
Civil Rights Activist Rosa Parks

Civil rights activist Rosa Parks (February 4, 1913 to October 24, 2005) refused to give her seat to a white passenger on a Alabama bus, which spurred on the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott that helped launch nationwide efforts to end segregation of public facilities. The city of Montgomery had no choice but to lift the law requiring segregation on public buses. Rosa Parks received many accolades during her lifetime, including the NAACP's highest award.

On December 1, 1955, after a long day's work at a Montgomery department store, where she worked as a seamstress, Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus for home. She took a seat in the first of several rows designated for "colored" passengers. The Montgomery City Code required that all public transportation be segregated and that bus drivers had the "powers of a police officer of the city while in actual charge of any bus for the purposes of carrying out the provisions" of the code. While operating a bus, drivers were required to provide separate but equal accommodations for white and black passengers by assigning seats. This was accomplished with a line roughly in the middle of the bus separating white passengers in the front of the bus and African-American passengers in the back. When an African-American passenger boarded the bus, they had to get on at the front to pay their fare and then get off and re-board the bus at the back door.

As the bus Rosa was riding continued on its route, it began to fill with white passengers. Eventually, the bus was full and the driver noticed that several white passengers were standing in the aisle. The driver of Rosa's bus stopped the bus and moved the sign separating the two sections back one row, asking four black passengers to give up their seats. The city's bus ordinance didn't specifically give drivers the authority to demand a passenger to give up a seat to anyone, regardless of color. However, Montgomery bus drivers had adopted the custom of moving back the sign separating black and white passengers and, if necessary, asking black passengers give up their seats to white passengers. If the black passenger protested, the bus driver had the authority to refuse service and could call the police to have them removed.

Three of the other black passengers on Rosa's bus complied with the driver, but Rosa refused and remained seated. 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. Later, Rosa recalled that her refusal wasn't because she was physically tired, but that she was tired of giving in.

The police arrested Rosa at the scene and charged her with violation of Chapter 6, Section 11, of the Montgomery City Code. She was taken to police headquarters, where, later that night,

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she was released on bail.

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