

Parks, Rosa (4 Feb. 1913-24 Oct. 2005), civil rights activist, was born Rosa McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama, the daughter of James McCauley, a carpenter and stonemason, and Leona Edwards, a schoolteacher. Leona McCauley was a widely respected woman in her community. James McCauley was a native of Abbeville, Alabama. Two years after Rosa's birth, Leona McCauley separated from her husband and returned to her hometown of Pine Level, Alabama. Rosa would see her father just once more before she reached adulthood. From her mother, Rosa learned the value of self-respect, self-love, and honorable behavior toward others. Religion was also at the center of Rosa's world. Soon after her baptism at age two, Rosa became a lifelong member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She found much comfort and perspective in biblical study and prayer.

Young Rosa received her early education in a rural schoolhouse in Pine Level. Later, at the strong urging of her mother, she attended Montgomery Industrial School for Girls and subsequently completed the tenth and eleventh grades at Alabama State Teachers' College for Negroes.

At the end of 1932 nineteen-year-old Rosa married the self-educated Raymond Parks. With his encouragement, Rosa finally earned her high school diploma. An avid reader, Raymond Parks exposed Rosa to civil rights activism as early as 1931, when he began organizing a legal defense fund for the Scottsboro boys, nine young African American males accused of raping two white women on a freight train. Rosa Parks attended some of these meetings with her husband.

Parks worked a number of jobs. She was a nurse's assistant, a secretary on a military base, and a private seamstress for whites. Her experience on the military base stood out in her memory. Racial segregation was forbidden on federal property and within federal institutions. Parks noted the contrast each day as she rode home on the segregated city bus. Like other black riders, she often experienced humiliation and disgust at Jim Crow segregation in transportation and in other areas of southern life.

In December 1943, at the urging of an old friend, Parks joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She became secretary of the chapter at her first meeting and soon began work on a voter registration drive and plans to desegregate transportation. One important duty involved traveling around Alabama and interviewing citizens about their experiences with racial discrimination. Also significant to her early activism was her work on behalf of Recy Taylor, a 24-year-old black woman kidnapped and raped by 6 white men in Abbeville. Parks was instrumental in organizing the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. Parks's reputation around the state grew in direct proportion to her concentrated efforts. By 1947 she was a well-known civil rights figure throughout Alabama.

In the late 1940s Parks joined in organized discussions about segregated transportation. By 1955 the time was ripe for an organized challenge to Jim Crow in Montgomery. Parks and other activists were inspired in part by the successful 1953 Baton Rouge boycott and by *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, the landmark case that ruled segregation in education to be unconstitutional.

On 1 December 1955, after a long day's work, Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus for a trip home. She paid her ten-cent fare and sat down in an empty section often referred to as "no-man's land." The first ten rows of the bus were reserved for whites, and the last ten rows were designated for "colored" passengers. Parks took a seat in the middle section open to blacks as long as whites had available seats in their section. When Parks sat down, she noticed several empty spaces in the whites-only section. However, the white section filled quickly after the next two stops. After a third stop, a white man was standing without a seat. Custom and law required that Parks and three other black passengers seated in no-man's land move to the rear of the bus. The driver James F. Blake stopped the bus, approached the four black passengers, and asked that they move. Parks refused. Blake called the police, who came and arrested Parks.

Black Montgomery responded in two ways: the best legal minds prepared to challenge the constitutionality of segregation, and the grassroots activists, clergy, educators, and everyday folk planned for a boycott of the buses. Both succeeded. Blacks organized alternative transportation pools and an elaborate communication system to replace public transportation. Many blacks simply walked. At the center of this effort was Parks as both a symbol and an important strategist. Indeed she had a hands-on role in keeping the boycott going. She worked as a dispatcher for the alternative transportation system and distributed food and clothing to boycott participants who lost their jobs. Blacks stayed off the buses for 381 days, as the boycott became the most celebrated event of the era.

In June 1956 activists won a victory in federal district court when a three-judge panel ruled that intrastate bus segregation was unconstitutional. In November and December 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court responded to appeals by affirming the district court's original ruling. Parks and her community were victorious.

Parks and her husband endured many reprisals in response to their involvement, not the least of which was losing their jobs. Neither was employable after the boycott. By August 1957 Parks had left Montgomery for Detroit.

On settling in her new city, Parks continued her activism, including participation in the 1963 march on Washington and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march, events closely identified with the legacy of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) Parks focused on local politics as well. In 1964 she worked on the campaign of John Conyers, Democratic candidate for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. She continued working on his staff from 1965 until 1988. Her husband died in 1977. In 1987 she cofounded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development to inspire and guide youth to lead socially responsible lives.

Throughout the 1990s Parks gave numerous lectures and made countless public appearances. The nation responded by honoring the woman that history would remember as the "mother of the civil rights movement." In 1996 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and in 1999 she was honored with the Congressional Gold Medal. Parks died in her Detroit home. For nearly a week the nation paid glowing tribute to Parks. She became the first woman and only the second African American to lie in honor in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C.

Bibliography

The Rosa L. Parks Papers are in the Walter Reuther Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit. Unique and engaging self-portraits are Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992), and Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation* (1994). A biographical overview is Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (2000). Historical accounts of the work of Parks and other women in the movement are in first-person accounts by close friends and movement colleagues, including Johnnie Carr, *Johnnie: The Life of Johnnie Rebecca Carr* (1995); Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle* (1985); and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, ed. David J. Garrow (1989), a colorful and richly detailed story by an activist and educator. Online resources include Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development (<http://www.rosaparks.org>).

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