

Rosa Parks

<http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2007-Li-Pr/Parks-Rosa.html>

Born Rosa Louise McCauley, February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, AL; died of natural causes, October 24, 2005, in Detroit, MI. Civil rights activist. Rosa Parks was best known for her act of civil disobedience in December of 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest led to a Supreme Court decision that segregation on such forms of public transportation was illegal, sparking the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Parks was regarded as a hero and spent the whole of her life as a face of the movement. Upon her death Rev. Jesse Jackson told E.R. Shipp of the *New York Times* , "She sat down in order that we might stand up. Paradoxically, her imprisonment opened the doors for our long journey to freedom."

Parks was the first of two children born to James and Leona (Edwards) McCauley. Her parents were farmers who held other jobs as well. Her father worked as a carpenter while her mother was also a teacher. An ill child, Parks' parents separated when she was young and her mother raised her and her brother on her maternal grandparents' farm in Pine Level, Alabama. Parks received her early education at a blacks-only one-room schoolhouse where classes were only held for five months a year so that students could work the fields. Violence against African Americans, including lynchings and burnings, was a part of her life, as the Ku Klux Klan was active in the area.

An aunt lived in Montgomery, Alabama, where Parks began attending schools at the age of eleven. Though she attended Miss White's School for Girls in Montgomery as well as the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, Parks' education at the Alabama State Teachers College was cut short when she left school at 16 to take care of her ailing grandmother. To help support her family, she learned how to type and took in sewing.

In 1932, Parks married Raymond Parks, a barber, who was active in the Civil Rights movement. Parks became politically active as well. She was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was serving as the

secretary of the chapter in Montgomery, Alabama, by 1943. As a member of the Montgomery Voters' League, Parks also helped blacks pass the tests needed for them to register to vote. It took her three attempts to pass the test herself.

By the mid-1950s, Parks was working as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair department store and as a housekeeper for a white couple, Clifford and Virginia Durr. The 1955 incident which pushed the Civil Rights movement forward was born of Parks' own fatigue from the racial segregation she faced in daily life in Alabama using black-only elevators, water fountains, and schools. It also showed the power of non-violent action and made her a national figure. Parks was chosen to be a symbol for the cause because she was a model citizen in Montgomery.

After refusing to give up her seat on that December day coming home from work, Parks was taken into custody and fined \$14. She was eventually convicted of violating segregation laws, but did not accept the situation. With the guidance of civil rights lawyers, she helped challenge the laws which allowed such segregation. The incident sparked a 13-month boycott of the buses in Montgomery by African Americans organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Improvement Association. In 1956, the Supreme Court declared this type of segregation illegal.

While Parks' arrest and the subsequent case were of importance nationally and historically, the incident and its aftermath had a negative affect on her immediate life. She was dismissed from her job, received threats, and was hassled as were many who supported the bus boycott and the Civil Rights movement. Her health was also negatively affected. In addition, Parks had some disagreements with leaders of the movement in Montgomery including King. In 1957, she and her husband left Alabama and moved first to Virginia and later to Detroit, Michigan, with Parks' mother.

In Detroit, Parks supported herself again first by doing sewing in her home for a number of years. In 1965, Parks was hired by John Conyers, a Detroit-area Congressman, to be his aide, a position she held until 1988. As Parks became regarded as an important, inspirational figure in the civil rights movement, she used her position to raise funds for the NAACP and continue to push for greater racial equality.

In 1987, Parks co-founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. The group sponsored several programs to educate about the Civil Rights Movement. Despite her fame, she still suffered. In 1994, she was mugged by a 28-year-old man for \$53 in her own home. Despite such setbacks, Parks received many honors for her life, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996 and the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1999.

