

# History Resources

## Ten Ways to Teach Rosa Parks

by Jeanne Theoharis and Say Burgin

*Adapted and reprinted with permission from The Nation [Issue of December 1, 2015]*

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Her courageous action galvanized a yearlong community boycott and helped usher in a new chapter of the black freedom struggle. It is now one of the most well-known stories of the civil rights movement—imparted to school children across the United States. Yet much of what students are taught, and much of what most Americans think they know, about Parks’s stand is wrong. To correct the misconceptions, here are ten ways to teach Rosa Parks:



Rosa Parks, ca. 1956 (Library of Congress)

1. **Rosa Parks wasn’t meek. She had a “life history of being rebellious,” as she put it.** As a child, she stayed up with her grandfather while he

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT

dangerous organizing work—both with her husband, Raymond, in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, and with E. D. Nixon, a Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organizer who then became president of Montgomery's NAACP, in seeking justice for lynching, rape, and assault victims. She hated how “a militant Negro was almost a freak of nature to [white people], many times ridiculed by others of his own group.”

2. **Nor was she passive or quiet in key moments.** The summer before her arrest, Parks had grown tired of meetings between the black community and city officials about bus segregation that led nowhere: “We would be given some vague promises and given the run-around.” She refused to go to another meeting: “I had decided I wouldn't go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors.” That December evening, when the police boarded the bus to arrest her and asked why she didn't move, she wasn't quiet. She spoke back, “Why do you push us around?”
3. **She wasn't the first to be arrested on a Montgomery bus.** A number of black Montgomeries had resisted segregation on Montgomery's buses. When Viola White did in 1944, she was beaten and fined \$10; her case was still in appeals when she passed away ten years later. In 1950, police shot and killed Hilliard Brooks, a World War II veteran, when he boarded the bus after having a few drinks and refused to reboard the bus from the back door—and the police were called. Witnesses rebutted the officer's claims that he acted in self-defense, but he wasn't prosecuted. Emboldened by the 1954 *Brown* ruling, the Women's Political Council had written Montgomery's mayor that there needed to be change on Montgomery's buses or the community would boycott. Then on March 2, 1955, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to relinquish her bus seat. Police arrested Colvin and charged her on three counts. The black community was outraged and initially mounted some resistance (Parks served as a fundraiser for Colvin's case) but ultimately decided against a full-blown campaign on Colvin's behalf, seeing her as too young, feisty, and emotional. (Despite popular belief, Colvin was not pregnant at the time the community decided not to pursue her case but got pregnant later in the summer.) The impact of these incidents accumulated—and Montgomery's black community was at a breaking point by December 1955.
4. **This wasn't her first act of bus resistance.** Montgomery's segregated buses mandated black riders at the back, whites in the front, and a middle section in which both black and white passengers could sit (though not together)—and black people could be asked to move for white passengers. Bus drivers carried a gun. Some Montgomery bus drivers would make black people pay in the front, but then force them to get off the bus, and re-board through the back door (so they didn't even walk by white passengers). Parks had been kicked off the bus a number of times for refusing to abide by this practice, including by the very driver, James Blake, who would have her arrested on that December evening. “Over the years I have been rebelling against second-class citizenship. It didn't begin

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT

5. **It wasn't just about a seat on the bus.** When Blake told her to give up her seat, Parks thought of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy who had been lynched in Mississippi in August, and the recent acquittal of the two men, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, who had killed him. Four days earlier, she'd attended a packed mass meeting where the lead organizer in the Till case had come to bring the bad news of the acquittal and the need to keep fighting. She thought about the many years she'd been fighting for criminal justice for black men wrongfully accused of crimes and for black women who could find no justice after being raped. She later wrote that when the bus driver said he would have her arrested, she mused, "Let us look at Jim Crow for the criminal he is and what he had done to one life multiplied millions of times over these United States." It was not about a seat next to a white person: "I have never been what you would call just an integrationist. I know I've been called that. . . . Integrating that bus wouldn't mean more equality. Even when there was segregation there was plenty of integration in the South, but it was for the benefit and convenience of the white person, not us." Her aim was "to discontinue all forms of oppression." Hearing of Parks's arrest and her decision to pursue her case, the Women's Political Council called for a one-day boycott the day Parks was to be arraigned in court. Buoyed by the success of that first day, the community at a mass meeting that night decided to extend the boycott. A young Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a galvanizing speech and would emerge as the movement's leader. A separate federal court case was filed, with Colvin as one of the plaintiffs (Parks was not). Three hundred and eighty-two days later, Montgomery's buses were desegregated.
6. **She spent more than half her life in the North.** Eight months after the boycott's successful end, still unable to find work and facing death threats, she moved with her husband and mother to Detroit, where she lived for nearly five decades. She called it "the promised land that wasn't." She didn't find "too much difference" between the systems of housing and school segregation, job exclusion, and policing from Montgomery to Detroit—so she set about to challenge the racial inequality of the North, alongside a growing Black Power movement. She attended the 1968 Black Power conference in Philadelphia and the 1972 Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, visited the Black Panther School, and served on many prisoner defense committees from the Wilmington Ten to JoAnn Little to Gary Tyler. "I'm in favor of any move to show that we are dissatisfied," she explained.
7. **Her courage wasn't just a one-day thing. And she loved the spirit and militancy of young people.** In the 1950s, Parks organized the Youth Council of the Montgomery NAACP, encouraged its members to make a strong stance against segregation, and following Colvin's arrest, made Colvin secretary. Parks asked Colvin to tell her story over and over to inspire others. Parks believed in youth leadership, and young people's need to be heard and treated with dignity. So while she was deeply distraught by the Detroit uprising of July 1967—a turbulent four days

