

# Rosa Parks stood up for her rights — but you may not know all the facts

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.03.16

Word Count **761**



Rosa Parks (right) sits in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956 after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation illegal on the city's bus system. Behind her is Nicholas C. Chriss, a reporter covering the event. Library of Congress via Wikimedia Commons

Rosa Parks was a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store in Montgomery, Alabama. On a cool evening 60 years ago, 42-year-old Parks left work to go home. She walked along Montgomery Street to board the Cleveland Avenue bus.

Around 6 p.m., Parks got on bus No. 2857. She was about to change the course of the 20th century.

Here are five myths about what happened that first evening of December 1955.

1. Rosa Parks sat in the whites-only section of the bus.

Montgomery buses had 36 seats. The first 10 were for whites only. The last 10 seats were supposed to be for blacks only and the middle 16 seats were first-come, first-served. The bus driver could rearrange seats so that whites could be given first choice.

## **Sitting Where City Law Allowed**

Parks was sitting in an aisle seat in the front row of this middle section.

2. If Rosa Parks had not moved, a white passenger would not have had a place to sit.

Several white passengers boarded and driver James E. Blake noticed a white man standing near the front. He asked the four black passengers in Parks' row to move to the back. When they did not respond, Blake got out of his seat and yelled, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of the black passengers got up and stood in the back of the bus. Parks, however, refused to get up. She moved to the window seat, which would have allowed for the white passenger to sit in any of the three seats in her row.

The bus driver asked: "Are you going to stand up?" Parks responded with a quiet but firm "No." She explained that she had gotten on board first. She had paid the same fare, and she was not sitting in the white section.

## **She Got On And Paid First**

She did not think it was fair that she had to stand for someone else to sit who arrived after her. She said she was not breaking the city law.

"I'm going to have you arrested," Blake said. "You may do that," Parks said.

Blake called the police. Officers F.B. Day and D.W. Mixon arrested Parks and held her in a dank and airless cell.

Parks' boss and friend, E.D. Nixon, bailed her out that evening. He was the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group fighting for black people to be treated fairly.

## **History With Difficult Bus Driver**

3. This was Rosa Parks' first conflict with that bus driver.

If Parks had been paying attention, she never would have gotten on the bus driven by the tall, blond, 43-year-old Blake. He was known for insulting blacks, especially black women. A dozen years earlier, Blake had tried to make Parks exit and re-enter his bus through the crowded rear door after she had already boarded his bus in the front. Parks refused, so Blake grabbed her sleeve to push her off the bus. For the next 12 years Parks had avoided riding on Blake's bus on purpose, but on Dec. 1, 1955, she got on the bus without thinking. It proved to be a mistake that landed her in the history books.

4. Rosa Parks refused to stand up because she was tired.

Parks sought to set the record straight: "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically. ... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." She later said she couldn't have lived with herself if she had given in and stood up.

### **Following A Younger Woman's Example**

5. Rosa Parks was the first black woman to exercise civil disobedience on a Montgomery bus.

Nearly nine months before Rosa Parks' famous arrest, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested on a Montgomery bus. She too refused to yield her seat to a white passenger. Parks served as an activist and secretary with the Montgomery NAACP. The group sought to challenge Jim Crow laws whenever they could, and Colvin's actions inspired Parks. When a Christian woman of Parks' position and modesty was unjustly treated, the leaders, including a 26-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., saw an opportunity and made their move.

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of injustice, King said.

Sixty years ago, Rosa Parks determined that there did indeed come a time. And the rest, as they say, is history.