

# An Act of Courage, The Arrest Records of Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, during a typical evening rush hour in Montgomery, Alabama, a 42-year-old woman took a seat on the bus on her way home from the Montgomery Fair department store where she worked as a seamstress. Before she reached her destination, she quietly set off a social revolution when the bus driver instructed her to move back, and she refused. Rosa Parks, an African American, was arrested that day for violating a city law requiring racial segregation of public buses.

On the city buses of Montgomery, Alabama, the front 10 seats were permanently reserved for white passengers. The diagram shows that Mrs. Parks was seated in the first row behind those 10 seats. When the bus became crowded, the bus driver instructed Mrs. Parks and the other three passengers seated in that row, all African Americans, to vacate their seats for the white passengers boarding. Eventually, three of the passengers moved, while Mrs. Parks remained seated, arguing that she was not in a seat reserved for whites. James Blake, the driver, believed he had the discretion to move the line separating black and white passengers. The law was actually somewhat murky on that point, but when Mrs. Parks defied his order, he called the police. Officers Day and Nixon came and promptly arrested her.

In police custody, Mrs. Parks was booked, fingerprinted, and briefly incarcerated. The police report shows that she was charged with "refusing to obey orders of bus driver." For openly challenging the racial laws of her city, she remained at great physical risk while held by the police, and her family was terrified for her. When she called home, she spoke to her mother, whose first question was "Did they beat you?"

Mrs. Parks was not the first person to be prosecuted for violating the segregation laws on the city buses in Montgomery. She was, however, a woman of unchallenged character who was held in high esteem by all those who knew her. At the time of her arrest, Mrs. Parks was active in the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), serving as secretary to E.D. Nixon, president of the

Montgomery chapter. Her arrest became a rallying point around which the African American community organized a bus boycott in protest of the discrimination they had endured for years. Martin Luther King, Jr., the 26-year-old minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, emerged as a leader during the well-coordinated, peaceful boycott that lasted 381 days and captured the world's attention. It was during the boycott that Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., first achieved national fame as the public became acquainted with his powerful oratory.

After Mrs. Parks was convicted under city law, her lawyer filed a notice of appeal. While her appeal was tied up in the state court of appeals, a panel of three judges in the U.S. District Court for the region ruled in another case that racial segregation of public buses was unconstitutional. That case, called *Browder v. Gayle*, was decided on June 4, 1956. The ruling was made by a three-judge panel that included Frank M. Johnson, Jr., and upheld by the United States Supreme court on November 13, 1956.

For a quiet act of defiance that resonated throughout the world, Rosa Parks is known and revered as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement."

The documents shown here relating to Mrs. Parks's arrest are copies that were submitted as evidence in the *Browder v. Gayle* case. They are preserved by the National Archives at Atlanta in Morrow, Georgia, in Record Group 21, Records District Courts of the United States, U.S. District Court for Middle District of Alabama, Northern (Montgomery) Division. Civil Case 1147, *Browder, et al v. Gayle, et al*.