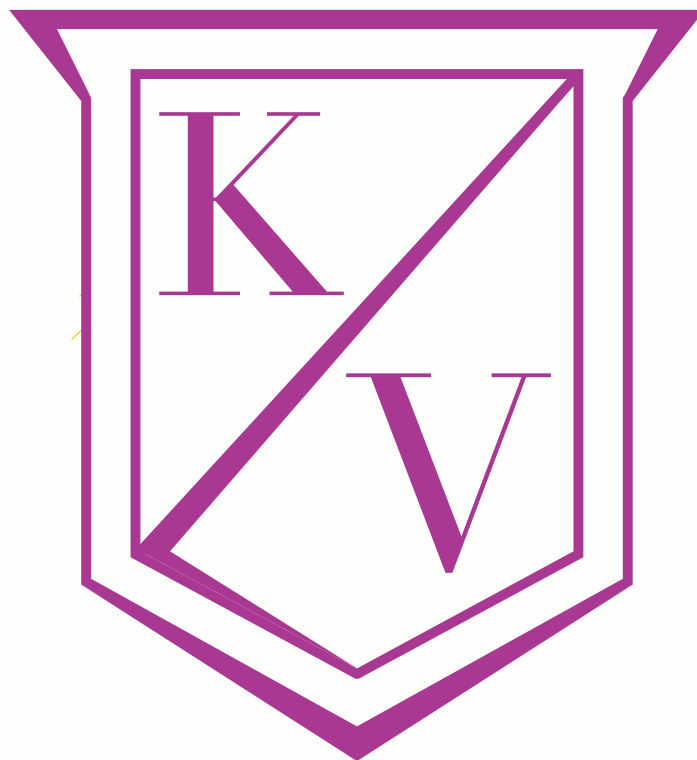


Heroes Who Inspire

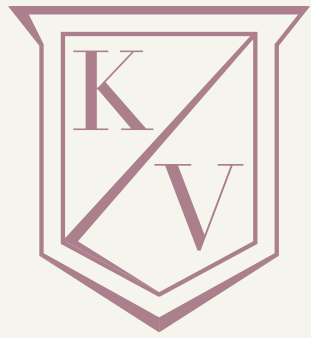
# Knightly Virtues



Rosa Parks

Learning About the Virtues  
of Justice & Courage

Heroes Who Inspire



# THE STORY



Rosa Parks

Story retold by Jon Davison

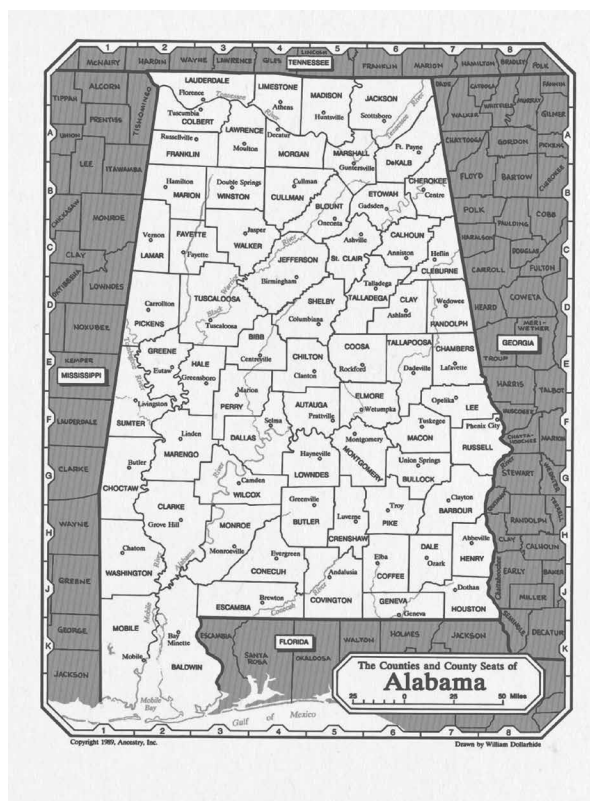
“Sometimes when Rosa and her friends walked to school, the bus carrying the white pupils would drive past and the white pupils would throw rubbish from the windows at them.”

# Introduction

Rosa Louise McCauley was born on 4 February 1913, in a place called Tuskegee, Alabama in the southern states of America. She grew up with her family, went to school like other children and when she was nineteen, she met Raymond Parks. They fell in love and married. This sounds like a very ordinary story, but we remember Rosa Parks as a very courageous woman, because she sat on a bus. That might sound strange to us, because many of us, our friends and family sit on buses every day. So why was this a courageous thing for Rosa to do?

