

Rosa Parks: The Small Refusal that Sparked a Monumental Controversy

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“Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice,” Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) stated in his “I Have a Dream” speech. A woman who had known about segregation since she was just a little girl had always wanted to end the inequality and she strongly believed in what Dr. King preached. Her name was Rosa Parks. She didn’t want blacks to be treated differently than whites. People of color have not always had the same rights as white people have had. In the early to mid 1900’s, segregation prevented people from attending the same social places. There were separate churches, separate schools, and children of color had to walk to school every day. Parks strongly believed that it was the blacks’ constitutional rights to have the same privileges as the whites did at the time (Interview with Isom). She made an endeavor for equality, and did not stand for injustices. Parks strived to see equality for all, and took it upon herself to stand up for herself during a time of hardship. The arrest of Rosa Parks, a result of a black woman taking a public stand against a white bus driver named James Blake, sparked a controversial compromise resulting in the desegregation of city buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

Slavery was a common way of life for many people who lived in the 13 U.S. colonies during the 1600’s. Slavery first began in America in 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia. It led to one of the deadliest wars in American history: the Civil War. The Union’s (North) victory in 1865 freed nearly four million slaves (Slavery in America). Even though slaves were considered to be free, they did not immediately gain equal rights to the whites. The blacks still faced discrimination and racism. They were often the targets of lynching and other acts of violence. The black citizens desired the same rights as the whites, but were deprived of this equality, as stated in *A Journey to Freedom: Rosa Parks* by L.S. Summer.

One of the most prominent ways that the blacks were discriminated against was in their voting rights. In 1867, the 15th amendment was ratified. Section one of the 15th amendment states, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The blacks had the right to vote. However, they were often threatened when they tried to register in the South. At other times, when they actually did register, they were simply turned away. Blacks were also sometimes required to pay poll taxes in order to vote. The poll taxes proved to be a problem because many African Americans were poor and could not afford to pay the price of the tax. The blacks, even though they had the right, found it difficult and too expensive to cast their votes (Parks and Haskins 71-72).

Nearly a century later, there was still much discrimination against the black people in the U.S. Another way that the blacks were segregated from the whites was in riding public transportation vehicles. Blacks were required to pay their fare in the front of the vehicle, but were then expected to exit the bus, walk to the rear set of doors, and enter there, as they were not allowed to sit in the front 10 seats. On a day in 1943, after Rosa Parks had been turned away to vote, she boarded a city bus. After paying her fare, Parks realized that the bus was overly crowded that day. She could see that there were so many blacks standing in the back section of the bus that they were blocking the rear doors. She decided there was no reason for her to exit the bus, walk to the back doors, and struggle to get back on the bus. Mrs. Parks ultimately decided to simply walk down the aisle. The bus driver noticed her doing so, and ordered her to get off of the bus and to reenter through the back doors. She explained that she was already on the bus and saw no reason for her to exit. The driver threatened to call the police. Mrs. Parks knew that the bus driver was carrying a

gun under his jacket so she complied. She was harassed and did nothing to stand up for herself. This was just the beginning of Parks' rebellious actions (Summer 13-15).

In 1943, Rosa and Raymond Parks joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP is an organization that ensures the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights for different racial groups. Rosa Parks knew that segregation was not fair and that it should not be happening in the world (Rosa Parks and Haskins 120). Parks believed that by joining the NAACP she would better be able to help establish equality for blacks.

About four months before Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, she attended a workshop at Highlander Folk School. The workshop was called "Racial Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision." The workshop taught the attendees that they should try to end segregation in a nonviolent way, and that they should not resort to violence when trying to influence the court's decision on ending segregation (Highlander Folk School). The workshop helped attendees to strategize so that they could end segregation of many public places, but mostly to end the segregation of schools. While at the workshop, Parks did not feel threatened in any way. She stated, "One of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people" (Durham).

Her strong beliefs in the NAACP and her desire for equal rights led to to an event in early December of 1955, in which Parks was arrested for not cooperating with a bus driver. In Montgomery, Alabama, the public transportation buses were divided into three sections. The first ten seats on the bus were permanently reserved for the whites, the back ten seats were permanently

reserved for the blacks, and the seats in between were available to any passenger (See Appendix I) (Summer 15-16).