By 2002, Parks was suffering from dementia and faced some financial difficulties. Parks could not pay her rent and relied on a local church to cover the costs for a time. Such problems did not change her importance. Conyers told Patricia Sullivan of the *Washington Post* upon Parks' death, "There are very few people who can say their actions and conduct changed the face of the nation, and Rosa Parks is one of those individuals." Parks died on October 24, 2005, at the age of 92. As her husband died in 1977 and the marriage was childless, she has no survivors in her immediate family.

Sources:

CNN. com, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/10/25/parks.obit/index.html> (October 25, 2005); *Economist* (U.S.), October 29, 2005, p. 90; *Independent* (London), October 26, 2005, p. 36; *New York Times* , October 25, 2005, p. A1; *People* , November 7, 2005, pp. 72-74; *Washington Post* , October 25, 2005, p. A1.

Read more: [Rosa Parks Biography - life, family, children, parents, death, school, mother, young - Newsmakers Cumulation](#)
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Sitting Down

On Thursday evening December 1, 1955, after a long day of work as a seamstress for a Montgomery, Alabama, department store, Rosa Parks boards a city bus to go home.

Tired as she is, Mrs. Parks walks past the first few — mostly empty — rows of seats marked "Whites Only." It's against the law for an African American like her to sit in these seats. She finally settles for a spot in the middle of the bus. Black people are allowed to sit in this section as long as no white person is standing. Though Rosa Parks hates the [segregation](#) laws, and has been fighting for civil rights at the [NAACP](#) for more than 10 years, until today she has never been one to break rules.



The bus continues along its route. After several more stops the bus is full. The driver notices that all the seats in the "Whites Only" section are now taken, and that more white people have just climbed aboard. He orders the people in Mrs. Parks's row to move to the back of the bus, where there are no open seats. No one budes at first. But when the driver barks at the black passengers a second time, they all get up . . . except for Rosa Parks.

Arrested

Rosa Parks has finally had enough of being treated as a second-class citizen. As an African American, she has put up with terrible treatment on city buses, as well as in stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places for years. She is tired of it. In fact, she remembers that twelve years earlier this very same bus driver made her get off the bus and enter through the rear



door.

When the driver continues shouting at her to move, Rosa Parks decides that she is not going to take it anymore. She simply says no, and refuses to get up from her seat.

The angry bus driver puts on the emergency brake, gets out of his seat and marches over to Mrs. Parks. He demands that she move to the back of the bus. When she doesn't, he leaves the bus and returns with a policeman. Mrs. Parks is promptly arrested for violating segregation laws.

Upon hearing of Rosa Parks's arrest, Mr. E.D. Nixon, a friend and longtime civil rights leader, posts her bail. Nixon believes that the Montgomery African-American community must respond. Although Rosa Parks is not the first African American to be treated unfairly, he is determined to try and make her the last.

Boycott

The next day, Friday, December 2, E.D. Nixon calls a meeting of black leaders to discuss how to fight bus segregation.

Knowing that the city bus system depends heavily on the African-American community, the black leaders agree to call a [boycott](#) of all city buses on Monday,

December 5. A new and popular minister in Montgomery by the name of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) is chosen to lead the boycott. By Friday evening the news of the upcoming boycott has spread throughout the city.



On Monday morning, December 5, King and the other leaders wait nervously at a bus stop to see whether their plan will work. To their relief and surprise, bus after bus rolls by with no African Americans aboard. United in protest, boycotters choose instead to walk, take carpools, pedal bicycles, and even ride mules to get to work instead of board the buses.

That same day Rosa Parks goes to court with her lawyer. The judge finds her guilty of breaking a city segregation law and fines her \$14. Declaring that the law is unjust, Rosa Parks's lawyer says he will [appeal](#) the case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dr. King's Speech

Inspired by the boycott's success, thousands of people gather in a Montgomery church on the evening of December 5 to listen to their new leader, Dr. King.

In a spellbinding speech, King explains why the boycott must continue. "There comes a time," he says, "that people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us for so long, that we are tired, tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression." But above all, King asks that the protesters fight without violence. In response, the crowd rise to their feet. Thunderous applause fills the air.



