

This Day in History... February 4, 1913

Birth of Rosa Parks

Rosa Louise McCauley Parks was born on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her quiet resolve and careful preparation would later place her at the center of one of the most important civil rights protests in American history.

Rosa Parks grew up in rural Alabama during the early 20th century, when segregation shaped nearly every part of daily life. She spent much of her childhood in Pine Level, Alabama, where her grandparents owned a small farm. From an early age, Parks witnessed racial injustice firsthand. She saw Black citizens denied basic rights and protections, while white residents benefited from better schools, services, and opportunities.

Parks attended segregated schools for Black children, which were underfunded and lacked basic supplies. White children in nearby communities attended newer schools with buses, while Black students often walked long distances. As a teenager, Parks enrolled at the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes in Montgomery. She left school before graduating to care for her sick mother and grandmother. Years later, she returned to her studies and earned her high school diploma. At the time, only about seven percent of African Americans had completed high school, making her achievement uncommon.

In 1932, Rosa married Raymond Parks, a barber who was active in civil rights work. Through him, she became more involved in efforts to challenge racial discrimination. In 1943, Rosa and Raymond Parks joined the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). That same year, Rosa Parks was elected secretary of the chapter, a position she held for more than a decade. Her role involved documenting cases of racial injustice, including violence against Black citizens, and assisting with investigations.

During the summer of 1955, Parks attended the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. The school trained activists and community leaders working for labor rights and racial equality. The experience strengthened her understanding of nonviolent protest and collective action. By the time she returned to Montgomery, Parks was not a passive observer of segregation but a prepared and experienced organizer.

On December 1, 1955, after finishing her job as a seamstress at a Montgomery department store, Parks boarded a city bus to go home. She sat in the section designated for Black passengers, near the middle of the bus. When the bus filled and white passengers were left standing, the driver ordered Parks and three other Black riders to give up their seats. The others complied. Parks refused. She was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and violating a local segregation ordinance.

Parks later explained her decision clearly. "There was an opportunity for me to take a stand to express the way I felt about being treated in that manner," she said. Although the law did not require passengers to give up their seats once seated, she was convicted and fined. Parks chose to appeal the ruling.

Local Black leaders responded quickly. On the Sunday following her arrest, Black churches announced a one-day boycott of Montgomery's public buses. Despite heavy rain on Monday, African Americans walked, carpooled, or found other ways to get to work and school. The boycott continued far beyond one day. It lasted more than a year and caused serious financial losses for the bus company.

The legal challenge moved slowly through the courts. In 1956, a federal court ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional. The US Supreme Court upheld the decision, and Montgomery ended segregation on public buses.

The boycott had personal costs for Rosa Parks. Shortly after her arrest, both she and her husband lost their jobs. Unable to find steady work in Alabama, they moved to Detroit, Michigan. There, Parks continued her public service. She worked as a secretary and receptionist for US Representative John Conyers for more than 20 years. She also served on the board of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

In the 1980s, Parks co-founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. The organization runs the Pathways to Freedom program, which educates young people about the Underground Railroad and the civil rights movement through travel and study.

Rosa Parks received many honors during her lifetime. These included the NAACP Spingarn Medal, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Congressional Gold Medal. In 1999, *Time* magazine named her one of the 20 most influential figures of the 20th century.

Parks experienced dementia in her later years and died in Detroit on October 24, 2005. After her death, she became the first woman and the second African American to lie in honor at the US Capitol, a recognition of her lasting impact on American history.



Stamp issued on Parks's 100th birthday in 2013.



Imperforate Rosa Parks Stamp



Stamp commemorates the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

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