



Rosa Parks (1913-2005)

Summary:

By refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus in 1955, black seamstress Rosa Parks (1913—2005) helped initiate the civil rights movement in the United States. The leaders of the local black community organized a bus boycott that began the day Parks was convicted of violating the segregation laws. Led by a young Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the boycott lasted more than a year—during which Parks lost her job—and ended only when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional. Over the next half-century, Parks became a nationally recognized symbol in the struggle to end racial segregation.

Early Life and Activist Beginnings:

- Rosa Louise McCauley was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, on February 4, 1913. She moved with her parents, James and Leona McCauley, to Pine Level, Alabama, at age 2 to reside with Leona's parents.
 - Rosa Parks' grandparents, Rose and Sylvester Edwards, were both former slaves and strong advocates for racial equality.
 - One of Rosa Parks' earliest experiences with racial prejudice was watching her grandfather stand outside of the family house with a shotgun while Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members marched down the street.
- She had brother named Sylvester who was born in 1915. Shortly after his birth, her parents separated.
- Rosa's mother Leona was a teacher, and she placed a high value on education—particularly the education of her two children.
 - Rosa attended a segregated, one-room school. African-American students had to walk to school and often didn't have desks while white students had a school bus system and preferential treatment for school supplies.
- Rosa moved to Montgomery, Alabama, at age 11.
 - In 1929, while in the 11th grade at a laboratory school for secondary education led by the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes, Rosa left school to attend to both her sick grandmother and mother.
 - She never returned to her studies, but instead, she got a job at a shirt factory in Montgomery.
- In 1932, at age 19, Rosa met and married Raymond Parks, 10 years her senior, a barber and an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). With Raymond's support, Rosa earned her high school degree in 1933.
 - Raymond and Rosa, who eventually became a seamstress, were both respected members of Montgomery's large African-American community.
- Although Raymond had previously discouraged her out of fear for her safety, she soon became actively involved in civil rights issues herself by joining the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP in 1943, serving as the chapter's youth leader as well as secretary to NAACP President E.D. Nixon—a post she held until 1957.

Rosa Parks' Arrest on Dec. 1, 1955

- Segregation was law; the front of a Montgomery bus was reserved for white citizens, and the seats behind them for black citizens. However, there was a custom that bus drivers had the authority to ask a black person to give up a seat for a white rider.

- There were contradictory Montgomery laws on the books: One said segregation must be enforced, but another, largely ignored, said no person could be asked to give up a seat even if there were no other seat on the bus available.
- **On Thursday, December 1, 1955, the 42-year-old Rosa Parks was commuting home from a long day of work at the Montgomery Fair department store by bus.**
 - Black residents of Montgomery often tried to avoid municipal buses because they found the “Negroes-in-back” policy to be demeaning. Nonetheless, 70 percent or more riders on a typical day were black, and on this day Rosa Parks was one of them.
- **At one point on Rosa’s bus trip home, a white man had no seat because all the seats in the designated “white” section were taken. So the driver told the riders in the four seats of the first row of the “colored” section to stand, adding another row to the “white” section. The three others obeyed, and Rosa did not.**
 - The driver demanded, “Why don't you stand up?” to which Rosa replied, “I don't think I should have to stand up.” The driver called the police and had her arrested. She was taken to police headquarters, where, later that night, she was released on bail.

The Bus Boycott

- The Montgomery chapter of the NAACP formed a plan to organize a boycott of Montgomery's city buses. Ads were placed in local papers, and 35,000 pamphlets were printed and distributed in black neighbourhoods. Members of the African-American community were asked to stay off city buses on Monday, December 5, 1955—the day of Rosa's trial—in protest of her arrest.
- On the morning of Rosa’s trial, a group of leaders from the African-American community gathered to discuss strategies, and determined that their boycott effort required a new organization and strong leadership.
 - They formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, electing Montgomery newcomer Dr. Martin Luther King Jr—26 years old, as its president. The MIA believed that Rosa Parks' case was an excellent opportunity to take further action to create real change.
- As appeals and related lawsuits slowly went through the courts, all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court, the boycott generated anger in much of Montgomery’s white population as well as some violence, and Nixon’s and Dr. King’s homes were bombed.
 - The violence didn’t deter the boycotters or their leaders, and the drama in Montgomery continued to gain attention from the national and international press.
 - On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional; the boycott ended December 20, a day after the Court’s written order arrived in Montgomery. Parks—who had lost her job and experienced harassment all year—became known as “the mother of the civil rights movement.”

Later Life

- Facing continued harassment and threats in the wake of the boycott, Parks, along with her husband and mother, eventually decided to move to Detroit, where Parks’ brother resided. Parks became an administrative aide in the Detroit office of a local Congressman. In 1965, a post she held until her 1988 retirement. Her husband, brother and mother all died of cancer between 1977 and 1979.
- In 1987, she co-founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, to serve Detroit’s youth.
- In the years following her retirement, she traveled to lend her support to civil-rights events and causes and wrote an autobiography, “Rosa Parks: My Story.” In 1999, Parks was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor the United States bestows on a civilian.

Famous Quotes

- “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired,” wrote Parks in her autobiography, “but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”
- “I have learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.”