

# NATIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT 2020

## Teen Resistance to Systemic Racism



### STUDENT GUIDE Case Study and Conversation Kit

*Claudette Colvin and the fight for civil rights*



• Smithsonian

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The National Youth Summit is made possible by the A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation and the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation K-12 Learning Endowment. The National Youth Summit is held in collaboration with the following partners.



*Cover illustration by Rina Alfonso Osawa/Studio Aorta (@studioaorta)*

# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Thank you for participating in the Smithsonian's National Youth Summit on Teen Resistance to Systemic Racism. This packet contains resources and materials to help you prepare, discuss, and take action in response to the guiding question: **How can young Americans create a more equitable nation?**

The National Youth Summit will be held on Tuesday, September 22, 2020, at 3:00 p.m. EDT. At this time, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History will host a live panel discussion connecting stories of teenagers in the past fighting to address systemic injustice to those of the present. The event will also set aside time for students to discuss and summit on the guiding question and create recommendations for themselves, their peers, communities, and democracy about the power of teenagers to shape our present and future.

The 2020 National Youth Summit is centered on the case study of Claudette Colvin—a 15-year-old Black student in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 who refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus and testified in the legal case that brought an end to segregated busing in Montgomery. The summit will provide digital platforms and facilitators for students to convene, discuss this vital history, and examine the power of teens activated today to fight systemic racism.

In the following document, you will find three sections of resources.

- **Section 1:** Case study and thinking prompts about Claudette Colvin's fight against systemic injustice. Use these resources to get ready to discuss this vital history and the power of teens activated today to fight systemic racism.
- **Section 2:** Discussion questions and strategies. Use these prompts and resources as you prepare to have your summit discussions with classmates and peers and to guide your conversation.
- **Section 3:** Resources for taking action. Use these to apply what you have learned and envision both large and small ways you can inform the world around you.

# SECTION 1: CASE STUDY

## GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What prompts a person to challenge systemic injustice?
- What choices do individuals and groups make when they fight systems of oppression?



A segregated streetcar in Birmingham, Alabama. Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives

## INTRODUCTION

Millions of Black Americans who gained freedom after the Civil War hoped to join society as equal citizens. Some white Americans welcomed them. Others, though, used ignorance, racism, and fear to spread racial divisions. By 1900, new laws and old customs had created a segregated nation that turned Americans of color into second-class citizens.<sup>1</sup>

In northern states, segregation included race-based housing rules put in place by the U.S. government and real estate agents. It also led to poor access to jobs, discriminatory hiring practices, and acts of terror. In the South, states passed “Jim Crow” laws to keep Black people separate from white people. White authorities claimed that services for Black people in segregated spaces were “separate but equal.” In reality, they were far inferior to those enjoyed by white people.

Jim Crow laws included public transportation. In the segregated South, white passengers rode at the front of the bus, and Black passengers rode at the rear. In Montgomery, Alabama, city bus rules stated that no rider had to give up a seat unless another was available. Yet, white riders expected Black riders to give up their seat if the bus became crowded. Black passengers who refused to do this faced arrest, threats, and physical abuse by bus drivers, police, and other authorities.

Such restrictions angered many. The Black residents in Montgomery suffered under these rules for decades and prayed for change. But in 1955 there was reason for hope. A year before, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional in the landmark ruling *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In the following years, civil rights leaders around the country fought to desegregate schools and other public areas. This included the city bus system in Montgomery.



Sign board, bus sign, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Nancy L. and Paul Newfield

## CLAUDETTE COLVIN

In March 1955, a 15-year-old Black student named Claudette Colvin rode the Montgomery city bus home from school. She refused to give up her seat to a white woman. Police arrested her and took her to jail. The courts convicted her on three felony charges, but later dropped two of the charges.

Colvin's protest took place almost nine months before Rosa Parks got arrested for the same violation. That arrest led Black residents to boycott the city bus system for an entire year.

*The actions people take to create change have important effects on society, local communities, and the people themselves. This case study asks you to think about Claudette Colvin's actions in protesting segregation and the impact they had.*

Girl, 15, Guilty In Bus Seat Case  
The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Mar 26, 1955.  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender  
pg. 1

## Girl, 15, Guilty In Bus Seat Case

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — A 15-year-old girl who refused to move to the rear of a city bus was found guilty in Juvenile court here last Friday on charges of assault and battery, disorderly conduct and with violating a city ordinance which makes it "unlawful for any passenger to refuse or fail to take those seats assigned to the race which it belongs."

