

## Claudette Colvin

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin boarded a bus home from school. Fifteen years old, the tiny Colvin attended Booker T. Washington High School. She'd been politicized by the mistreatment of her classmate Jeremiah Reeves and had just written a paper on the problems of downtown segregation. On the bus home that day, the white section filled up. A white woman was left standing. The driver called out, and the three students sitting in Colvin's row got up but Colvin refused. "We'd been studying the Constitution...I knew I had rights."

The standing white woman refused to sit across the aisle from her. "If she sat down in the same row as me, it meant I was as good as her," Colvin noted. The driver yelled out again, "Why are you still sittin' there?" Colvin recalled. "A white rider yelled from the front, 'You got to get up!'" A girl named Margaret Johnson answered from the back, "She ain't got to do nothin' but stay black and die." There were thirteen students on the bus that day, most of them her classmates.

Two cops roughly arrested her and pulled her off the bus. Other black people on the bus said Colvin "fought like a little tigress", but Colvin maintained that she went limp and "didn't fight back." In the patrol car, the officers mocked her and made comments about parts of her body. Colvin worried they might try to rape her; she tried to cover her crotch and put her mind on other things. "I recited Edgar Allan Poe, Annabel Lee, the characters of *Midsummer's Night Dream*, the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm."

Various civil rights activists in Montgomery were outraged by the arrest and began to organize. Rosa Parks and white ally Virginia Durr began fundraising for young Colvin's case, and more than one hundred letters and a stack of donations streamed into Parks' apartment. Parks was hopeful that the young woman's arrest would embolden other young people to action and spark interest in the NAACP youth meetings. She encouraged Colvin to get active in the youth council.

Black community members met with the city, and various promises were made. At a second meeting with city officials, they took a petition to the bus company and city officials which asked for more courteous treatment and no visible signs of segregation on the bus. Tired of the city's "run-around", Parks refused to join them: "I had decided I would not go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors."

Colvin's case went to trial in May. Colvin had been charged with three crimes. The judge strategically dropped two of the charges (for disturbing the peace and breaking the segregation law) but found her guilty on the third for assaulting the officers who arrested her. Since Colvin had only been convicted of assault, appealing her case could not directly challenge the segregation law. The community was outraged. Some people stayed off the buses. But Colvin was young and seen as "feisty" and "uncontrollable" by many adults and lived on the wrong side of town. Ultimately, civil rights leaders deemed her not the right kind of plaintiff to organize around.

There is a myth, however, that they dropped her because she was pregnant. Colvin was not pregnant when the community decided not to pursue her case. Later in the summer, Colvin found out she had become pregnant by an older man. When this news came to light, many felt further convinced they had done the right thing in not pursuing her case. Over time, the stories would change so Colvin would be pregnant at the time of her arrest and trial — which was not the case.

According to Colvin, Mrs. Parks was the only adult leader who kept up with her that summer. Colvin had been a member of the NAACP Youth Council before the arrest and continued to attend Youth Council meetings. Parks made Colvin secretary of the council, trying to nurture the young woman's spirit and budding leadership. Claudette Colvin recalled that she only went to Youth Council meetings "if I could get a ride" and sometimes she would "stay overnight at Rosa's — she lived in the projects across the street." Parks exhibited a certain forcefulness and strictness with the young people. According to Colvin, Parks "was very kind and thoughtful; she knew exactly how I liked my coffee and fixed me peanut butter and Ritz crackers, but she didn't say much at all. Then when the meeting started, I'd think, Is that the same lady? She would come across very strong about rights. She would pass out leaflets saying things like 'We are going to break down the walls of segregation.'" Parks would make Colvin tell the story of her bus arrest over and over. "After a while they had all heard it a million times," Colvin recalled, "They seemed bored with it."

Colvin would become one of the plaintiffs on the federal case, *Browder v Gayle*, filed in February 1956 during the boycott which ultimately led to the desegregation of Montgomery's buses.

**Related primary source:** [Claudette Colvin's arrest record](#)