

Segregation on transportation



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Segregation on transportation was one injustice that blacks faced. Have you ever thought that Rosa Parks might not have been the first person to stand up for her and her community's rights? Well, she was not. In fact, there were many unrecognized people who did what she did before her. These women not only stood up for themselves, but for their colored friends and family.

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One hundred years before Rosa Parks famously stood up against segregation, Elizabeth Jennings did the same aboard a streetcar in New York, NY on July 16, 1854. Jennings was an African-American teacher, a church organist, and an activist. When the driver told the two women to get off, her friend did but Jennings refused. The driver attempted to remove her physically, but Jennings fought back, holding onto a window, then to the driver's coat. A police officer boarded the streetcar to assist in her removal and the two men pushed Jennings out into the muddy street, ruining her clothes. Laws at this time were very different than the 1950's Jim Crow laws. Although slavery was against the law in New York, segregation was commonly seen and accepted. On streetcars, colored people could only ride if white passengers did not complain of their presence. If any white passenger complained, colored riders had to leave the car. Even when whites did not complain it was still common for bus companies to use this excuse as a means of removing blacks from their buses. After the incident, Elizabeth decided to sue the streetcar company and was represented by Chester A. Arthur. She won her case and was awarded \$225 for damages. Her lawyer, Chester A. Arthur, later went on to become the president of the United States.

Charlotte Brown stood up for her rights on April 17, 1863 in San Francisco, CA. Brown was leaving her home for a visit with her doctor. She entered the streetcar to find only three other people riding and took a seat halfway down the car, then the conductor ordered her off. She recalled telling him that she had been in the habit of riding ever since the cars had been running. He told her that colored persons were not permitted to ride and that she would have to leave. Brown refused to leave for 3 more stops, until the driver came and took her by the arm and forced her out of the car. After the incident, Brown sued the company for two hundred dollars with the encouragement of her father, James Brown. The Omnibus Railroad company attempted to justify the conductor's actions, saying that racial segregation on streetcars was necessary because white people may be scared riding next to colored people. The judge rejected the company's reasoning and awarded Brown five cents, which was the bus fare. Days after the judgement, another streetcar driver forced Charlotte and her father from a car. Brown sued the company once again and Judge C. C Pratt ruled that streetcar segregation in San Francisco was illegal, and the jury awarded Brown five hundred dollars.

Jim Crow laws ran rampant through the southern states providing the legal backing to support racial inequalities. These laws made sure that white and black people lived separate lives, including on transportation. Even riding the bus was difficult for black passengers. All riders entered through the front and dropped their dimes in the box. If there were white passengers on the bus, the colored passengers had to get off the bus and reenter through the back door. In southern cities, blacks were required to sit in the back and whites sat in the front. Generally, when the seats filled up both races stood,

but Montgomery had its own city ordinance. There, each bus had 36 seats, and the first 4 rows were reserved for white passengers only. Seating behind that was up to the driver. If all ten white seats were filled, the driver would order blacks to give up their seats for white passengers. This city ordinance disregarded the law in place since 1900 which stated that no riders were required to give up their seat unless there was another available for them to sit in. In this law, no one could be legally kicked off the bus because of their color. Here, drivers simply ignored the law.

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin entered a bus to go home from school with 13 other classmates. There were no whites on the bus, so everyone walked straight through the aisle and sat in the back. As the bus moved, the ten white seats filled up quickly, forcing blacks to stand. Claudette soon realized there was a white woman standing over her waiting for her to move out of the seat. All the other girls in her row had already gotten up and were standing. Claudette didn't move a muscle. The driver looked in his mirror and said, I need those seats. Claudette didn't move. The woman was still hovering over her. Why are you still sittin' there? the motorman yelled. Gimme that seat! and Get up, gal! She stayed silent in her seat. At the next stop, a policeman boarded the bus and told her to get up, but when she did not move, he went to the driver and told him that since he was a transit policeman, he lacked the authority to make an arrest. The conductor continued to the next stop where two Montgomery policemen boarded the bus and told Claudette to get up and she said, it's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right! One of the cops grabbed Claudette by the arm, his partner grabbing the other

and together they pulled her off the bus and into a police car. She didn't resist or fight back, but kept yelling, It's my constitutional right! After that, they drove Claudette to the police station where they booked her and took fingerprints. Then they got back in the police car and drove to the city jail. Claudette's mother and pastor then got her from the jail and went home. Claudette pleaded not guilty in court but in the end was declared guilty of all charges and put on probation. (book)

Mary Louise Smith stood up for herself on October 21, 1955. She boarded a bus to take her to her white employers' home to collect the twelve dollars they owed her, but when she got there, they weren't home. So, Mary got back on the bus to go back home. At the next stop a white woman boarded but there were no available seats. Mary was ordered to give up her seat by the woman, but she refused. She was then asked by the driver but refused again. Mary was arrested and charged a fourteen-dollar fine, which was paid by her father.

On April 19, 1955, Aurelia Browder boarded a Montgomery City bus and sat in the first available seat. When the white section became full, the driver ordered Browder to surrender her seat, but she refused. After many warnings, the driver called the police and they arrested Browder and removed her from the bus. Aurelia then filed a lawsuit that three other women took part in, including Claudette Colvin, Susie McDonald, and Mary Louise Smith. Their case Browder v. Gayle marked the ending of all bus boycotts in Montgomery. Of course, there was a legal question the court had to answer, which was whether the segregation of white and black people on privately owned buses operated by the city of Montgomery violated the

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Fourteenth Amendment of the U. S. Constitution. The court ruled that the Montgomery segregation codes deny and deprive plaintiffs and other Negro citizens that were in the similar situation of equal protection of the laws and due process of law secured by the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision was final and segregation on buses was officially declared illegal. Now any race could sit anywhere they wanted on a bus, and the bus boycotts ended.

So, why does everyone know about Rosa Parks, while these ladies do not get the recognition they deserve? Well, Claudette Colvin was very active in the NAACP's Youth Council and was advised by Rosa Parks herself. NAACP activists were originally excited at the idea of organizing a boycott around Colvin's case. However, when E. D. Nixon discovered that Colvin was several months pregnant, their ambition diminished. It was also rumored that Mary Louise Smith's father had a drinking problem, though she later told that it was not true. Both girls were also still teenagers, with Claudette at just 15 and Mary at 18, so the community did not trust them with the Community leaders knew that the time was perfect to challenge segregation through law. The African American community needed someone whose name was unblemished. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks would become that person. (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/browder-v-gayle-the-women-before-rosa-parks>)

These women and more stood up to fight injustice before Rosa Parks' famous bus incident. These women helped to lay a solid foundation to continue the fight for equality and social progress throughout the nation. For this reason, these women and others should not go unnoticed in history and deserve

recognition as much as Rosa Parks. Just as these women fought to bring about change and equality.

After Claudette Colvin stood up for herself, she and Parks met and became friends, and I believe that that is what drove Rosa to stay in her seat.