On December 1, 1955, Parks sat in the first row immediately behind the “white” section. James Blake, the bus driver, looked back and saw that a white man was standing due to overcrowding on the bus. Blake went back and told Parks, along with three other blacks in the row, to move to the rear of the bus. The three others in the row immediately complied. Blake then asked Parks if she was going to move. She calmly and firmly replied, “No.” Blake called the police. The officers who were immediately dispatched to the bus asked Parks if the bus driver had told her to move. Parks simply answered, “Yes.” She then asked them why they, the policemen, pushed around blacks. One of them answered, “I don’t know, but the law is the law and you are under arrest” (See Appendix II) (Interview with Parks). The events on this day in December led to Parks’ arrest in Montgomery, Alabama.

After her arrest, Parks was convinced that she should initiate legal proceedings. After being released from her jail cell she met with her attorney, Edgar Nixon. Mr. Nixon asked Parks if she would be willing to make her case a test case against segregation. After a long discussion, Parks agreed and became the plaintiff in her case (Parks and Haskins 121-126). Parks’ trial was one of the first legal measures taken against segregation.

The events that followed the arrest of Rosa Parks resulted in masses of groups and activists taking a stand against segregation. After activist, Jo Ann Robinson, and other leaders of the Women’s Political Council had heard of Rosa Parks’ arrest, they agreed to start a boycott of the city buses starting on December 5, the day of Parks’ trial. To spread the word of the boycott, they handed out handbills and letters to Montgomery citizens (Parks and Haskins 126-132). It was the

actions of activists like Robinson that made an impact on the advancement of desegregation (See Appendix III).

The trial involving Rosa Parks was a stepping stone to hearing her case in the U.S. Supreme Court. Rosa Parks was found guilty at her initial trial. Nixon had hoped that Parks would be found guilty because, only in cases where the plaintiff was found guilty, could they appeal the conviction to a higher court. That same day, Dr. King was elected President of the NAACP. Dr. King and others held a NAACP meeting at the Holy Street Baptist Church in Montgomery. The church was overflowing with blacks waiting to hear the NAACP's plan regarding the boycott. The main objective of the meeting was to decide whether the bus boycott should continue, and to discuss what demands they were going to present to the bus company and to the city's white leaders (Parks and Haskins 132-150). The demands, according to Parks, were: "1) Courteous treatment on the buses; 2) First-come, first-served seating, with whites in front and blacks in back; 3) Hiring of black drivers for the bus routes." Dr. King then asked for those in agreement of continuing the bus boycott and presenting the demands to the bus company to please stand. The people at the meeting started standing one at a time and in small groups. Soon everyone in the church and those who had gathered outside were all standing and cheering (Parks and Haskins 143). On the day that Rosa Parks was found guilty, huge advancements had been made in the journey to freedom for blacks. Parks' case took its first step in being eligible to be tried at the Supreme Court and Dr. King took on the role of being a major spokesperson for desegregation as he became a new leader of the NAACP.

During the bus boycott, the lives of many were negatively impacted. People were arrested and many lost their jobs. Jobs were lost because in support of the boycott, many refused to ride the buses and had no means of transportation to their place of employment. As a solution, the churches

participating in the boycott collected money and bought station wagons to help transport citizens. Others used their own vehicles to help with transportation. About 30,000 people were transported daily with the help of those supporting the boycott. While some people were not able to be transported by the station wagons or private vehicles, their employers transported them because they simply could not afford to operate their businesses without their employees (Parks and Haskins 144-145). Despite the negative consequences of the boycott to some, people worked together to make it through the hardships they faced.