The United States of America in which Rosa was born was very different from the USA we know today. Less than fifty years before Rosa was born, the US totally abolished slavery in 1865. Before that time, African American people living in the southern states of America could be owned by white Americans. They could be bought, sold and forced to work on farms and plantations. If they ran away, slaves could be returned to their owners by law.

During the whole of Rosa's childhood and her early adult life, the southern states of America operated a system of segregation - in their everyday public lives African American and White people were separated in their schools, in shops, restaurants and in many other situations that we would find very strange today. The laws of the southern states upheld this separation and people could be put in jail for breaking them. Many African American people were attacked, persecuted and even murdered by racist white people. Often law enforcement officers in the southern states did nothing to solve crimes committed against African American people.



## Going to School

Rosa began school at the age of six years. Her brother Sylvester began the following year, at the age of five. They went to a school for African American children near where they lived in Pine Level - it had just one teacher. At school Rosa enjoyed fairy tales and Mother Goose rhymes. She also enjoyed reading very much.

During the colder months, older boys had to go to cut and fetch wood to provide heating in the school. Boys at the white school did not have to do this as the school authorities looked after the heating. When Rosa was very young a new school was built for white pupils. The school was not very far from where she lived. But even though the school had been built with public money, including taxes paid by all adults in the community, Rosa could not attend it but had to go to the poorer school for African American children.

Some white pupils rode to school in a bus, but there were no school buses for African American pupils. Sometimes when Rosa and her friends walked to school, the bus carrying the white pupils would drive past and the white pupils would throw rubbish from the windows at them. Complaining would do no good as nobody would listen.

## Schooling in Montgomery

The nearest big town to Pine Level was called Montgomery. From the age of eleven years Rosa attended Montgomery Industrial School, which everybody called Miss White's school, after the head teacher and co-founder, Miss Alice L. White. The school had an excellent reputation. All the teachers at the school were white women from the north states of America. Therefore, when they travelled south to educate African American girls at the school, white people in Montgomery refused to have anything to do with them. Life was not easy for them. In the early days of the school it was burned down twice by angry white people.

The best lesson that Rosa learned at Miss White's school was that she was a person with dignity and self-respect. She decided that she would not set her sights lower than anybody else just because she was not white. The girls at the school were taught to be ambitious and to believe that they could achieve what they wanted in life. Rosa's mother and grandparents also encouraged her to think this way about herself.

Many aspects of life in those days were very different from today. On the public bus service between Pine Level and Montgomery, African American people could not travel inside, but had to ride on the roof of the bus with the luggage. There were other examples of segregation in Montgomery, too. For example, the public water fountains in Montgomery had signs on them: 'White' and 'Coloured'. Like many other African American children, Rosa and her friends wondered if 'White' water tasted different from 'Coloured' water. They wanted to know if 'White' water was white and if 'Coloured' water came out of the fountain in different colours. Of course, Rosa and her friends began to understand that there was no difference in

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the colour or taste of the water. The only difference was who was allowed to drink it from which public fountains.

By the time Rosa was sixteen years old, her grandmother had become very ill. Although Rosa had begun eleventh grade in September, she dropped out of high school after a month to look after her grandmother. Sadly, she died. Rosa started work and did a number of jobs from cleaning to working in a shirt factory. Although she went back to school briefly, she had to drop out again when her mother became ill.

## Marriage

In December 1932, Rosa married Raymond Parks. It was a small wedding attended by family members and close friends. They went to live on the East Side of Montgomery in a lodging house on South Jackson Street.

Parks was very supportive of Rosa's wish to finish school so she went back to school after they were married. She was awarded her High School diploma in 1933 when she was 20 years old. At that time only a small percentage of African American people in Montgomery were High School graduates. In 1940, seven years after Rosa gained diploma only 7 out of every 100 (7%) had a High School education.

After a while Rosa and her husband went to live on South Union Street, where they stayed with Mr. King Kelly, who was a deacon of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. One day Rosa went to the railway station with Mr. Kelly and his daughter to see them off on the train. She was walking a short distance behind them. As they were on their way to the train a police officer approached Rosa and asked if she had a ticket. She told him she didn't. He pushed her back against some railings and told her that if she did not have a ticket, she could not go any further. It was clear that officer had a club and a gun, which he would use if he felt provoked. Rosa could do nothing but move out of the way. She was very upset by the incident.

