

Rosa Parks honored by Congress with full-length statue

Written by Maya Rhodan, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – As Black History Month came to a close, a Civil Rights icon made history once again in the halls of the U.S. Capitol.

Last month, in ceremony hosted by President Obama and members of Congress, Rosa Parks became the first Black woman to have her full-length likeness depicted in the National Statuary Hall.

The statue of Parks, which stands at 9-feet tall, depicts the Civil Rights icon seated and clutching her purse to commemorate her refusal to move to the back of a Montgomery, Ala. bus, sparking the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 that lasted more than a year.

During his speech, President Obama told the story of Parks' encounter with the bus driver on Dec. 1, 1955 which led to the boycott.

Parks had been kicked off the bus by the same driver twelve years prior for entering through the front door when the back was two crowded.

"He grabbed her sleeve and he pushed her off the bus. It made her mad enough, she would recall, that she avoided riding his bus for a while," President Obama said. "And when they met again that winter evening in 1955, Rosa Parks would not be pushed."

Later, when Parks refused to move from her seat, even after the bus driver who had kicked her off the bus 12 years before threatened, and later delivered on his promise, to have her arrested, she remained.

"Some schoolchildren are taught that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat because her feet were tired," then Sen. Obama remarked at Rosa Parks' funeral in 2005. "Our nation's schoolbooks are only getting it half right. She once said: "The only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

For 385 days, Black people across Montgomery boycotted the bus system until it was desegregated; a feat President Obama said last Wednesday led to "the entire edifice of segregation" beginning to tumble like the "ancient walls of Jericho."

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Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga), who grew up in Troy, Ala., only 40 miles from Montgomery, did not meet Parks until he was a student at Fisk University.

"I was only 15 years old during the Montgomery bus boycott," Lewis said. "But I, like everyone else I knew in Alabama, had a deep admiration and respect for Rosa Parks because of her dignity, her courage and her integrity."

President Obama referred to Parks as a woman who "defied the odds and defied injustice."

Although known for sparking the bus boycott, Parks' activism extended far beyond refusing to be removed from her seat. Parks was an eternal activist who served in her local NAACP, and worked with Congressman John Conyers of Michigan from 1965-1988.

At 74, Parks opened the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, an organization that educates and trains disadvantaged youth for employment. Twelve years later President Clinton honored an 86-year-old Parks with a Congressional Gold Medal.

"Rosa Parks held no elected office. She possessed no fortune; lived her life far from the formal seats of power. And yet today, she takes her rightful place among those who've shaped this nation's course," President Obama said during the ceremony.

Parks, whose casket became the first of an African American to lie in the Capitol Rotunda when she died in 2005 at age 92, now stands among 100 of the most notable leaders in our nation's history.

"Rosa Parks' singular act of disobedience launched a movement. The tired feet of those who walked the dusty roads of Montgomery helped a nation see that to which it had once been blind," President Obama said during the unveiling. "It is because of these men and women that I stand here today. It is because of them that our children grow up in a land more free and more fair; a land truer to its founding creed."

The icon would have turned 100 on Feb. 4, joins the likenesses of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sojourner Truth in the hall of more than 180 pieces of art that celebrate men and women who are "illustrious for their historic renown."

Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-Ohio), the current chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, released a statement on the unveiling praising Parks for her "dedication to ensuring no human being is treated like a second class citizen."

She added, "I am grateful to Mrs. Parks for her contributions to our country. As the statue of Mrs. Parks will remind every person who walks through the halls of the U.S. Capitol, the sacrifices and the fight to secure civil rights in this country are far from over."