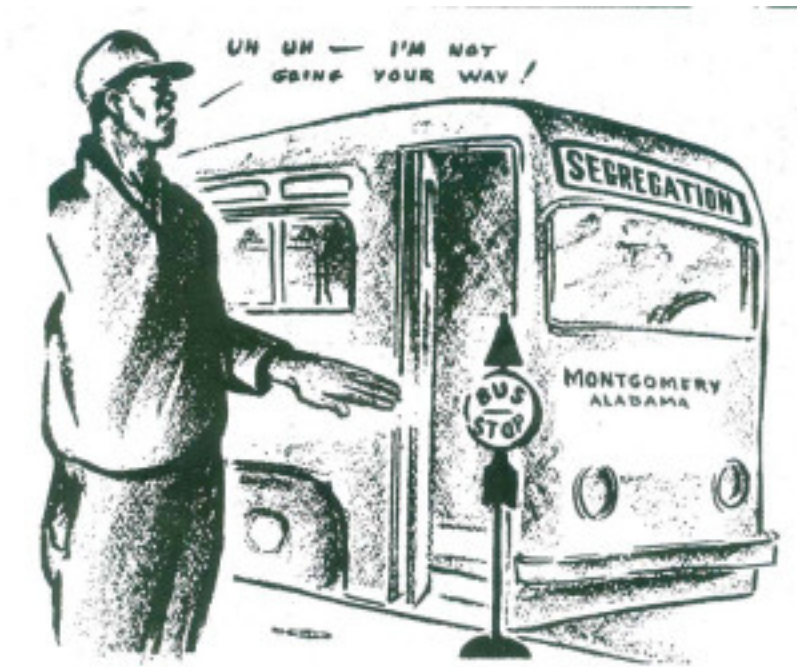


The Factual Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott Flowed Like an Orchestra



Rosa Parks Was More Than a Simple Seamstress Who Wanted to Ride the Bus



Real story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is Lost in Many Historical Narratives

On This Date in History: Often times, when history becomes part of the popular lexicon, facts get obscured in a sanitized or abbreviated version. In some cases, the blurring of facts is done intentionally. In other instances, it is a result of lazy or ignorant members of the media or simply from an effort at brevity. Most of the time, the ultimate storyline remains true at the expense of accuracy. The process often concludes with the creation of a mythology that raises some figures to great heights while diminishing the efforts of others that history may otherwise lift to the champion pedestal. The story of the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#) in 1955 provides an example of a historical event that involves all of the elements mentioned. Many narratives incorrectly mark the start of the 381-day boycott heard round the world.



Robinson May Have Been the Original Force Behind the Boycott

The general story is that a seamstress, Rosa Parks, got on a public Montgomery bus and sat in a seat toward the front and was arrested for doing so and that sparked the boycott that many people point to be the initiation of the Civil Rights Movement that culminated in the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). But, there was much more to the story that really had its roots many years before. You see, all the way back in 1943, Rosa Parks had an issue with the bus service when she paid her fare only to see the bus drive away before she could board through the back entrance as the driver had instructed her to do. However, there was another incident in the 1940's that involved a woman who has been lost to history but whom Dr. Martin Luther King described in his 1958 book [Stride Toward Freedom](#) as “indefatigable” and who he acknowledged was “perhaps more than any other person, was active on every level of the protest.” The person of whom King referred was [Alabama State College](#) professor [Jo Ann Robinson](#) who in 1949 boarded a sparsely occupied bus and inadvertently sat in the front seat. The driver mercilessly screamed at her until she fled the vehicle in tears. Her response was to attempt to start a protest boycott. But, when she approached her fellow members of the [Woman's Political Council](#) with her story and proposal, she was told that it was “a fact of life in Montgomery.” A year later, [Dexter Avenue Baptist Church](#) pastor [Rev. Vernon Johns](#), whom is referred by some as the “father of the Civil Rights movement,” refused to give up his seat for a white passenger and was subsequently evicted from the bus. He asked other African-American riders on the bus to leave with him in protest. The other passengers rebuffed his urging by telling him that he should

have known better. It's worth noting that Jo Ann Robinson was part of Vernon Johns' Dexter Avenue Baptist Church congregation.



At 15, Colvin Could Have Been Parks Before Parks

So, you see, many historians suggest that the Montgomery Bus Boycott had its origins well before 1955 and it actually involved persons of some prominence. The circumstance also was not just happenstance. After the US Supreme Court [Brown v. Board of Education](#) decision in 1954 that struck down the concept of “separate but equal” in public education, Robinson, who had ascended to the position of president of the Women’s Political Council, informed the mayor of Montgomery that some 25 local organizations were considering a bus boycott to protest the city bus system policies. The following year, the same Women’s Political Council that told Robinson in 1949 to forget about a bus boycott, decided to listen to the call of their president and determined that such a protest was in order. But, leadership in the African-American community recognized that they needed a catalyst that would outrage Black bus riders enough to the point that they would respond affirmatively. They wanted to find a person who was “above reproach” and who would agree to challenge the segregation laws in court. They thought that they had found their person when 15 year-old [Claudette Colvin](#) was arrested in early 1955 for refusing to give up her seat. Miss Colvin was active with the NAACP Youth Council and NAACP Montgomery Chapter President [Edgar D. Nixon](#) thought that Ms. Colvin would be the perfect person to get a boycott plan started. His hopes were dashed, however, when it was learned the teenager was pregnant. That brings us back to Rosa Parks.