## The right to vote

Today, every American citizen over the age of 18 years has the right to vote. But the right to vote for all citizens in the USA did not become law until 1965. In those days, the vast majority African Americans living in the southern states could not vote. At the time in order to register to vote African Americans had to have white people to approve of them. Most white people in the South made it very difficult for African American people to register to vote.

Rosa tried to register to vote in 1943, when she was thirty. She had to take a test. She was told she had failed. No reason had to be given for why she had failed, or what she could do to pass the test. The second time she tried, the same thing happened, but she was sure that she had answered the questions correctly. She took the test a third time in 1945. She kept a hand-written copy of all her answers to the test. If she was failed a third time, she was going to take legal action. But her certificate arrived in the post. She was now a registered voter and



could now vote.

Rosa became more and more interested in the rights of African American citizens. In the mid 1940s she became a member of the local branch of what was known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This national organisation had been founded by a small group of African American and White Americans to protest against racial discrimination, lynching, brutality, and unequal education. Rosa became secretary of the local branch and one of her duties was to keep a record of incidents of discrimination, unfair treatment or acts of violence against African American citizens.

There were many violent incidents against African American people in the late 1940s, after World War II ended. African American soldiers who had fought for their country were returning home, and they believed they should have equal rights. Many World War II veterans came back and tried to get registered to vote but could not. They were treated with even more disrespect, especially if they were in uniform. White Americans felt that things should remain as they had always been.

## Public Transport

African American people had special rules to follow on public transport. Montgomery buses contained thirty-six seats. The first ten were always reserved for white people, even if there were no white passengers on the bus. African American people were required to sit in the last ten seats at the back of the bus. Even if there were empty seats in the front of the bus, they could not use them.

It was up to the bus drivers how they organised who sat in the middle sixteen seats. They had total control and passengers could not argue. Bus drivers carried guns and had what was known as 'police power' to rearrange seating and enforce rules of segregation. Some bus drivers were stricter than others. But usually once the ten seats in the back of the bus were filled, all the other African American passengers had to stand. If the front ten seats and the middle sixteen seats filled, drivers would insist that the African American passengers give up

their seats in the back section. People who refused to give their seats would be dragged from the bus by police and arrested even if they were children or elderly women.





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# Arrest

In the winter of 1955 Rosa Parks was 42 years old. She was working as an assistant tailor at 'Montgomery Fair' department store. It was the kind of store where assistants had to smile and to be polite no matter how rudely or badly they were treated.

On the evening of 1 December 1955 Rosa boarded a bus after work to take her home. She took a seat in the middle section of the bus. At the next stop some white people got on. They filled up the front ten seats, and one man was left standing. The driver noticed the man standing. Then he looked back at Rosa and the people sitting near her and demanded their seats. But Rosa and three other people did not move.

The driver spoke a second time and a man in the window seat next to her stood up. Rosa moved to let him pass. She looked across the aisle and saw that the two women were also standing.

Rosa moved over to the window seat. She had begun to realise that the more African American people gave in and did what they were told, the worse they were treated.

Some people have said that she didn't give up her seat because she was tired, but that was not true. She was not tired physically, but she was tired of giving in.

The bus driver saw her still sitting there, and asked her again to stand up. Rosa refused. He said that he would have her arrested. Rosa replied, 'You may do that.'

The driver got out of the bus and stayed outside for a few minutes, waiting for the police.

As she sat there, she tried not to think about what might happen to her. She knew that anything was possible. She could be manhandled or beaten. She could be arrested.

But she tried not to think too deeply about what might happen to her, or she might have got off the bus. So she chose to remain and wait for the consequences.

# Rosa Parks — Glossary

## Characters

Rosa Parks	an African-American civil rights activist
Raymond Parks	Rosa's husband

## The Story

abolish	to formally put an end to
dignity	being worthy of respect, or a composed manner
High School diploma	academic qualification for US school leavers

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)	an African-American civil rights organization in the United States
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persecute	to subject someone to ill-treatment, particularly because of their skin colour
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'police power'	United States constitutional law, to enforce order
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provoke	to deliberately make someone react, possibly making them angry or annoyed
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segregation	the separation of racial groups in daily life
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slavery	when people are treated as the property of someone else
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vote	a method for making a group decision
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