In early, February 1956, an attorney named Fred Gray filed a suit with the U.S. District Court claiming that bus segregation was unconstitutional. By that time, the appeal of Rosa Parks' case had been denied by the courts. Mr. Gray wanted to challenge the entire system of segregation on buses and ultimately be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. Meanwhile, in Montgomery, Alabama, the bus company had ceased running its buses due to the financial impact that that boycott inflicted on it (Parks and Haskins 147-148). The case of Browder vs. Gayle was the case that ended bus segregation. This case was eventually appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The ruling of the Supreme Court took months to be decided. On November 13, 1956 the U.S. Supreme court had ruled in the Blacks' favor by declaring that segregation on the Montgomery buses was unconstitutional. On December 20, 1956, Montgomery, Alabama received a written order from the U.S. Supreme Court ending the bus boycott. By the 21st of December, black citizens returned to the buses. The Montgomery Bus Boycott had lasted more than a year (Parks and Haskins 157). Even though Parks' case was not heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, as she hoped it would be, and it did not significantly impact the desegregation of the Montgomery buses, it initiated others, like Fred Gray, to take a stand on desegregation.

The cases of Parks and Browder vs. Gayle helped to launch the Civil Rights Movement. Soon after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, other boycotts started popping up all over the United States that demanded better treatment for the blacks. In February of 1960, a group of African-American students started the “sit-in”. They sat at racially segregated lunch counters, and when asked to leave, they stayed subjecting themselves to verbal and sometimes physical abuse. The movement of the “sit-in” quickly spread to several other cities. In April of 1960, Dr. King and others met with activists who were leading “sit-ins”. Dr. King advised them to nonviolently continue with their protests. By the end of August in 1960, segregated lunch counters in 27 southern cities had become desegregated (Martin Luther King Jr.). Lunch counter “sit-ins” proved to be a successful means of protest that aided in the advancement of desegregation.

After the Civil Rights Act had been signed in 1964, many changes began to take place. In the South, the violence and racial injustices against blacks began to decline. After the Civil Rights Act had been signed, two other major acts were written; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited prerequisite voting literacy tests and other discriminatory voting practices. On April 11, 1968, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which banned discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of property based on race, religion, national origin, and sex was signed (Civil Rights Act). Following the Fair Housing Act, in 1988 the Congress passed the Fair Housing Amendments Act. This act extended the law to stop discrimination in housing based on disability or family status, including pregnant women or children under the age of eighteen (Fair Housing Act). These acts were yet another means to halt discrimination of blacks and other races.

By the late 1960's still more advancements were being made in eliminating racial discrimination. Black candidates began to be elected into political offices (Civil Rights Movement). In 1969, Douglas L. Wilder became the first African American to win a seat in the Virginia Senate. In 1973, Tom Bradley was elected as the mayor of Los Angeles, making him the first African American elected in a major American city. In the year of 1984, a black man named Jesse Jackson ran for President of the U.S and received white votes (Parks and Haskins 186). In 1989, continuing Douglas Wilder's political career, he became the first African American to be elected governor in the U.S. (Douglas Wilder). The first African Americans elected into public positions helped pave the way for other black citizens to be nominated and elected into offices, again closing the gap of racial discrimination between blacks and whites.

Even though Rosa Parks' efforts did not attain desegregation at all public places, her conflict with James Blake sparked a movement that led to a compromise resulting in desegregation of buses in the South. Segregation in the United States has changed considerably throughout the last few decades. Black citizens are now able to run for office, vote without being harassed, and are given equal rights when in public places. These changes occurred because a small lady with a strong will said, "No." Her name was Rosa Parks. Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus because she was tired. She said, "People always said 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" (Parks and Haskins 116). When Rosa Parks boarded the bus that day, she had not intended to start one of the greatest social movements of our nation. "At the time I was arrested I had no idea it would turn into this. It was just a day like any other day.

The only thing that made it significant was that the masses of the people joined in,” Parks said. It is because of this seemingly small conflict that a great compromise was made, changing the lives of those that lived and dealt with social injustices. Had Rosa Parks not said a simple two letter word on December 1, 1955, the United States might not be the same country it is today.

