practices in pubs, hotels, factories, and policing.<sup>3</sup>

These public recountings of the Bristol Bus Boycott in the United Kingdom also noted the transnational elements of the campaign. Paul Stephenson was inspired by the bus boycott organized by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, and he chose the tactic to provoke comparisons between the United Kingdom and the Jim Crow South as images of King's bloody Birmingham campaign were hitting UK newsstands. In its early days, the boycott also received a boost when Sir Learie Constantine, cricket legend and High Commissioner for newly independent Trinidad and Tobago, spoke out forcefully against the racism faced by Caribbean immigrants in the United Kingdom.

The presence of these connections hints at the broader world of transnational exchange built by the peoples of the African diaspora amid postwar freedom struggles. It is a world whose workings come into clearer focus if we follow Paul Stephenson's life and work from Bristol to Richmond and back, and then on to Kingston, London, and Johannesburg. Indeed, challenging racism in the United

Kingdom frequently led Stephenson beyond its borders. His visit to the United States in 1964 provides an opportunity to examine these transnational relations in microcosm and, in particular, to elucidate the two-way nature of the “other special relationship.”

Paul Stephenson came to the United States at the invitation of the NAACP, whose Field Secretary, Calvin Banks, coordinated his trip. It is not clear how Banks and the NAACP heard of Stephenson. The American civil rights organization sent staff members to the United Kingdom to investigate racism in these years, including their Labor Director, Herbert Hill, who toured London’s Notting Hill after the white riots of 1958.<sup>4</sup> One of their own may have issued a report, or Banks may simply have read about Stephenson in the pages of the black press, which covered the activities of Black Britons frequently in the 1960s, alongside reports of struggles in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. The Bristol Bus Boycott was not reported in any mainstream American papers, but it made headlines in the *Atlanta Daily World*, the *Afro-American* (headquartered in Baltimore, with editions in Washington, DC, and Richmond, among other cities), and the national weekly edition of the *Chicago Defender*, where word of the “Breakthrough in Britain” ran in the same issue that heralded the success of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>5</sup>

However he discovered Paul Stephenson, Calvin Banks would have seen in him a kindred spirit. Like Stephenson, Banks had served his country in the armed forces before serving the youth of his community as a teacher in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Like Stephenson, his activist career began with efforts to guarantee “the creation and expansion of employment opportunities for Negroes,” which Banks did as Industrial Secretary for the Urban League in Philadelphia before joining the NAACP.<sup>6</sup> Banks continued this work for the NAACP, and the itinerary he put together for Stephenson included visits with branches in the midst of battles for jobs and economic opportunity in New York City, Philadelphia, and Richmond.<sup>7</sup>

Stephenson’s American sojourn began in New York, where the NAACP was headquartered, and specifically in Harlem, where he stayed at the famed Hotel Theresa and visited several local organizations. At the Nation of Islam’s Mosque Number 7, Stephenson encountered a “breathtaking vision” of disciplined self-reliance, and was “most impressed” by the eloquence of the congregation’s leader, Louis X (Farrakhan), even though he did not share the latter’s “spiritual intolerance.” Visiting a youth detention center, he was struck by the parallels to his own experiences as a youth worker in Bristol, and remarked that the young men he encountered in both places “were victims of a social system that didn’t give them much hope.”<sup>8</sup> From Harlem, he journeyed south to Philadelphia and Washington, DC, where he met and spoke with local organizers in much the same way before making his way to Richmond, his southernmost stop.

In traveling and speaking as he did, Stephenson was following a well-worn path trod by civil rights organizers including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Ella Baker. While scholarship on the civil rights movement has rightly moved away from top-down, “great man” explanations of political action,

emphasizing instead the importance of sustained local organizing, the travels of well-known activists could and did offer support and encouragement to grassroots campaigns.<sup>9</sup> By maintaining impressive itineraries that crisscrossed the nation and the world, these organizers brought inspiration, media attention, and a sense of connectedness to thousands of local struggles.<sup>10</sup> In certain instances, their presence could be used strategically to expose local racism to national and international audiences (or at least suggest the threat of such embarrassment, as Paul Stephenson's booking at the Hotel John Marshall did).

Stephenson was well aware of the value of such sojourners, having benefitted in his own local struggle from visits and expressions of support by Sir Learie Constantine, Sir Lawrence Lindo, the High Commissioner for Jamaica, and Claudia Jones, the tireless London-based activist and publisher of the *West Indian Gazette*, which reported the boycott.<sup>11</sup> The success of the boycott launched him into a similar role. Before his trip to the United States, the *Guardian* profiled him as a "People's Tribune" who "spends most of his spare time lecturing to university bodies, social clubs, and youth groups."<sup>12</sup> His stops in England before and after his trip included the Oxford Union (where students "were ever so slightly disappointed" that Stephenson "was not as radical as Malcolm X," who had preceded him by several months) and Eton College.<sup>13</sup>