The girl, Claudette Colvin, was declared a ward of the state and placed on probation pending good behavior.

Robert W. Cleere, driver of the bus, told the court that the girl was seated near the front of his

bus with a Negro woman when a group of white persons boarded the bus. Cleere said he asked both the girl and the woman to move to the rear. He said the woman moved but that Miss Colvin remained in her seat. Cleere said he then called police.

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*The Chicago Defender (National edition), March 26, 1955*



Claudette Colvin, Archive PL / Alamy Stock Photo

## WHAT PROMPTS A PERSON TO CHALLENGE SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE?

Colvin's refusal to give up her bus seat to a white woman happened because of her lived experiences. In later interviews, she talked about the people and events that shaped her decision.

### **Jeremiah Reeves: Witnessing Injustice**

Jeremiah Reeves was a popular and talented young jazz musician in Montgomery. He was also Claudette Colvin's neighbor. Police arrested Reeves when he was 16. He confessed to the crime and was sentenced to death. He later withdrew his confession and maintained his innocence, saying police pressured him to plead guilty.

Black leaders in Montgomery believed Reeves was innocent and wrongfully accused. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Reeves in jail and said, "One of the authorities had led him to the death chamber, threatening that if he did not confess at once he would burn there later." The U.S. Supreme Court tossed out Reeves's conviction in 1954. Yet, a new, all-white jury condemned him to death in only 34 minutes. He died at age 22 on March 28, 1958.

Claudette Colvin spoke about how Reeves's case helped her recognize social injustice:

*"Jeremiah Reeves's arrest was the turning point of my life. That was when I and a lot of other students really started thinking about prejudice and racism. I was furious when I found out what had happened . . . The hypocrisy of it made me so angry . . . That changed me. That put a lot of anger in me. I stayed angry about Jeremiah Reeves for a long time."*<sup>2</sup>

### **High School Teachers: Learning About the Past**

Claudette Colvin remembers the critical role her Black teachers played in forming her worldview. Her history teacher, Josie Lawrence, "taught us all the different nations of Africa and the periods of African history." She reminded students to take pride in their heritage. English teacher Geraldine Nesbitt "made us see that we had a history, too—that our story didn't begin by being captured and chained and thrown onto a boat. There had been life and culture before that." The two teachers worked together during Negro History Week and lead discussions on local racial injustice. "I was grateful for it and totally receptive," Colvin recalled years later. "I'd had enough of just feeling angry about Jeremiah Reeves. I was tired of hoping for justice."<sup>3</sup>

Motivated by her teachers, she turned her feelings into action. "Whenever people ask me: 'Why didn't you get up when the bus driver asked you?' I say it felt as though Harriet Tubman's hands were pushing me down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth's hands were pushing me down on the other shoulder. I felt inspired by these women because my teacher taught us about them in so much detail," Colvin said in a 2018 interview.<sup>4</sup>





## PROMPTS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

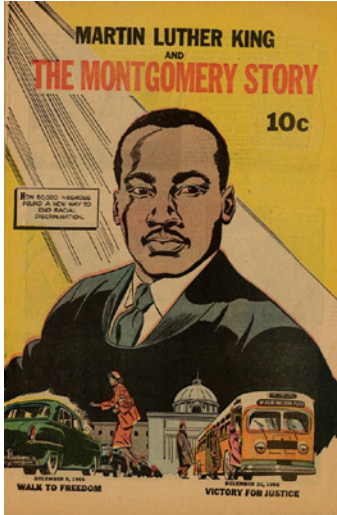
What role did Ms. Colvin's high school teachers and Jeremiah Reeves play in influencing her decision to refuse to give up her seat on the bus? Give three examples of how these experiences shaped her.

Have you ever felt it necessary to take action on something you believe in strongly? If so, why did you feel this way? Did you take action? Why or why not?

Who are some of the individuals in your life who have shaped your identity and inspired you to stand up for what you believe in? How did they inspire you?

