

**BEYOND THE BUS BOYCOTT: THE IMPACT OF ROSA PARKS ON
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

KAYLA RICHARD

Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

Dr. Felipe Hinojosa

May 2020

Major: Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the Bus Boycott: The Impact of Rosa Parks on the Civil Rights Movement

Kayla Richard
Department of Political Science
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Felipe Hinojosa
Department of History
Texas A&M University

Literature Review

There has been much written about Rosa Parks throughout the years including biographical sources about her life and secondary sources about the Civil Rights Movement in which she is included. As a whole, scholars have focused mostly on her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and less on her other contributions as an activist. Additionally, there are various archived primary documents from the Library of Congress about Parks' life that I intend to utilize. My research will build on this previous research and use primary documents in order to highlight her contributions and impact as an activist in the Civil Rights Movement.

Thesis Statement

In addition to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosa Parks contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in many ways, such as being a secretary and leader in the NAACP and an activist for various civil rights causes throughout the years.

Theoretical Framework

I endeavor to apply aspects of both social movement theory and feminist theory, including intersectionality, to this research regarding the impact of Rosa Parks on the Civil Rights Movement.

Project Description

How did Rosa Parks contribute to the civil rights movement overall as a leader and activist? Parks' refusal to give up her seat on the segregated Montgomery bus both started the Montgomery Bus Boycott and solidified her place as an important historical figure. However, it has become the only aspect of her activism that she is known for by the general public. It made her a symbol that separated her from her identity as an activist and leader in the movement. In reality, Rosa Parks made many important contributions to the Civil Rights Movement in a variety of ways. These contributions are worth highlighting as much as her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. There is more that can be learned from the career of Rosa Parks as an activist, even decades after these events took place.

This research will build on previous research regarding the life of Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement to highlight her contributions to the movement as a whole rather than only focusing on her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In doing so, I hope to convey the importance of understanding and celebrating the many achievements of influential activists such as Rosa Parks rather than simply reducing them to a symbol.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and my father for constantly supporting and encouraging me in everything I do, and imbuing me with a love of history and writing.

Additionally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the late and great Rosa Parks and all of the past black leaders and activists in the Civil Rights Movement who fought tirelessly to end segregation and systemic discrimination and those who continue to fight against racial injustice even today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Felipe Hinojosa, as well as my departmental advisor, Dr. Brittany Perry. I would also like to thank the many professors that have positively impacted me during my time here at Texas A&M.

KEY WORDS

CRM Civil Rights Movement

MBB Montgomery Bus Boycott

NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

INTRODUCTION

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on Montgomery, Alabama's segregated bus system. With this action, Parks simultaneously began what would become the Montgomery Bus Boycott and solidified her place as an important historical figure. Although this moment in history is well-known, the perception surrounding it is very reductive. The common belief is that Rosa Parks was a tired seamstress who simply decided not to give up her seat on that particular night. For instance, there has been research done on the way Rosa Parks is taught in schools and how students only learn a one-dimensional picture of Parks as a figure. As a result, she has become a singular symbol of resistance, separated from her connection to the larger Civil Rights Movement. However, her action was actually strategically planned in advance by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and her subsequent arrest was considered to be a viable case for the lawyers of the movement to be able to defend in court and garner support from the community (Glennon, 1991, p. 62). Additionally, this feat of activism was not the only contribution that Rosa Parks made to the Civil Rights Movement in her long career as an activist. Before and after her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosa Parks made many significant contributions to the movement, such as her impact as the secretary of the NAACP. As with other historical figures, Rosa Parks should be studied, remembered, and celebrated for all of her achievements in her life as an activist and not simply reduced to one singular action. There is so much more that can be gleaned from her life that is still relevant to social movement activism today.

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF ROSA PARKS' ACTIVISM

Contrary to popular belief, Rosa Parks' connection to the Civil Rights Movement did not begin with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Even though she is commonly known to have been a seamstress at the time of the boycott, she was also "the well-respected secretary of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (Glennon, 1991, p. 62).

Introduction to the Movement

As a child growing up in a segregated Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was exposed to racial discrimination from a very early age. One incident in particular, in which she stood up for herself against the discriminatory attitude of a white boy and his mother, Rosa showed early signs of defiance against the status quo of segregation and racism (Whitaker, 2011, p. 689). She was first introduced to the Civil Rights Movement by her husband Raymond Parks, who she married in 1932. As an activist, Mr. Parks was both a member of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and a member of the Committee to Defend the Scottsboro Boys. (Houck & Dixon, 2009, p. 37). The Scottsboro Boys were "a group of African American male youth accused of raping two white women aboard a cargo train car" (Whitaker, 2011, p. 690). Mr. Parks worked to raise a fund for the legal services of the Scottsboro Boys because many black activists at the time believed they were falsely accused. Although the situation greatly disheartened Rosa, she did not become involved in the effort to help the Scottsboro Boys because her husband feared for her safety if she were to become involved in such a dangerous civil rights cause (Whitaker, 2011, p.

690). As a result, Rosa Parks did not immediately become involved in any civil rights causes at that time. However, her husband's activism would eventually lead her to become involved.