The branches of the NAACP that hosted Stephenson were also familiar with the catalytic power of welcoming well-known activists. In Richmond, Stephenson arrived a few months after Myrlie Evers, the widow of slain NAACP activist Medgar Evers. Evers helped the local Richmond Branch kick off their annual membership drive with a rousing speech in which she praised local campaigns and rallied the crowd around the memory of her husband. As she told the assembly, "We can't expect these rights to be given to us without our own effort. We must pay for them with time, effort, money, blood, and, yes, even our lives."<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Evers spoke particularly of the courage of young activists, including some who were arrested the night before her talk for sitting in at a local restaurant. "We owe much of our progress in the past year to such young people," she said, "who often took the lead because some of the older folks, I am sorry to say, fell behind."<sup>15</sup> Such words would have resonated with Paul Stephenson, whose challenge to the Bristol Omnibus Company was met with wariness by the older, more established political leadership in Bristol's West Indian community.<sup>16</sup> After finding the West Indian Association and its leader, Bill Smith, unreceptive to a direct challenge to the bus company's color bar, Stephenson founded the West Indian Development Council, which relied on the support of young black Bristolians like Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, and Guy Bailey.

After his eventful first day, Stephenson focused his attention on the young people of Richmond, visiting student groups at Virginia Union University, Armstrong High School, St. Emma Military Academy, and Mosby Junior High School.<sup>17</sup> Richmond's students, many of whom were organized into the youth and college chapter of the local NAACP, had been engaged in robust direct action campaigns since 1960, when future SNCC organizer Charles Sherrod, then a student at Virginia Union, led a sit-in at Talheimer's department store in downtown Richmond.<sup>18</sup> In Virginia and across the United States, these efforts pushed

older NAACP leaders to embrace direct action or, at the very least, offer tactical support to the young people taking part in these protests. In the summer of 1963, as Stephenson was leading the charge against discriminatory municipal employment in Bristol, high school and college students were doing the same in Richmond.<sup>19</sup> While there are no recorded minutes from Stephenson's meetings with these student groups, one imagines that they had no trouble finding things to talk about.

Toward the end of his stay in Richmond, Stephenson was profiled by the city's edition of the *Afro-American*. In his comments, most of which focused on the Bristol Bus Boycott and racism in the United Kingdom, he argued "the racial situation in England is comparable to that in the northern United States, except that there is no legislation on the subject, one way or the other." Using his international platform to put pressure on his homeland, he added, "It is paradoxical that England, which officially is opposed to any kind of racial segregation, should lag behind America in legislating against racial discrimination."<sup>20</sup> While it seems unlikely that a copy of the *Afro* crossed Harold Wilson's desk, the Prime Minister, who was elected while Paul Stephenson was in Richmond, did take it upon himself to write to Stephenson in Jamaica (where he travelled after leaving the United States on Thanksgiving Day) to inform him that "he was now prepared to address the issue of racism in Britain."<sup>21</sup> Wilson's note arrived just as Stephenson was preparing to return home to the United Kingdom, where new chapters in the freedom struggle would soon be unfolding.

Paul Stephenson came home from the United States and Jamaica "more convinced of the need to carry on." As he remembers, "It wasn't just the buses I was eyeing on. It was the whole rigmarole, social class, the nightclubs, the pubs."<sup>22</sup> One of his first actions drew inspiration from the youth-led sit-in movement that had taken hold in Richmond and so many other cities. In 1965, he went for a pint at the Bay Horse, a local pub, and refused to leave when he was not served, earning himself a trip to jail but ultimately winning damages from the pub's ownership in court. Similar sit-ins (or "drink-ins," as one highly-publicized but somewhat anticlimactic action was dubbed) took place around the United Kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

After the passage of the first Race Relations Act established Community Relations Councils, Stephenson found employment in a series of positions within this new state-run system. Though he was "skeptical... that the government wanted to take the sting out of the racial protest we had started," he used these new structures of government (which he often criticized for lacking teeth) to continue his antiracist activism, often with a decidedly transnational bent.<sup>24</sup> While working with youth in London, he recruited Muhammad Ali to visit a boys' school in Brixton's black community, and later worked with him to set up a Sports Development Association for local youth that bore Ali's name. One of their guests was Richmond native Arthur Ashe, who introduced many young Brixtonites to tennis. Through his work in sport, he met South African antiapartheid activist Sam Ramsamy, and joined him in campaigning against the participation of apartheid teams in international competitions.

Stephenson continued to travel, visiting Buffalo, New York in 1970 as the guest of the Anglican/Episcopalian church (and also meeting with local Black Panthers), returning several times to the Caribbean, and joining Ramsamy in Johannesburg after the election of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress in 1994. In 1992, he returned to Bristol, where he led the creation of the Bristol Black Archives Project and also pushed the city to acknowledge its role in the slave trade in advance of the 200th anniversary of its abolition, in 2007. As Stephenson recalls, "It took me a long while to get the city to face up to the fact that it was built on the blood and sweat of the enslaved."<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, for his efforts ranging from the bus boycott, to the building of an archive for Bristol's diverse, transnational populations, to fighting for recognition of the city's role in a global system of racist enslavement, Stephenson was awarded the Freedom of the City of Bristol in December 2007 (the only recipient of this honor to have spent time in the city's jails, as he notes).