## WHAT CHOICES DO MOVEMENTS MAKE WHEN FIGHTING SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION?

### Choosing the Right Moment: The Start of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts



"Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story" pamphlet. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Montgomery police officer takes Rosa Parks's fingerprints following her arrest as a boycott organizer in February 1956. Getty Images

Nine months after Claudette Colvin's arrest, local activist Rosa Parks took similar action. She refused to give up her bus seat to a white rider and got arrested. Colvin's actions raised awareness, but Parks's actions set off a boycott of the Montgomery bus lines. Thousands of Black residents rode the bus to work, often for white employers. After Parks's arrest, though, they refused to ride for an entire year.

Why did Rosa Parks's refusal to move spark a citywide bus boycott while Claudette Colvin's did not? Much of this rests on the strategies of Montgomery's NAACP leaders. E.D. Nixon, the head of the local NAACP chapter, had considered Claudette Colvin a potential test case for challenging the city's segregation laws. But Nixon and other NAACP leaders concluded that the younger woman might not be the best choice to rally around. They never explained why.

Many, including Colvin, suspected that her young age, lower socio-economic status, and unexpected pregnancy several months after her trial all played a role. On Colvin's pregnancy, Rosa Parks believed that "if the white press got ahold of that information, they would have a field day. They'd call her a bad girl, and her case wouldn't have a chance." Parks was a seamstress and a longtime NAACP activist. She had a job, a husband, and was seen as "morally clean," according to E.D. Nixon. "I had to be sure that I had somebody I could win with," he later recalled. <sup>5</sup>



Read the following reflection by Claudette Colvin on Rosa Parks's arrest and the Montgomery bus boycott:

*When I heard on the news that it was Rosa Parks, I had several feelings: I was glad an adult had finally stood up to the system, but I felt left out. I was thinking, "Hey, I did that months ago and everybody dropped me." There was a time when I thought I would be the centerpiece of the bus case. I was eager to keep going in court ... Maybe adults thought a teenager's testimony wouldn't hold up in the legal system. But what I did know is that they all turned their backs on me, especially after I got pregnant. It really, really hurt. <sup>6</sup>*

In a later 2017 interview with *Teen Vogue*, Colvin said:

*I was a little disappointed [at being left out], because the whole movement was about young people, saying we want more from America. We want to stand up and be first class citizens. The discrimination that's going on, whether gender or racial or whatever, religious. We want it to be brought out and defeated.*



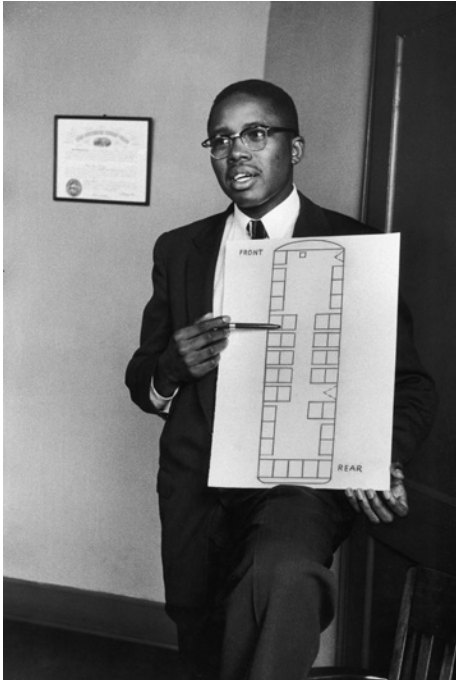
## PROMPTS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Why might Montgomery's NAACP leaders have chosen to organize the boycott after Rosa Parks's arrest instead of Claudette Colvin's? Did they make the right choice in using Parks as a case to rally around? What would you have done if you had been in E.D. Nixon's shoes?

After Parks's arrest, Colvin recalled thinking, "*Well, maybe she's the right person—she's strong and adults won't listen to me anyway.*" <sup>7</sup> Have you ever shared Colvin's feelings about not being listened to as a young person? What were the circumstances, and how did you react?

What do you think could happen if the actions and ideas of young people had more power? How can teenagers harness the power that they do have to impact social issues?

## Continuing the Fight: *Browder v. Gayle*



NAACP Attorney Fred Gray arguing *Browder v. Gayle*, 1956. Getty Images



*Arizona Sun*, November 22, 1956. Courtesy of Library of Congress

The Montgomery bus boycott went on for more than a year after Rosa Parks's arrest in December 1955. In that time, the NAACP filed a civil lawsuit that claimed Montgomery's segregated bus system violated the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. That amendment ensures equal protection under the law for all U.S. citizens. Led by attorney Fred Gray, the lawsuit (*Browder v. Gayle*) tried to overturn the law that allowed segregated transportation in Montgomery.