Secretary of the NAACP

In 1943, Parks became the secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, twelve years before her act of defiance started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Coincidentally, an incident during that same year began her conflict with the segregated Montgomery bus system and the same driver who would later have her arrested. The driver, James P. Blake, humiliated Parks on the Montgomery city bus that he drove because she entered through the front of the bus (Houck & Dixon, 2009, 37). This humiliation led Parks to vow to never ride his bus again. In addition to being the secretary of the NAACP, Parks became the advisor to her local NAACP's Youth Council. In this role, Parks supported youth activists as they began to challenge the system of segregation in Montgomery (Whitaker, 2011, p. 691). Under the leadership of Parks, the NAACP Youth Council at that time was instrumental in challenging the segregation of libraries, which prevented African-Americans from checking out books. Although the Youth Council did not immediately succeed in their attempt to change the library's segregated policy, Parks continually "encouraged the youth activists to continue their work because it was important that they made their voices heard" (Whitaker, 2011, p. 691). In this way, Parks heavily influenced the next generation of civil rights activists.

Influential Connections

As secretary of the NAACP, Parks made connections with various influential figures and activists of the CRM, all of which would have an effect on her increased role in the movement. In 1946, Rosa befriended leader and activist Ella Baker, who would eventually become both a role model and mentor to her, who encouraged her involvement in certain civil rights causes,

such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Houck & Dixon, 2009, p. 38). Working closely with NAACP President E.D. Nixon resulted in Nixon introducing Parks to prominent political figures. In 1954, Nixon introduced Parks to the Clifford and Virginia Durr. While Clifford was a lawyer who worked in two presidential administrations, Virginia was known for being active in various civil rights circles across the country (Houck & Dixon, 2009, p. 38). As a result of this friendship, Parks was able to attend the very important Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. The Highlander School was well-known for “educating labor and civil rights activists on the finer points of community organizing and leadership” (Houck & Dixon, 2009, p. 38). Her two-week attendance at the Highlander School is considered instrumental in Parks’ decision to expand her activism and willingly become the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Although Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat officially set the Montgomery Bus Boycott in motion, she was not the first to protest the segregated bus system in this way. There were many brave individuals, especially women, who protested the segregated bus systems, and their contributions should not be forgotten. These people made it possible for Rosa Parks to truly make a difference with her act of defiance.

Predecessors to the Montgomery Bus Boycott

One of the lesser known, but very important individuals whose protest preceded Rosa Parks is Claudette Colvin. Remarkably, Colvin's protest was almost exactly nine months before Rosa Parks, on March 2, 1955 (Hendrickson, 2005, p. 287). Although there are similarities between the two events, there are differences between Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin. First, Colvin was only 15 years old at the time that she refused to give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery bus, whereas Rosa Parks was a trained and prepared activist in her 40s. Unlike the way that Parks was reported to have accepted her arrest, Claudette Colvin was taken off of the bus "kicking and screaming" (Hendrickson, 2005, p. 287). Regardless, Claudette Colvin and her act of defiance at the young age of 15 was influential in eventually beginning the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

A Different Form of Protest

In 1955, a group of black women in Montgomery, Alabama decided to protest the segregated bus system in a different way than Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin did. These women, led by Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, decided to undertake a financial protest and stop using

the segregated public transportation systems altogether (Robinson, 1989, p. 20). They were a part of the Black Women's Political Council of Montgomery, a group that would work to fight against discrimination and segregation and towards the advancement of black people in Montgomery. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson would eventually become the president of this council. The Black Women's Political Council began planning the protest of Montgomery's segregated bus system for years before 1955 (Robinson, 1989, p. 20). However, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat and subsequent arrest allowed them to fully institute their unique form of protest. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson and the other members began to publicize their plans for a one-day boycott of the bus system throughout Montgomery's black community. This one-day boycott turned out to be an "instant and almost complete success" for the Civil Rights Movement (Robinson, 1989, p. 20). Meanwhile, Rosa Parks' case was being fought at the courts.

Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, on a segregated Montgomery city bus driven by James Blake, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man. Contrary to popular belief, Rosa was not simply tired after a long day. If anything, she was tired of injustice. However, this one act of protest was planned in advance by the leaders of the CRM and Rosa Parks herself was trained and prepared for it by her education at the Highlander Folk School. Her arrest was considered by many black activists at the time to be "a suitable vehicle for rallying the community to insist on changes in the Jim Crow system" (Glennon, 1991, p. 62). When Rosa Parks went to court, she was represented by activist and attorney, Fred Gray. He challenged the constitutionality of her arrest and the charges brought against her and filed an appeal when she was found guilty (Glennon, 1991, p. 63). Although she was found guilty in court and forced to pay a fine, Rosa

Parks' arrest still had positive implications for the movement because it led to a one-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system, which officially started the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

As soon as Parks was released from jail, she got back to work in helping to organize the efforts of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks wrote letters to the participants of the bus boycott, providing encouragement or direction (Parks, 1956). In one letter, Parks gives detailed instructions for how they are to behave in taking the alternative modes in transportation that was provided instead of the segregated bus system (Parks, 1956). In the letter, Parks writes “Riders — go to dispatch and pick up stations if you want transportation” (Parks, 1956).