Leaving the church that night, the people are as determined as ever to keep the boycott going. They have three simple demands:

1. Change the law that says African-American passengers must give up their seats to white passengers.
2. Bus drivers must be courteous to all riders.
3. Hire African-American bus drivers.

Though the demands are modest, city commissioners and the bus company still refuse to budge. Instead of weakening the boycotters' determination, the city's refusal only pushes the protesters to demand an end to bus segregation altogether.

The Boycott Is Working

The bus boycott continues. Slowly but surely the bus company begins to lose money — 75 percent of its riders are black and all have joined the boycott. Nevertheless, the company doesn't change its segregation policies. Executives are convinced that the protesters — who are mostly poor and supporting large families — can't afford to miss work and will be back on the buses soon.



To their surprise and dismay, as days turn into weeks, Montgomery's African Americans adjust to finding other means of transportation.

Eventually the bus company is forced to cut back on the number of buses serving the city. It also raises the price of a ride from ten to

fifteen cents. Because the protesters are now shopping closer to home, the white owners of downtown shops are starting to lose money. Angry and frustrated, some of the white people of Montgomery begin to **harass** and threaten anyone involved with the boycott. The protesters stay calm, resist using violence, and continue to follow the guidance of their leader, Dr. King. They will fight this battle using nonviolent **tactics** no matter how much they are **provoked**.

Nonviolence

Harassment grows worse as the boycott continues. Protesters receive threatening phone calls and tickets for **trivial** violations; their homes are vandalized.

The violence reaches new heights when one day, while Dr. King is at a church meeting, a bomb explodes at his home. His wife, Coretta Scott King, their two-month-old baby, Yolanda, and a friend are inside. Dr. King rushes home as soon as he hears the news. Upon arriving he learns that no one has been hurt. But supporters are crowding around his house. They are furious and ready to fight. King tells them not to fight. "We cannot solve this problem with **retaliatory** violence," King tells the crowd calmly. "We must meet violence with nonviolence."



Supreme Court Ruling

The bombing not only fails to stop the protesters, but it unites them and makes them stronger. Finally, almost one year after Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat, the Supreme Court rules — on November 13, 1956 — that Montgomery's segregation laws are **unconstitutional**.



Although the boycott wouldn't have been successful without the unified effort of Montgomery's 17,000 African Americans, no one will forget Rosa Parks, the brave woman who led the way.

The very next day, Rosa Parks, along with E.D. Nixon and Martin Luther King, Jr., board a city bus. Proudly, Rosa Parks takes a seat right up front.

Interview with Rosa Parks

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/rosa/interview.htm>

Rosa Parks, the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement," visited the Scholastic Web site from January to February 1997. During this monthlong project, students learned how Mrs. Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott by not giving up her bus seat to a white passenger. One year later, as a result of her brave act, the Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses was illegal.



Below are Rosa Parks's answers to questions from students.

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Life Before Civil Rights

How do you feel about the way black Americans used to be treated?

I always felt badly because our people were not treated fairly. We should have been free and given the same opportunities others had.

How did it feel not to have civil rights?

Of course it felt like we should all be free people and we should have the same rights as other people. In the South, at that time, there was legally enforced segregation. There were places black people couldn't go, and rights we did not have. This was not acceptable to me. A lot of other people didn't disobey the rules because they didn't want to get into trouble. I was willing to get arrested — it was worth the consequences.

When you were little, did you understand that black people weren't treated fairly?

When I was a young child I couldn't understand why black people weren't treated fairly. But when I did learn about it, I didn't feel very good about it.

How do you feel about the people who treated you so unfairly?

I don't think well of people who are prejudiced against people because of race. The only way for prejudiced people to change is for them to decide for themselves that all human beings should be treated fairly. We can't force them to think that way.

Were you allowed to learn to read when you were little?