Photo Part of Effort to Portray Parks as a Simple Seamstress When In Reality She was Very Involved With the Organizers of the Boycott

Miss Parks was not just a simple seamstress. In reality, she was a well-respected, educated woman with an unassailable record who had attended the laboratory school at Alabama State College; the same college for whom Jo Ann Robinson was a professor. Parks was a seamstress but only because she could not find a job that fit her skill set. However, for many years, [Miss Parks was also working for the NAACP](#), serving as the volunteer secretary for President [Edgar Nixon](#) since December 1943. She and her husband became members of the Voters League in 1944 and, for a brief time, she held a job at Maxwell Air Force Base. She often rode a desegregated Trolley on the base and she told her biographer that “Maxwell opened my eyes up.” By the end of 1955, she had returned from [Highlander Folk School](#) in Monteagle, TN where she completed a workshop on race relations. That trip was encouraged and sponsored by a politically liberal white couple, Clifford and Virginia Durr, for whom Parks worked as a seamstress and housekeeper. When the young Colvert was arrested early in 1955, Parks took a keen interest in her case.



Nixon Also Was Arrested During the Boycott

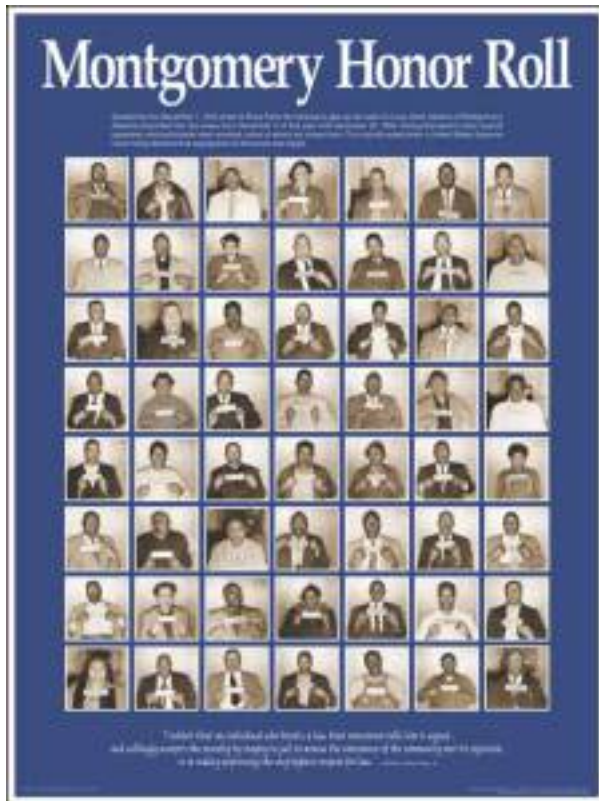
Many narratives suggest that, since it was known (and Parks had experienced first hand) that the bus driver on Park's chosen route had strong racist tendencies and used harsh measures to enforce Montgomery segregation policy, Parks was encouraged to create an incident that would serve as a catalyst for a planned boycott. Other narratives imply it was simply a coincidence that it was Parks who got arrested. In any event, on Thursday, December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks found herself on the 5th row of a crowded bus. The rules were that Blacks and Whites could not share a seat and that Blacks could only sit from the 5th row to the back of the bus. The first 4 rows became crowded with Whites and a white man was left standing in the aisle. The driver instructed the Blacks on the 5th row to move to the back of the bus. The other riders on Parks' row complied but Rosa did not. She was arrested and NAACP President Nixon called to find out on what charge his secretary was being held. After he was told to mind his own business, Nixon called a white lawyer who was sympathetic to the plight of African-Americans in the hope that the Civil Liberties lawyer would help. Nixon probably knew that the lawyer would give his assistance since the lawyer was none other than [Clifford Durr](#), Rosa Parks's employer and benefactor.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Parks' Arrest May Have Been Part of the Plan All Along

That night Professor Jo Ann Robinson pushed for a one day bus boycott on the following Monday to protest the arrest of Parks. She persuaded her students to distribute flyers on Friday announcing the boycott all over town. A group of ministers and Civil Rights leaders met to discuss the boycott but the meeting quickly fell apart and many attendees left. Those who remained decided to spread the word of the planned boycott through word of mouth and from the pulpit. Initially, it was thought that the boycott would be a one-day affair but they decided to meet again on Monday night to determine the effectiveness of the protest and to determine what their next move would be. So, **on this date in 1955**, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. Dr. Martin Luther King, who by that time had succeeded Vernon Johns as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, determined that a 60% participation in the boycott by African-Americans would be considered a success. To his surprise and that of others, the busses on Monday that rolled by his house were nearly empty. King wrote in Stride Toward Freedom that it was a miracle and that "The once dormant and quiescent Negro community was now fully awake." Many leaders wanted to end the boycott and declare victory but Nixon addressed the crowd at the Monday night gathering quite forcefully. The vote was unanimous to continue the strike.



There Were Many Players in the Montgomery Bus Boycott

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't clean. There was violence and bogus arrests. Edgar Nixon's home was bombed; dozens of blacks were arrested under an old city ordinance that prohibited boycotts. Blacks who rode the bus suffered threats of violence and violence from other African-Americans. But, on November 13, 1956 the US Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that struck down the desegregation laws of the Montgomery Alabama bus system and on December 21, 1956, African-Americans in Montgomery, Alabama returned to the city busses. While [the Supreme Court ruling actually stemmed from Colvin's arrest](#), the story of Rosa Parks was born and soon hers would be elevated to mythical levels and while the myth perpetrated in popular culture got the end correct, the created perceptions leave the uninitiated to believe the story was something that it was not. The truth is that the story surrounding Rosa Parks revolved around the NAACP, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the Women's Political Council and the Voters League and the principals were all connected through these organizations. It's pretty clear that the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the story of Rosa Parks was largely orchestrated and not a case of a simple woman refusing to give up her seat on a bus. Nevertheless, I suppose the outcome is all that really matters.