Exactly a year after her refusal to give up her seat, in December of 1956, Parks was able to see the integration of the Montgomery public transportation system. She was able to witness her work and sacrifice come to fruition and result in a success for the Civil Rights Movement. She would go on to see many positive changes in the status of race relations throughout the rest of her career as an activist.

CHAPTER III

ACTIVISM POST-MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Even after Parks had started the Montgomery Bus Boycott with her individual act of protest, her work in the Civil Rights Movement was far from done.

Speaking Tours

After the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Parks embarked on a speaking tour across the country to promote the cause of the Civil Rights Movement. During this speaking tour, she told the story of her courageous act and garnered more support for the movement. In one flyer for her speaking appearance at Bethel A.M.E Church in Springfield, Massachusetts, Parks was advertised as “The Woman Who Set-Off the Montgomery Bus Boycott” (Parks, 1956). There were many other flyers similar to this one for her speaking appearances at various churches. Additionally, this appearance was organized by this city’s branch of the NAACP. Various NAACP chapters across the country often worked together during the Civil Rights Movement.

Detroit

Although her act of protest made her famous, it resulted in Parks losing her job as a seamstress and her husband being fired from his own job. Struggling financially, they left Montgomery altogether and moved to Detroit, Michigan, in 1957. At the time, Detroit was one of the centers of the Civil Rights Movement and a place where Parks could continue to make a difference with her activism. As she did in Montgomery, she worked as a seamstress until 1965 (Houck & Dixon 2009, p. 38). In Detroit, she continued to fight for the causes of the Civil Rights Movement, such as housing discrimination and police brutality. The state of housing discrimination in Detroit was a cause that Parks became passionate about and she would

officially “join the fight around open housing” (Theoharis, 2012, p. 24). In 1963, Parks was involved in two marches in Detroit of very different scales and for different reasons. First, Parks joined Dr. King for the Great March to Freedom on June 23, which protested the overall racial discrimination that black people encountered in Detroit and involved 200,000 people (Theoharis, 2012, p. 24). The second march was organized by the Detroit NAACP to specifically protest housing discrimination and although it only drew a crowd of 200 people, it was led by Parks herself (Theoharis, 2012, p. 24). Parks’ work in the fight against housing discrimination would continue for many years, but she became involved in politics as well. Another dimension of the Civil Rights Movement involved campaigning for the election of representatives who were either civil rights activists or favorable to their causes in order to promote the agenda. Parks exemplified this in 1964 by campaigning for John Conyers, who was running to represent Michigan in the U.S. House of Representatives (Theoharis, 2012, p. 24). Parks was able to assure his win by getting Dr. King to endorse him (Theoharis, 2012, p. 24). Another cause that Parks became involved in the fight against in Detroit was police brutality. Even though the Civil Rights Movement had gained national successes, it “had garnered few successes by the mid-1960s” in Detroit. Relations between the police and white citizens were strained. Not only did Parks begin work in ending police harassment and brutality, she theorized the root of the problem. Parks found that the origin of the problem was in “the long history of white resistance to civil rights demands” (Theoharis, 2012, p. 26).

Later Activism

In the 1970s, Parks began to organize to bring awareness to political prisoners in the United States, specifically black activists who faced criminal persecution (Theoharis, 2013). In 1980, Parks founded the Rosa L. Parks Scholarship Foundation for college-bound high school

seniors regardless of race (Hunter, 2005). She often donated her fees from speaking engagements to this scholarship fund. In 1987, Parks co-founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. This foundation helped to educate people and continue the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Parks would work as the receptionist of John Conyers, the representative that she had helped to elect, until 1988 (Houck & Dixon 2009, p. 38). Towards the end of her life, Parks lived in extreme poverty despite her fame and success as an activist (Theoharis, 2013). She was never concerned with making profit from her work as an activist. Despite her failing health, she continued to make a positive difference as an activist in any way she could until her death in 2005.

CONCLUSION

The impact of Rosa Parks on the Civil Rights Movement reached far beyond her monumental act that started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks made many significant contributions as an activist and leader in the Civil Rights Movement before and after the bus boycott. Parks made an impact in her role as secretary of the NAACP and as a sexual assault investigator. For years after the bus boycott, she made an even greater impact in her work with housing discrimination, police brutality, and political prisoners. Although her contributions garnered her notoriety and fame, she did not care for fame nor profit. Parks only wanted to fight against discrimination and injustice and ensure a better life for black people across the country. The life of Rosa Parks is a testament to the true power of selflessness and being willing to sacrifice yourself for the greater good, no matter what the cost. It is important to celebrate all the contributions of Parks as an activist rather than reducing her to a symbol of one singular event. The way that the legacies of black historical figures are handled needs to improve for the better. They are more than symbols and figureheads. They are more than isolated examples of black history taught one day amongst the detailed triumphs of white historical figures. There is so much more to learn from the life of Rosa Parks than the one incident that engraved her name in history. There is too much more inspiration to gain from the contributions of this remarkable woman. Not in order to dwell on the past, but to lead us into a better future.

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