One of the plaintiffs in the case—and one of the star witnesses—was Claudette Colvin. Fred Gray and the NAACP asked her to testify. Colvin took the stand in May 1956 and talked about her experience on the Montgomery bus the year before. She defended her actions and those who were boycotting the buses. Her testimony played a crucial role in the court's decision to declare Montgomery's segregated transport systems unconstitutional. The city's lawyers appealed the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling that deemed segregated buses unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court may have banned segregated buses in Montgomery, but the boycotts continued for six more weeks. Mayor William A. Gayle refused to follow the order. Federal marshals came in December 1956 to force the mayor to integrate the bus system.



## PROMPTS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The case *Browder v. Gayle* was filed on February 1, 1956, after almost three months of bus boycotts. Why might Montgomery's Black leadership have decided that a legal case was a good idea in addition to the boycotts protesting injustice?

According to Frank M. Johnson, the federal judge who ruled in favor of Colvin and her fellow plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle* and would go on to decide several other high-profile civil rights cases, "All the boycotts and sit-ins and marches in themselves did not cure the illness of discrimination. It was the court decisions that did it." <sup>8</sup> Was Johnson correct: Did the court decisions "cure" discrimination? Is discrimination "cured" today?

Assess the different ways that each of the following challenged the injustice of segregation:

- Claudette Colvin's high school teachers
- Claudette Colvin
- Rosa Parks
- The NAACP

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY TO CONTINUE LEARNING

Research the Montgomery bus boycott and summarize your findings in two paragraphs. Did you encounter Claudette Colvin? If so, how and where? What can the inclusion (or exclusion) of Colvin's story in this history tell you about how history is recorded and written?



## PRIMARY RESOURCE ANALYSIS

### CONFLICTING NARRATIVES AND HOW HISTORY IS SHAPED

What happens when two narratives of history don't agree with each other? This primary resource exercise looks at how history is shaped by providing competing versions of the same event—the arrest of Claudette Colvin by Montgomery police officers.

Below, you will find two different perspectives. The first comes from a police officer who arrested Colvin for refusing to give up her bus seat. He wrote it immediately after the event. For decades, this was the only publicly available and existing account of Colvin's arrest.

The other is based on author Philip Hoose's interview with Claudette Colvin nearly 50 years later. It is an oral account, told by Colvin and recorded by Hoose. The author used the interview to reconstruct what happened that day from Colvin's point of view.

Read the following historical context. Then study the two accounts and use the following guiding questions to check the written and oral records. Be prepared to compare the two sources and draw conclusions on how history is shaped.

#### Historical Context:

Claudette Colvin rode a crowded bus home from Booker T. Washington High School on March 2, 1955. She sat behind white people in the “colored” section, but refused to give up her seat to a white woman who wanted to sit in the same row. The bus driver called the police. Minutes later, white Montgomery officers boarded the bus and arrested her. Read the report filed by the officers and then compare it to Claudette Colvin's memory of her arrest.



Montgomery police monitor bus boycott participants waiting for carpools, 1956. Getty Images

YMK  
POLICE DEPARTMENT  
CITY OF MONTGOMERY

Date 3/2/55-Wednesday 19

Complainant Robert Clare, white male

Address Montgomery City Lines Bus Inc. Phone No. 7321

Offense Ch. 6, Sec. 11 Reported By Above

Address - Phone No. -

Date and Time Offense Committed 3/2/55-3:41 P.M.

Place of Occurrence Bibb and Commerce St's

Person or Property Attacked See Below

How Attacked -

Person Wanted -

Value of Property Stolen - Value Recovered -

Details of Complaint (list, describe and give value of property stolen)

We received a call at Bibb and Commerce St's., in regards to seeing a bus driver of the Highland Gardens Bus. When we arrived there we were informed by the driver of the Highland Gardens Bus that there were two colored ~~female~~ females sitting opposite two white females, that refused to move back with the rest of the colored. These colored were sitting forward, left side, of the rear entrance. An unidentified colored female that was sitting in this disputed seat moved to the rear when we asked her to, but Claudette Colvin, age 15, colored female, refused. We then informed Claudette that she was under arrest. She struggled off the bus and all the way to the police car. After we got her in the police car she kicked and scratch me on the hand, also kicked me in the stomach. (Ward)

Witnesses: Mr. Collins  
Cameron, 623 W. Shawnee Dr., (WM) Mr. Glen N. Seabury, 1st Nat. Bank Bld'g.,  
Ph. 2-5911, (WM)

THIS OFFENSE IS DECLARED:

UNFOUNDED ☐  
CLEARED BY ARREST ☐  
EXCEPTIONALLY CLEARED ☐  
INACTIVE (NOT CLEARED) ☐

Officers Paul Headley-T. J. Ward

Division Patrol

Time 5:25 P.M.