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT

the energy and spirit of a new generation of Black Power activists, seeing Black Power carrying forward many of the issues she had been fighting for over decades. When young radicals organized a People's Tribunal around the police killings of three young black men at the Algiers Motel during the Detroit uprising (after no police were indicted and the media refused to investigate), she agreed to serve on the jury. When the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee helped build an independent black political party with local residents in Lowndes County, Alabama, that took the black panther as its symbol, Parks journeyed down to support them. And in 1980, she was delighted to visit the Black Panther school in Oakland; students and teachers prepared a play in her honor and talked about her visit for weeks after.

8. **Rosa Parks was not a political carbon copy of MLK.**

When the Montgomery bus boycott began, Rosa Parks was forty-two, a seasoned activist, while Martin Luther King was twenty-six, a new minister pastoring his first church. Parks grew up in a family that supported Marcus Garvey, began




---

Rosa Parks (left) with Septima Clark at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, December 1956 (Library of Congress)

---

her adult political life with the Scottsboro Boys' defense alongside her husband, Raymond, and spent the next decade with E. D. Nixon pushing to turn the Montgomery NAACP into a more activist chapter. Mentored by legendary organizer Ella Baker, she was inspired by the political visions of Highlander Folk School leaders Septima Clark and Myles Horton, when she attended the adult organizer training school the summer before her arrest. Throughout her life, she believed in the power of organized nonviolence and the moral right of self-defense and described Malcolm X as her personal hero. She and Malcolm X met for the first time in November 1963 because he, awed by her courage, put out the word among mutual friends that he wanted to meet her.

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT

economic instability and deep poverty; both lost their jobs following her bus stand and had difficulty finding steady work for the next decade. In 1965, newly elected Congressman John Conyers hired her to work in his Detroit office. This stabilized the family's situation and provided needed health insurance, but they never were able to afford to own a home. Parks was a woman of deep Christian faith, but to her, Christianity required justice and action in this world. "Faith without works is dead," she wrote. To the end of her life, she believed there was much more work to be done in the struggle for racial and social justice, telling a group of Spelman students, "Don't give up and don't say the movement is dead."

10. **And those famous pictures of her being fingerprinted and her "7053" mugshot . . . well, they're not actually from her first arrest.** There was no fanfare—or photographers—around Parks's initial bus arrest. There was nothing to suggest this would be a history-changing moment. While unsure if she would "get off the bus alive," she didn't imagine her stand as the prelude to something big. She wrote a colleague a few months later how "startling" the community's reaction and boycott of the buses was to her. Over the next few months, the city tried to break the boycott. Police harassed the boycott leaders and the city indicted eighty-nine of them (including Parks) on an old anti-boycott law. She and E. D. Nixon presented themselves for arrest: "Are you looking for me? Well, I am here." She was photographed being fingerprinted that day; her mugshot and the mugshots of others arrested in February 1956 have circulated publicly since they were found in a Montgomery sheriff's office in 2004.

Learning about the Rosa Parks who devoted her life to challenging injustice and who valued the militancy of young people—rather than the meek seamstress of the popular imagination who had her big moment seven decades ago—brings this history out of the distant past and provides ways of seeing where we are today in this country. To reckon with Rosa Parks, the lifelong rebel, moves us beyond the popular narrative of the movement's happy ending with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act to the long and continuing history of racial injustice in schools, policing, jobs, and housing in the United States and the wish Parks left us with—to keep on fighting.

Sixty-four years on, it's time to start teaching Rosa Parks right. For more information on Parks's life and activism, as well as primary sources and teaching guides, check out the website *Rosa Parks' Biography: A Resource for Teaching Rosa Parks* at [www.rosaparksbiography.org](http://www.rosaparksbiography.org).

---

*Jeanne Theoharis is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College and the author of The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks (Beacon Press, 2013), which won a 2014 NAACP Image Award. Her newest book, A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History (Beacon Press, 2018), won the 2018 Brooklyn Public Library Literary Prize for Nonfiction.*

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT

*educational website* Rosa Parks' Biography: A Resource for Teaching Rosa Parks (<https://rosaparksbiography.org>).

---

---

The Gilder Lehrman website uses cookies to personalize your experience and make our site easier to use. By continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of cookies. More information about our use of cookies and how to opt out of cookies in your internet browser can be found in our Privacy Policy. More info...

ACCEPT