A Bus Ride Into History

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks got on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and sat in the middle. At that time, a city law required African American citizens to ride at the back of all public buses. They could sit in the middle section of the bus only if the seats were not needed for any white passengers.

As the bus filled up, the bus driver told Rosa Parks to stand. When she refused to move, the bus driver notified the police. Parks was removed from the bus, arrested and taken to jail.

When news of the incident spread through Montgomery’s African American community, people were angry and upset. Community leaders proposed that African Americans stop taking the city buses. The bus company would lose money, and this would force them to change their policies. It would also call attention to the unfairness of the city’s segregation laws.

The boycott began on December 5, 1955, and it was an immediate success. Ninety percent of African Americans who generally rode buses found other modes of transportation. As a result, many Montgomery buses were running almost empty.

The boycott lasted 382 days and brought national attention to the issue of racial segregation. In November 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all public transportation companies, such as city buses, had to end their policies of segregation.

The incident on the public bus led to the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected the association’s first president, and Rosa Parks served on the association’s board of directors.

Because of the interest in the bus boycott and its effects, Parks became a national hero. She went on to share her story at schools, churches, and organizations across the country.