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History 3311F: African American History from Slavery to Reconstruction

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Video Diary Reflection:

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Freedom and Justice for All

The Montgomery Bus Boycott officially began on December 4th, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama. However, the actual event that spurred this rally, which, in turn, sparked the Civil Rights Movement, occurred four days earlier. Rosa Parks, a middle-aged African-American woman, refused to give up her seat to a white man on the racially segregated bus system. Arrested and fined, her unjust treatment triggered a furious response from the black population in her city. African men and women alike created a system of carpooling to protest the segregated buses. Their boycott lasted for 381 days.¹ As they made up over 75% of the civilians who rode the city transit system, the city suffered deeply as a result of their action. Accordingly, on December 20th, 1956, the United States Supreme Court ruled against the Montgomery laws bus segregation as it was unconstitutional. They ruled that it violated the 14th Amendment, enacted as a result of the Civil War almost a century ago, which declared that all citizens, regardless of race, have equal protection and rights under federal law. Through this first mass revolt, Rosa Parks became one of the symbols for black segregation in the Civil Rights Movement.²

In present day, The Henry Ford Museum, located in Dearborn, Michigan, exhibits, under the banner “Freedom and Justice for All”, the very bus where Rosa Parks refused to give up her

¹ “Rosa Parks Bus - The Story Behind the Bus.”, published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/story.asp>.

² “MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT”, published 2010, <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/montgomery-bus-boycott>.

seat. On the day of Rosa Parks's arrest, it seemed that no one had recorded the serial number of the bus or coach ID. However, the staff at the bus company did believe it to be a particular vehicle (Serial Number 3112; Coach ID 2857);³ when the company closed in the early 1970s, a Mr. Summerfield bought it on a whim. It rested in the family's back garden as a toolshed for thirty years. When Mr. Summerfield died, his sons attempted to auction off the bus, claiming it to be Rosa Parks's bus. Museum staff at The Henry Ford Museum, led by Malcolm Collum, went to extreme lengths to determine whether this was the case. In the end, they were successful when they recovered the station manager Charles Cumming's notes, upon which he jotted down the bus and coach number in a newspaper article related to Rosa Parks's arrest.⁴

Clearly, as the bus had been left unprotected for thirty years, there was a lot of necessary restoration before the bus could be put on display. Estimates of the total cost of restoration are \$300, 000.⁵ "Its seats and engine had been removed, many windows were broken, metal had rusted through and the paint job was a mere shadow of its former self."⁶ Museum staff did extensive research into everything about the bus at its prime, in an attempt to reach their goal of reformatting it to become the bus of 1955, to restore the bus where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.⁷

Restoration of historical artifacts has become a heated debate among museologists. In The Henry Ford Museum itself, there were extreme cases on each side. The JFK presidential limousine was actually modified before it came to the museum, whereas the 2011 Daytona 500

³ "Rosa Parks Bus - Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration.", published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>.

⁴ "Rosa Parks Bus - Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration.", published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>.

⁵ "Rosa Parks Bus - Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration.", published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>.

⁶ "Rosa Parks Bus - Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration.", published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>.

⁷ "Rosa Parks Bus - Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration.", published 2002, <https://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>.

remains exactly how it was – including the confetti that was showered on it when it won!⁸ And so the argument arises between “the two fields [...] conservation and restoration”.⁹ Using historical organs as examples of artifacts, John R. Watson examines this concept. Traditionally, restoration has the goal of restoring said object to its original form whilst conservation wishes to preserve the material.¹⁰ Clearly, in the case of the Rosa Parks’s Bus, the museologists took the restoration route. Even the seat she sat on has been replaced. So, then, the question becomes, can the shell of the former bus properly represent Rosa Parks’s story?

Yet, on my visit to the museum, stepping onto the bus remained compelling. Sitting where Rosa Parks’s sat still felt extraordinary. What the museum, it appears to me, genuinely sought to recreate was not the bus but the moment that Rosa Parks, and African-Americans all over Montgomery, Alabama, and the entire USA, began to fight the Civil Rights Movement. And that is exactly what the re-creation of the bus captures: the historical moment, the first whisper, the first “No”, that would bring about freedom and justice for all.

⁸ “About Racing in America”, published 2015, <http://www.thehenryford.org/racinginamerica/exhibit.asp#prettyPhoto/5/>

⁹ Joel Speerstra “Book Reviews, Artifacts in Use: The Paradox of Restoration and the Conservation of Organs, by John R. Watson.” *Early Keyboard Journal*, 219.

¹⁰ Joel Speerstra “Book Reviews, Artifacts in Use: The Paradox of Restoration and the Conservation of Organs, by John R. Watson.” *Early Keyboard Journal*, 220.

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