Rosa Parks Biography

Rosa Louise McCauley Parks (1913 – 2005) was an African American civil rights activist and seamstress whom the U.S. Congress dubbed the “Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement”.

Parks is famous for her refusal on December 1, 1955 to obey bus driver James Blake’s demand that she relinquish her seat to a white man. Her subsequent arrest and trial for this act of civil disobedience triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation in history, and launched Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the organizers of the boycott, to the forefront of the civil rights movement. Her role in American history earned her an iconic status in American culture, and her actions have left an enduring legacy for civil rights movements around the world.

Early life Rosa Parks

Rosa Louise McCauley was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, on February 4, 1913. Her ancestors included both Irish-Scottish lineage and also a great grandmother who was a slave. She attended local rural schools and after the age of 11 the Industrial School for Girls in Montgomery. However, she later had to opt out of school to look after her grandmother.

As a child, Rosa became aware of the segregation which was deeply embedded in Alabama. She experienced deep rooted racism, and became aware of the different opportunities faced by white and black children. She also recalls seeing a Klu Klux Klan march go past her house – where her father stood outside with a shotgun. Due to the Jim Crow laws, most black voters were effectively disenfranchised.

In 1932, she married Raymond Parks, a barber from Montgomery. He was active in the NAACP and Rosa Parks became a supporter helping with fund-raising and other initiatives. She attended meetings defending the rights of black people and seeking to prevent injustice.

Montgomery Bus Boycott

After a day at work at Montgomery Fair department store, Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus at around 6 p.m., Thursday, December 1, 1955, in downtown Montgomery. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of back seats reserved for blacks in the “colored” section, which was near the middle of the bus and directly behind the ten seats reserved for white passengers. Initially, she had not noticed that the bus driver was the same man, James F. Blake, who had left her in the rain in 1943. As the bus traveled along its regular route, all of the white-only seats in the bus filled up. The bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded.
In 1900, Montgomery had passed a city ordinance for the purpose of segregating passengers by race. Conductors were given the power to assign seats to accomplish that purpose; however, no passengers would be required to move or give up their seat and stand if the bus was crowded and no other seats were available. Over time and by custom, however, Montgomery bus drivers had adopted the practice of requiring black riders to move whenever there were no white only seats left.

So, following standard practice, bus driver Blake noted that the front of the bus was filled with white passengers and there were two or three men standing, and thus moved the “colored” section sign behind Parks and demanded that four black people give up their seats in the middle section so that the white passengers could sit. Years later, in recalling the events of the day, Parks said, “When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night.”

By Parks’ account, Blake said, “Y’all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” Three of them complied. Parks said, “The driver wanted us to stand up, the four of us. We didn’t move at the beginning, but he says, ‘Let me have these seats.’ And the other three people moved, but I didn’t.” The black man sitting next to her gave up his seat. Parks moved, but toward the window seat; she did not get up to move to the newly repositioned colored section. Blake then said, “Why don’t you stand up?” Parks responded, “I don’t think I should have to stand up.” Blake called the police to arrest Parks. When recalling the incident for Eyes on the Prize, a 1987 public television series on the Civil Rights Movement, Parks said, “When he saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up, and I said, ‘No, I’m not.’ And he said, ‘Well, if you don’t stand up, I’m going to have to call the police and have you arrested.’ I said, ‘You may do that.’”
During a 1956 radio interview with Sydney Rogers in West Oakland several months after her arrest, when asked why she had decided not to vacate her bus seat, Parks said, “I would have to know for once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen of Montgomery, Alabama.”

She also detailed her motivation in her autobiography, My Story

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in. ”

When Parks refused to give up her seat, a police officer arrested her. As the officer took her away, she recalled that she asked, “Why do you push us around?” The officer’s response as she remembered it was, “I don’t know, but the law’s the law, and you’re under arrest.” She later said, “I only knew that, as I was being arrested, that it was the very last time that I would ever ride in humiliation of this kind.”

Parks was charged with a violation of Chapter 6, Section 11 segregation law of the Montgomery City code, even though she technically had not taken up a white-only seat—she had been in a colored section. E.D. Nixon and Clifford Durr bailed Parks out of jail the evening of December 1.

That evening, Nixon conferred with Alabama State College professor Jo Ann Robinson about Parks’ case. Robinson, a member of the Women’s Political Council (WPC), stayed up all night mimeographing over 35,000 handbills announcing a bus boycott. The Women’s Political Council was the first group to officially endorse the boycott.