Well, yes. I was born 50 years after slavery, in 1913. I was allowed to read. My mother, who was a teacher, taught me when I was a very young child.

The first school I attended was a small building that went from first to sixth grade. There was one teacher for all of the students. There could be anywhere from 50 to 60 students of all different ages. From 5 or 6 years old to in their teens. We went to school five months out of the year. The rest of the time young people would be available to work on the farm. The parents had to buy whatever the student used. Often, if your family couldn't afford it, you had no access to books, pencils, whatever. However, often the children would share. I liked to read all sorts of stories, like fairy tales — Little Red Riding Hood, Mother Goose. I read very often.

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Rosa Parks' Role in Civil Rights

What made you decide on December 1, 1955, not to get up from your seat?

That particular day that I decided was not the first time I had trouble with that particular driver. He evicted me before, because I would not go around to the back door after I was already onto the bus. The evening that I boarded the bus, and noticed that he was the same driver, I decided to get on anyway. I did not sit at the very front of the bus; I took a seat with a man who was next to the window -- the first seat that was allowed for "colored" people to sit in. We were not disturbed until we reached the third stop after I boarded the bus. At this point a few white people boarded the bus, and one white man was left standing. When the driver noticed him standing, he spoke to us (the man and two women across the aisle) and told us to let the man have the seat. The other three all stood up. But the driver saw me still sitting there. He said would I stand up, and I said, "No, I will not." Then he said, "I'll have you arrested." And I told him he could do that. So he didn't move the bus any further. Several black people left the bus.

Two policemen got on the bus in a couple of minutes. The driver told the police that I would not stand up. The policeman walked down and asked me why I didn't stand up, and I said I didn't think I should stand up. "Why do you push us around?" I asked him. And he said, "I don't know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest." As soon as he said that I stood up, the three of us left the bus together.

One of them picked up my purse, the other picked up my shopping bag. And we left the bus together. It was the first time I'd had that particular thing happen. I was determined that I let it be known that I did not want to be treated in this manner. The policemen had their squad car waiting, they gave me my purse and bag, and they opened the back door of the police car for me to enter.

Did you think your actions would have such a far-reaching effect on the Civil Rights movement?

I didn't have any idea just what my actions would bring about. At the time I was arrested I didn't know how the community would react. I was glad that they did take the action that they did by staying off the bus.

What was it like walking all those miles when the bus boycott was going on?

We were fortunate enough to have a carpool organized to pick people up and give them rides. Of course, many people walked and sometimes I did too. I was willing to walk rather than go back to the buses under those unfair conditions.

Very shortly after the boycott began, I was dismissed from my job as a seamstress at a department store. I worked at home doing sewing and typing. I don't know why I was dismissed from the job, but I think it was because I was arrested.

What did your family think about what happened?

After I was in jail I had the opportunity to call home and speak to my mother. The first thing she asked me was if they had attacked me, beat me. That's what they used to do to people. I said no, that I hadn't been hurt, but I was in jail. She gave the phone to my husband and he said he would be there shortly and would get me out of jail.

There was a man who had come to my house who knew I had been arrested. He told my husband he'd give him a ride to the jail. Meantime, Mr. E.D. Nixon, one of the leaders of the NAACP, had heard about my being arrested from a friend of mine. He called to see if I was at the jail. The people at the jail wouldn't tell him I was there. So Mr. Nixon got in touch with a white lawyer named Clifford Durr. Mr. Durr called the jail, and they told him that I was there. Mr. Nixon had to pick up Mr. Durr before he could come get me. Mr. Durr's wife insisted on going too, because she and I were good friends. Mr. Nixon helped release me from jail.

Were you scared to do such a brave thing?

No, actually I had no fear at that particular time. I was very determined to let it be known how it felt to be treated in that manner — discriminated against. I was thinking mostly about how inconvenienced I was — stopping me from going home and doing my work — something I had not expected. When I did realize, I faced it, and it was quite a challenge to be arrested. I did not really know what would happen. I didn't feel especially frightened. I felt more annoyed than frightened.