Appendix I

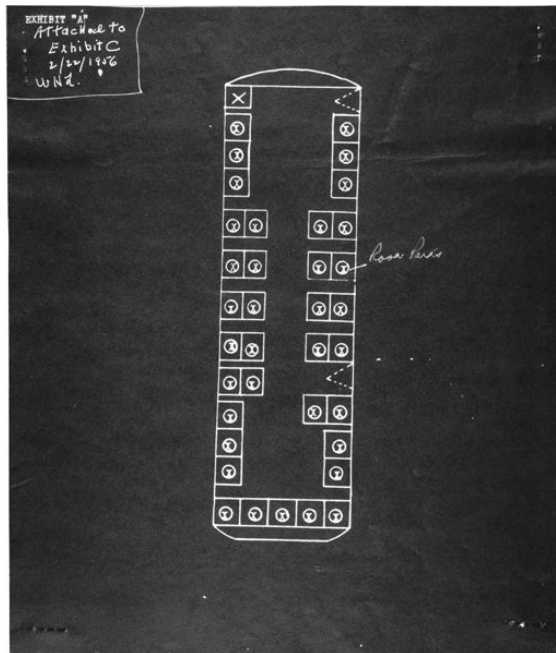


Illustration of Bus Where Rosa Parks Sat, December 1, 1955. 1 Dec. 1955. National Archives, www.archives.gov.

Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

The middle seats of the bus could be occupied on a first-come, first-served basis unless there was not a row that had no black citizens sitting in it. In that case, the white citizens got priority to the row over the blacks. The blacks then either had to stand or move to the back of the bus. Black citizens were required to enter the bus via the door closest to the driver, pay their fare, and then exit and reenter through the rear door. This proved to be a problem on overcrowded buses as the rear door was often blocked by blacks who had no seat. Even though the rear door was often blocked, blacks usually were able to push their way onto the bus which led to more overcrowding.

Appendix II

POLICE DEPARTMENT		MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA	
Date of Arrest	12-1-55	Arrested by	Day + Micon
Charges	Resisting the obeying order of bus driver Chapter 6 Sec. 11 of City Code	Residence	63 + Cleveland Court Montgomery
Disposition	#10 + case (app)	Place of Birth	Lurkege Ala.
Nationality	Negro	Date of Birth	Feb. 4 1913
Age	42	Height	5' Feet 3 Inches
Complexion	Black	Weight	140
Build	Med.	Eyes	Brown
Scars and Marks	None	Hair	Black
Employed by	Montgomery Fair	Occupation	altuation ship
Relatives	Husband, R. A. Parks 63 + Cleveland Court		
Remarks:			
Case No.	41464		

Police Report Against Rosa Parks. 1 Dec. 1955. National Archives, www.archives.gov. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

When Rosa Parks was brought to the Montgomery City Hall after being arrested she asked for a drink of water. Parks was standing right next to a water fountain, yet she was denied the right of having some water. The policemen told Parks that she was going to have to wait until they reached the jail before she could get. Just a few minutes later she asked the policemen if she could make a phone call. They again denied her the right of making the call. During the time of her arrest, Parks faced some discriminatory actions against her, yet she did not let it bother her. She knew that she had to take a stand against discrimination.

Appendix III

This is for Monday, December 5, 1955

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.

It is the second time since the Claudette Colbert case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped.

Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother.

This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.

You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus.

You can also afford to stay out of town 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 of all buses ~~Monday~~.

Don't Ride the Bus Leaflet. 2 Dec. 1955. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom,

kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

Jo Ann Robinson and some others created 35,000 handbills asking blacks to not ride the city buses on December 5, 1955. Robinson and some of her students, after loading the handbills into her car, drove to all of the elementary, junior, and high schools that had a black enrollment. The handbills were sent home with the students and handed out to blacks walking down the streets. Their mission was accomplished when, on the day of Rosa Parks' trial, the buses in Montgomery, Alabama were practically empty.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Don't Ride the Bus Leaflet. 2 Dec. 1955. *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom*,
kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

Jo Ann Robinson and some others created 35,000 handbills asking blacks to not ride the city buses on December 5, 1955. Robinson and some of her students, after loading the handbills into her car, drove to all of the elementary, junior, and high schools that had a black enrollment. The handbills were sent home with the students and handed out to blacks walking down the streets. Their mission was accomplished when, on the day of Rosa Parks' trial, the buses in Montgomery, Alabama were practically empty.