10M--Davis--1-54

**Assess the source:**

1. Who is the author of the document?
2. How long after the actual event was this document written?
3. Why did the author write it?
4. When was the document written?
5. Who is the author's intended audience?

**Think about the historic context**

1. What else was happening in history at the time the document was written?
2. What might shape the author's perspective of the event in question?

**Critically evaluate the information:**

1. What did you find out from this source that you might not find anywhere else?
2. What questions still remain after examining this source?



### Now read Claudette Colvin's account of her arrest:

*They [police officers] came to me and stood over me and said, "Aren't you going to get up?" I said, "No, sir." He shouted, "Get up" again. I started crying, but I felt even more defiant. I kept saying over and over, in my high-pitched voice, "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right!"*

*One cop grabbed one of my hands and his partner grabbed the other and they pulled me straight up out of my seat. My books went flying everywhere. I went limp as a baby—I was too smart to fight back. They started dragging me backwards off the bus. One of them kicked me. I might have scratched one of them because I had long nails, but I sure didn't fight back ... I was crying hard. The cops put me in the back of a police car and shut the door....*

*All ride long they swore at me and ridiculed me. They took turns trying to guess my bra size. They called me "n----- b---h" and cracked jokes about parts of my body. I recited the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm over and over in my head, trying to push back the fear.<sup>9</sup>*

### Assess the source:

1. Who is the narrator of the source?
2. How long after the actual event was this source recorded?
3. Why did the narrator share it?
4. When was the source recorded?
5. Who is the narrator's intended audience?

### Think about the historic context:

1. What else was happening in history at the time of the events described?
2. What might shape the narrator's perspective of the event in question?

### Critically evaluate the information:

1. What did you find out from this source that you might not find anywhere else?
2. What questions still remain after examining this source?



### COMPARE, ANALYZE, & DISCUSS

1. What are some of the differences between how the arresting officer described his interactions with Claudette Colvin and her memory of the events? What might account for those differences in interpretation?
2. Assess both accounts, keeping in mind the perspective of both authors. Which do you believe? Do you believe both? Explain your reasoning.
3. Other African American occupants of the bus said Claudette Colvin physically resisted arrest. She “fought like a little tigress,” according to witnesses cited by historian Jeanne Theoharis in her book *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. How does this impact the way you view Colvin’s narrative? Justify your answer using information from this case study.
4. For over 50 years, the police report was the only publicly available description of Claudette Colvin’s arrest. How has this shaped the way students since then have understood this historical event?

## SECTION 2:

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

The National Youth Summit will take place during the week of September 22, 2020, at 3:00 p.m. EDT. Students nationwide will summit on the guiding question for this event and the supporting questions below.

### DRIVING QUESTION:

### HOW CAN YOUNG AMERICANS CREATE A MORE EQUITABLE NATION?

### SUPPORTING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What are the circumstances that make it urgent to challenge systemic injustice?
- What tools do individuals and movements have to fight systems of oppression?
- Does it matter what story is told and who gets to tell it? Why?
- What methods do teens use to claim power? How can the actions and choices of teens shape our shared democracy and create a more equitable nation?

### USE THE STRATEGIES BELOW TO PREPARE FOR CRITICAL DISCUSSION WITH YOUR PEERS, TEACHERS, FAMILIES, AND OTHERS.

### SITUATE YOURSELF.

- Start with yourself. Use an identity chart, like this [identity wheel shared by the American Library Association from Sunny Kim and Nikola Andrews](#), to create a graphic of your lived experience. This information can stay private and does not have to be shared. As you reflect on your identity chart, examine where you have felt experiences of privilege and oppression.
- Connect to history. In what ways do you connect to the case study of Claudette Colvin? What resonated with you? What frustrated you?
- Be curious about the experience of others. What do you want to know about the experience of others and their reaction to the case study?