Did you know that you were going to jail if you didn't give up your seat?

Well, I knew I was going to jail when the driver said he was going to have me arrested. I didn't feel good about going to jail, but I was willing to go to let it be known that under this type of segregation, black people had endured too much for too long.

How did you feel when you were asked to give up your seat?

I didn't feel very good about being told to stand up and not have a seat. I felt I had a right to stay where I was. That was why I told the driver I was not going to stand. I believed that he would arrest me. I did it

because I wanted this particular driver to know that we were being treated unfairly as individuals and as a people.

What were your feelings when you were able to sit in the front of the bus for the first time?

I was glad that the type of treatment — legally enforced segregation — on the buses was over...had come to an end. It was something rather special. However, when I knew the boycott was over, and that we didn't have to be mistreated on the bus anymore, that was a much better feeling than I had when we were being mistreated.

How do you feel about being called the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement"?

I accept the title quite well. I appreciate the fact that people feel that way about me. I don't know who started calling me that.

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Civil Rights Today

What one lesson would you like to leave with students?

I always encourage children to stay in school, get good grades, and to believe in themselves. Of course they should take care of their health and keep themselves from certain things that would be detrimental to them either physically or mentally. They should be sure to get the best education that they can and choose careers that they can be progressive in as they go into their adulthood. In our Pathways to Freedom Institute and our Institute for Self Development, we take young people on trips and give them opportunities to meet many civil rights leaders. We teach them to be good citizens and do what they can do to help other people as they become successful themselves. I urge children to have a spiritual awareness in their lives. If children work towards a positive goal in life, it will help them be successful when they become adults.

What do you think still needs to be done in regards to civil rights?

People need to free their minds of racial prejudice and believe in equality for all and freedom regardless of race. We need much more education — especially those who are narrow-minded. We need as much financial security as we can get. I think it would be a good thing if all people were treated equally and justly and not be discriminated against because of race or religion or anything that makes them different from others.

Do you think the relationships between the different races are where they should be today?

There is still as much racism among some people. It still exists, but we are not under the legally enforced segregation that we used to be. There are still people who are prejudiced because of race. The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute accepts people of any race. We don't discriminate against anyone. We teach people to reach their highest potential. I set examples by the way I lead my life.

What is your life like now? Are you still fighting for civil rights?

I am still a supporter of civil and human rights. I attend programs and I participate in the organization that I developed, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. Raymond Parks is my late husband. He was interested in civil rights himself.

Are there still people who treat you unfairly?

Yes. In 1994 a man entered my home and beat and robbed me. I was badly hurt and felt sad. It wasn't racial. He just broke into my house. He was on drugs and alcohol. He was arrested and is serving a sentence. I was not the only person he robbed and attacked. He robbed and mistreated older people and women. I recovered from the attack and went on with what I have to do.

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Other Questions

Have you ever faced something that you thought you couldn't stand up to?

I can't think of anything. Usually, if I have to face something, I do so no matter what the consequences might be. I never had any desire to give up. I did not feel that giving up would be a way to become a free person. That's the way I still feel. By standing up to something we still don't always affect change right away. Even when we are brave and have courage, change still doesn't come about for a long time.

Would you have continued school if you didn't have to take care of your mom and grandmom?

Yes. My grandmother was ill and I had to stop school to look after her. After she died my mother became ill and I did have to stay out of school. I finished high school after I was married and living in the city.

Did you ever see the Ku Klux Klan?

No, I never saw the Klansmen. But I did know that they had gone through the community and mistreated people and drove them from their homes. I saw the results of what had happened. I do remember a young man who was found lying dead in the woods and nobody saw who had done it.

How did you feel when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed?

It was a very devastating feeling. I felt very badly that he had been assassinated. I grieved very much about his death.