



Resources

Holocaust Unit

Action - Resource E

Rosa Parks

Civil rights activist Rosa Parks was born on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her refusal to surrender her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama bus spurred a city-wide boycott. 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

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. When the seats in the front of the bus filled up and more white passengers got on, the bus driver would move back the sign separating black and white passengers and, if necessary, ask black passengers give up their seat.

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. Though the city's bus ordinance did give drivers the authority to assign seats, it didn't specifically give them 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 requiring black passengers to give up their seats to white passengers, when no other seats were available. If the black passenger protested, the bus driver had the authority to refuse service and could call the police to have them removed.

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. He stopped the bus and moved the sign separating the two sections back one row and asked four black passengers to give up their seats. Three complied, 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, she was released on bail.

On the evening that Rosa Parks was arrested, E.D. Nixon, head of the local chapter of the NAACP, began forming plans to organize a boycott of Montgomery's city buses. Ads were placed in local papers, and handbills were printed and distributed in black neighborhoods. Members of the African-American community were asked to stay off city buses on Monday, December 5, 1955—the day of Rosa's trial—in protest of her arrest. People were encouraged to stay home from work or school, take a cab or walk to work. With most of the African-American community not riding the bus, organizers believed a longer boycott might be successful.

On the morning of December 5, a group of leaders from the African-American community gathered at the Mt. Zion Church in Montgomery to discuss strategies, and determined that their boycott effort required a new organization and strong leadership. They formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, electing Montgomery newcomer Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

The MIA believed that Rosa Parks's case provided an excellent opportunity to take further action to create real change.

When Rosa arrived at the courthouse for trial that morning with her attorney, Fred Gray, she was greeted by a bustling crowd of around 500 local supporters, who rooted her on. Following a 30-minute hearing, Rosa was found guilty of violating a local ordinance and was fined \$10, as well as a \$4 court fee. Inarguably the biggest event of the day, however,

was what Rosa's trial had triggered. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, as it came to be known, was a huge success. The city's buses were, by and large, empty. Some people carpooled and others rode in African-American-operated cabs, but most of the estimated 40,000 African-American commuters living in the city at the time had opted to walk to work that day—some as far as 20 miles.

Due to the size and scope of, and loyalty to, boycott participation, the effort continued for several months. The city Montgomery had become a victorious eyesore, with dozens of public buses sitting idle, ultimately severely crippling finances for its transit company. With the boycott's progress, however, came strong resistance. Some segregationists retaliated

with violence. Black churches were burned, and both Martin Luther King Jr.'s and E.D. Nixon's homes were destroyed by bombings. Still, further attempts were made to end the boycott. The insurance was canceled for the city taxi system that was used by African Americans. Black citizens were arrested for violating an antiquated law prohibiting boycotts.

In response to the ensuing events, members of the African-American community took legal action. Armed with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which stated that separate but equal policies had no place in public education, a black legal team took the issue of segregation on public transit systems to the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, Northern (Montgomery) Division; Rosa's attorney, Fred Gray, filed the suit. In June 1956, the district court declared racial segregation laws (also known as "Jim Crow laws") unconstitutional. The city of Montgomery appealed the court's decision shortly thereafter, but on November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling.

Source: <http://www.biography.com/people/rosa-parks-9433715>

