

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

Learn about Rosa Parks's courageous decision to fight discrimination and the boycott that ended segregation on public buses.

Overview

- On December 1, 1955, **Rosa Parks**, a black seamstress, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to give up her bus seat so that white passengers could sit in it.
- Rosa Parks's arrest sparked the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, during which the black citizens of Montgomery refused to ride the city's buses in protest over the bus system's policy of racial segregation. It was the first mass-action of the modern civil rights era, and served as an inspiration to other civil rights activists across the nation.
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, a Baptist minister who endorsed nonviolent civil disobedience, emerged as leader of the Boycott.
- Following a November 1956 ruling by the Supreme Court that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional, the bus boycott ended successfully. It had lasted 381 days.

Rosa Parks's Arrest



Figure 1: Rosa Parks, the 42 year old secretary of the Montgomery, Alabama NAACP, provided the inspiration for the Montgomery Bus Boycott with her 1955 arrest for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to accommodate white passengers. Image courtesy Wikimedia

Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama for failing to give up her bus seat—so that it would be available for white passengers—when instructed to do so by the bus's driver.

Parks was arrested at a time in American history when, under [Jim Crow](#) laws, African Americans faced discrimination and segregation across the South. Jim Crow bus laws in Montgomery at the time of Parks' arrest established a section for whites at the front of the bus, and a section for blacks in the back. The law required that when the white section filled, black passengers in the "colored section" give up their seats and move further back.

Parks, on her way home from her job as a seamstress in a downtown department store, was sitting in the first row of seats in the bus's "colored" section. As the white section filled, the driver announced that black passengers in the "colored" section's front row were to give up their seats. But Parks refused to do so. She was arrested and fined ten dollars.

Rosa Parks was forty-two years old, married, regularly attended church, and worked as a seamstress in a downtown department store. She had also been active in her local chapter of the NAACP for more than a decade. Four days before her arrest she had attended a large meeting at which the August 1955 murder of [Emmett Till](#) had been discussed by a member of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. She later recounted that Emmett Till was on her mind the evening of her arrest.

Origins of the Bus Boycott

E.D. Nixon, head of the Alabama NAACP, and Jo Ann Robinson, head of the local Women's Political Council, had been looking for means by which to challenge the treatment of African Americans in Montgomery for some time. As a model citizen and woman of unimpeachable conduct, Parks was an ideal candidate for a public campaign. After Parks's arrest, they decided to call for a boycott of the city's buses.

Nixon held meetings with members from the community in area churches. Robinson and members of her Council worked tirelessly to produce some fifty-thousand leaflets which were distributed that Sunday at the city's black churches. The leaflets read, "Don't ride the bus to work, town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. . . . Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7:00 P.M. at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instruction."

Martin Luther King, Jr., a little-known, twenty-six year old Baptist minister with a doctorate from Boston University, led the boycott. During the boycott he began his rise to national and international prominence in the US [Civil Rights Movement](#). Drawing on his study of nonviolent civil disobedience in the teachings of Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi, King delivered a message of nonviolent protest against racial injustice in eloquent, powerful sermons and speeches. On the boycott's first day, speaking before a crowd of more than 5,000 black citizens, he said:

"There comes a time when people get tired.... tired of being segregated and humiliated.... If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love...historians will have to pause and say 'there lived a great people—a black people—who injected a new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility."

The Boycott Succeeds

African American men, women, and children stopped taking the bus, and instead carpooled or walked to their destinations. Most bus riders had been African American, and with the precipitous decline in ridership, bus company revenues collapsed. The boycott became major news as the nation's television networks, newspapers, and major news magazines covered it.

The leaders of the boycott brought suit, demanding the end of segregation on public buses in Montgomery. The suit took months to make its way through the judicial system, but by mid-November 1956 the US Supreme Court—basing its decision on the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law—ruled that segregated public buses were unconstitutional. The boycott was a success. Many of the elements in the Montgomery Bus Boycott—organization, community solidarity, nonviolence, and the intervention of the federal government—proved to be the groundwork on which the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s would be based.

What Do You Think?

1. Why did the boycott succeed? Were the actions of both the citizens of Montgomery as well as those of the US Supreme Court necessary for its success?
2. How do you think people around the world who looked to the United States as a beacon of freedom might have felt and thought when they read about the boycott and the laws and practices that led to it?
3. What do you think led Rosa Parks to decide to take a stand against discrimination and segregation?