The fiftieth anniversary of the Bristol Bus Boycott in 2013 inspired several tributes to Stephenson and his fellow activists in the United Kingdom. These articles and news reports also shed light on the transnational nature of this campaign, illuminating the "other" special relationship that nurtured protest in the United States and United Kingdom in these years. Tracing Paul Stephenson's travels in America reveals some of the ways in which this relationship continued to inspire mobilization after the triumph of the 1963 campaign passed, with much work still to be done. As Stephenson told the *Bristol Post* in 2013, the city "cannot afford to be complacent" about racism today.<sup>26</sup> What his next campaign will be remains to be seen. As of this writing, he was traveling.

### Notes

1. The following account is drawn from two sources: Paul Stephenson's *Memoirs of a Black Englishman* (with Lilleith Morrison, Bristol: Tangent Press, 2011) and an interview conducted by the author on January 17, 2008 (transcript available from the author). All quotations are from these two sources.
2. The most comprehensive account of the Bristol Bus Boycott is Madge Dresser, *Black and White on the Buses: The 1963 Colour Bar Dispute in Bristol* (Bristol: JW Arrowsmith Ltd, 1986). See also Stephenson and Morrison, *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*.
3. E.g. Rachel Gardner, "Racism Never Dies, Says Bristol Bus Boycott Campaigner," *Bristol Post*, August 28, 2013 (<http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Racism-dies-says-Bristol-bus-boycott-campaigner/story-19720411-detail/story.html>) and Jon Kelly, "What Was Behind the Bristol Bus Boycott," *BBC News Magazine*, August 26, 2013 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23795655>).
4. Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 150.
5. "Lifts Ban on Negro Personnel," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 24, 1963, p. 2; "Lifts Ban," *Afro-American*, September 14, 1963, p. 8; "Breakthrough in Britain," *Chicago Defender*, August 31, 1963, p. 19.
6. "Calvin Banks: Biographical Note." *Papers of the NAACP*, Supplement to Part 17: National Staff Files, 1956–1965, Reel 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

7. Letter from Labor & Industry Committee, NY Branch NAACP, April 28, 1964 (announcing “a new, dynamic program on unemployment”), *Papers of the NAACP* Part 27, Series B, Reel 5, Schomburg Center; Press Release, “Program for Summer Jobs,” Philadelphia Branch NAACP, July 8, 1964, *Papers of the NAACP* Part 27, Series B, Reel 10, Schomburg Center; “Jobs Demonstrators Sit Awhile with City Council,” *Afro-American*, August 17, 1963, clipping in *Papers of the NAACP* Part 27, Series A, Reel 17, Schomburg Center. On struggles for jobs and economic opportunity in the civil rights era, see, among others, Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2005), Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2001), Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), and Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
8. Stephenson and Morrison, *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*, p. 74.
9. On the centrality of local organizing to civil rights victories, see, among many others, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Francesca Poletta, *It was like a fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).
10. On the travels of leading organizers in the United States and United Kingdom, see, among others, Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Stephen Tuck, “Malcolm X’s Visit to Oxford University U.S. Civil Rights, Black Britain, and the Special Relationship on Race,” *American Historical Review* 118:1 (February 2013): 76–103; Brian Ward, “A King in Newcastle: Martin Luther King Jr. and British Race Relations, 1967–1968,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79:3 (Fall 1995): 599–632.
11. “Sir Learie Makes it Plain on that Bristol Colour Bar,” *West Indian Gazette*, June 11, 1963; Interview with Paul Stephenson, January 17, 2008.
12. “People’s Tribune,” *Guardian* (February 27, 1964), p. 9.
13. Stephenson and Morrison, *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*, pp. 82–85.
14. “Night Behind Bars: Students Get Praise of Mrs. M. Evers,” *Afro-American*, April 25, 1964.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Dresser, *Black and White on the Buses*, pp. 28–33.
17. Ruth Jenkins, “Finds British Segregation Far More Subtle,” *Afro-American*, October 24, 1964.
18. Simon Hall, “Civil Rights Activism in 1960s Virginia,” *Journal of Black Studies* 38:2 (November 2007): 251–267.
19. “Jobs Demonstrators sit awhile with City Council” *Afro-American*, August 17, 1963; “More Jobs Wanted: 100 Demonstrate at City Hall” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 7, 1963, clippings in *Papers of the NAACP*, Part 27, Series A, Reel 17, Schomburg Center.
20. Ruth Jenkins, “Finds British Segregation Far More Subtle,” *Afro-American*, October 24, 1964.
21. Interview with Paul Stephenson, January 17, 2008.

22. Ibid.
23. Stephenson and Morrison, *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*; Tuck, “Malcolm X’s Visit to Oxford University,” pp. 91–95.
24. Stephenson and Morrison, *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*.
25. Interview with Paul Stephenson, January 17, 2008.
26. “‘Bristol Can’t Be Complacent about Race Issues’: 50 Years on from the Bristol Bus Boycott” *Bristol Post*, April 15, 2013 (<http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Bristol-t-complacent-race-issues-50-years-Bristol/story-18710356-detail/story.html>)