Durham, Frank. "Ethos in Action: Public Relations at the Highlander Folk School, 1955-1956."
Aug. 1993.

This report written by Frank Durham really helped me to understand the workshop that Rosa Parks attended. I really learned about what the workshop did for those attending it and how it helped them to discover how to desegregate public places.

Illustration of Bus Where Rosa Parks Sat, December 1, 1955. 1 Dec. 1955. *National Archives*,
www.archives.gov. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

The middle seats of the bus could be occupied on a first-come, first-served basis unless there was not a row that had no black citizens sitting in it. In that case, the white citizens got priority to the row over the blacks. The blacks then either had to stand or move to the back of the bus. Black citizens were required to enter the bus via the door closest to

the driver, pay their fare, and then exit and reenter through the rear door. This proved to be a problem on overcrowded buses as the rear door was often blocked by blacks who had no seat. Even though the rear door was often blocked, blacks usually were able to push their way onto the bus which led to more overcrowding.

Isom, Hattie Louise. Interview. 29 Dec. 2017.

The interview that I had with Isom really helped me to better understand what blacks went through back in the early to mid-1900's. I learned that they were often the targets of bombings and lynching. Isom told me that she faced much segregation when she was younger. Many of the public places that she attended were segregated whether it was a church or a doctor's office.

Parks, Rosa. "Standing up for Freedom." *Achievement*, 23 June 2017, www.achievement.org.

Accessed 30 Nov. 2017. Interview.

This interview with Rosa Parks really helped me to understand what she went through on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

Parks, Rosa, and Jim Haskins. *Rosa Parks: My Story*. Dial Books, 1992.

This book gave me a lot of first-hand account information. It gave me a lot of information for my background section and for my what happened afterward section.

Police Report Against Rosa Parks. 1 Dec. 1955. *National Archives*, www.archives.gov. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

When Rosa Parks was brought to the Montgomery City Hall after being arrested she asked for a drink of water. Parks was standing right next to a water fountain, yet she was denied the right of having some water. The policemen told Parks that she was going to have to wait until they reached the jail before she could get. Just a few minutes later she asked the

policemen if she could make a phone call. They again denied her the right of making the call. During the time of her arrest, Parks faced some discriminatory actions against her, yet she did not let it bother her. She knew that she had to take a stand against discrimination.

US Constitution. Amendment XV, sec. 1. Amended 1870. *Legal Information Institute*, Cornell University, www.law.cornell.edu. Accessed 8 Jan. 2018.

Section one of the 15 Amendment told me that citizens of the United States are not allowed to be denied the rights because of their race, sex, gender, etc.

Secondary Sources

“Civil Rights Act.” *History*, A+E Networks, 2010, www.history.com. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

This article gave me information about both the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

“Civil Rights Movement.” *History*, A+E Networks, 2009, www.history.com. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

This article really helped me to write the section in my paper that was about what happened after Rosa Parks said “No” and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

“Douglas Wilder.” *Biography*, A+E Television Networks, 14 Feb. 2016, www.biography.com. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

This article gave me information regarding Douglas Wilder who was one of the first black men to successfully be voted into office.

“Fair Housing Act.” *History*, A+E Networks, 2010, www.history.com. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

This article helped me to better understand what the Fair Housing Act is and what it does to protect others.

“Highlander Folk School.” *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle*, Stanford University, kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

This website really helped me to understand what those at the workshop of racial desegregation learned and had to do. They were told that they should try to appeal the U.S. Supreme court in a nonviolent way. They were taught to not say anything offensive or to fight with those that they were trying to persuade to end segregation.

“Martin Luther King Jr.” *Biography*, A+E Television Networks, 29 June 2017.

This article gave me several facts about the “sit-in” at a segregated lunch counter.

“Slavery in America.” *History*, A+E Networks, 2009, www.history.com. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

This website gave me some information on slavery before the Civil War. It gave me information that really helped with the background section of my paper.

Summer, L. S. *Journey to Freedom: Rosa Parks*. The Child’s World, 2009.

This book gave me a lot of information about segregation before Rosa Parks said “No” and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It also gave me some information on slavery after the Civil War ended.