On Sunday, December 4, 1955, plans for the Montgomery Bus Boycott were announced at black churches in the area, and a front-page article in The Montgomery Advertiser helped spread the word. At a church rally that night, attendees unanimously agreed to continue the boycott until they were treated with the level of courtesy they expected, until black drivers were hired, and until seating in the middle of the bus was handled on a first-come basis.

Four days later, Parks was tried on charges of disorderly conduct and violating a local ordinance. The trial lasted 30 minutes. Parks was found guilty and fined $10, plus $4 in court costs. Parks appealed her conviction and formally challenged the legality of racial segregation. In a 1992 interview with National Public Radio’s Lynn Neary, Parks recalled:

“ I did not want to be mistreated, I did not want to be deprived of a seat that I had paid for. It was just time… there was opportunity for me to take a stand to express the way I felt about being treated in that manner. I had not planned to get arrested. I had plenty to do without having to end up in jail. But when I had to face that decision, I didn’t hesitate to do so because I felt that we had endured that too long. The more we gave in, the more we complied with that kind of treatment, the more oppressive it became. ”
On Monday, December 5, 1955, after the success of the one-day boycott, a group of 16 to 18 people gathered at the Mt. Zion AME Zion Church to discuss boycott strategies. The group agreed that a new organization was needed to lead the boycott effort if it were to continue. Rev. Ralph David Abernathy suggested the name “Montgomery Improvement Association” (MIA). The name was adopted, and the MIA was formed. Its members elected as their president a relative newcomer to Montgomery, a young and mostly unknown minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

That Monday night, 50 leaders of the African American community gathered to discuss the proper actions to be taken in response to Parks’ arrest. E.D. Nixon said, “My God, look what segregation has put in my hands!” Parks was the ideal plaintiff for a test case against city and state segregation laws. While the 15-year-old Claudette Colvin, unwed and pregnant, had been deemed unacceptable to be the center of a civil rights mobilization, King stated that, “Mrs. Parks, on the other hand, was regarded as one of the finest citizens of Montgomery—not one of the finest Negro citizens, but one of the finest citizens of Montgomery.” Parks was securely married and employed, possessed a quiet and dignified demeanour, and was politically savvy.

The day of Parks’ trial — Monday, December 5, 1955 — the WPC distributed the 35,000 leaflets. The handbill read, “We are...asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial... You can afford to stay out of school for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don’t ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off the buses Monday.”

Rosa parks on a bus (Dec 1956) after the segregation law was lifted.

It rained that day, but the black community persevered in their boycott. Some rode in carpools, while others traveled in black-operated cabs that charged the same fare as the bus, 10 cents. Most of the remainder of the 40,000 black commuters walked, some as far as 20 miles. In the end, the boycott lasted for 382 days. Dozens of public buses stood idle for months, severely damaging the bus transit company’s finances, until the law requiring segregation on public buses was lifted.

Some segregationists retaliated with terrorism. Black churches were burned or dynamited. Martin Luther King’s home was bombed in the early morning hours of January 30, 1956, and
E.D. Nixon’s home was also attacked. However, the black community’s bus boycott marked one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation. It sparked many other protests, and it catapulted King to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.

Through her role in sparking the boycott, Rosa Parks played an important part in internationalizing the awareness of the plight of African Americans and the civil rights struggle. King wrote in his 1958 book Stride Toward Freedom that Parks’ arrest was the precipitating factor, rather than the cause, of the protest: “The cause lay deep in the record of similar injustices…. Actually, no one can understand the action of Mrs. Parks unless he realizes that eventually the cup of endurance runs over, and the human personality cries out, ‘I can take it no longer.’”

The Montgomery bus boycott was also the inspiration for the bus boycott in the township of Alexandria, Eastern Cape of South Africa which was one of the key events in the radicalization of the black majority of that country under the leadership of the African National Congress.

**Rosa Parks after boycott**

After the boycott, Rosa Parks became an icon and leading spokesperson of the civil rights movement in US. Immediately after the boycott, she lost her job in a department store. For many years she worked as a seamstress.

In 1965, she was hired by African-American U.S. Representative John Conyers. She worked as his secretary until her retirement in 1988. Conyers remarked of Rosa Parks.

“You treated her with deference because she was so quiet, so serene — just a very special person [CNN,2004]