## ESTABLISH YOUR EXPECTATIONS.

The National Youth Summit is meant to be a challenging and complex discussion with no easy answers. Before going in to this setting, take the time to write down your expectations.

- Expectations for yourself. What behaviors or attitudes will you deploy in the discussion to foster collaboration, mutual respect, and productive discussion? How will you keep this in mind during the discussion?
- Expectations of others. What behaviors or attitudes do you hope others will bring with them to the discussion? How will you adjust if your expectations don't meet reality?
- Expectations of the summit. What do you want out of the summit discussion?

## ASK QUESTIONS. A LOT OF QUESTIONS.

Asking questions is hard work and it can be intimidating to do. Use the Harvard University's Project Zero thinking routine [Question Starts](#) to practice this skill. Select at least four of the question stems. Then, complete the questions based on the expectations and identity work you completed.

## SECTION 3: TAKING ACTION TOOLKIT

Through historical thinking and critical discussion, the 2020 National Youth Summit examined the racist acts committed against Claudette Colvin and young people's experiences with bigotry and inequality. This toolkit provides suggestions and resources to empower teenagers today to act against racism. This includes developing empathy with those who think differently or come from different backgrounds than they do. It also means building media literacy skills and taking informed action.

### EMPATHY

The questions below are designed to help you imagine the experiences of and build empathy for others. Think about these questions individually, with a partner, and in small groups—each time you learn something new about others and yourself.

- Have you heard family stories about experiencing racism or bigotry? If so, what was your reaction when you heard them?
- Have you heard family stories about seeing racist behavior or practices? If so, how did those make you feel?
- Have you heard family stories about standing up to racism or bigotry? What did you think about those acts? What do you think you would have done in a situation like that?
- Is there a particularly powerful story in your family about an experience with bigotry? What do you think makes it powerful? How does it make you feel?
- Have you shared these stories with others? Is there one you'd like to share?
- Have you experienced racism or other forms of bigotry? Choose a particular experience to share.
- Have you seen people being treated in a racist or bigoted way? If you have, have you done anything about it? Why or why not?
- Have you ever stepped in when you saw bigoted behavior? If yes, what did you do and how did you feel?

You can also use Harvard University's Project Zero Thinking Routine Step In – Step Back – Step Out as a tool to help you engage in responsible discussion.

## MEDIA LITERACY

Media, in many forms, can shape how people think, how they view others, and how their own communities act. To combat racism, it is critical that young people are media literate. They should understand the source and motivation for the media they are consuming. This helps them choose the best sources to go to learn about anti-racism. This list of resources from the National Association of Media Literacy Education is a good place to start:

<https://namle.net/publications/race-equity-social-justice-resources/>

We also recommend the following sites to learn about race and racism:

- National Museum of African American History and Culture: Talking About Race  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist?fbclid=IwAR0fHW7DWpaZY0pv94lBPp1I1Cfv2cdUdtRt7nmkN5yg-R48GloZIlHDTc>
- Teaching Tolerance: Teaching About Race  
<https://www.tolerance.org/moment/racism-and-police-violence>
- Boston University Center for Antiracist Research  
<https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/>
- Watch Ibram X. Kendi's Ted Talk  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/ibram\\_x\\_kendi\\_the\\_difference\\_between\\_being\\_not\\_racist\\_and\\_antiracist?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/ibram_x_kendi_the_difference_between_being_not_racist_and_antiracist?language=en)

## INFORMED ACTION

Empathy and media literacy are important mindsets and skills of civic life. With these, teenagers can be better equipped to take action in combating racism. Then, they can work toward the goal of building a more equitable nation.

What can be done? It's not an easy question to answer, but history can provide some ideas. Here are a few examples:

- Telling stories can be powerful ways of changing the way we remember history. As a result, it changes the way we think about the present. Think about it: how did learning the story of Sojourner Truth affect Claudette Colvin? How has learning about the story of Claudette Colvin affected you? Share stories such as Sojourner Truth's and Claudette Colvin's with others. Then, use the prompts above to build understandings, question assumptions, and foster empathy among your friends and family.
- Learn from the actions of Claudette Colvin and find the courage to speak up in hard situations. If a friend or family member makes a thoughtless comment about race, be brave and say something. Telling a personal story from history or your own experience can be a low-key way to challenge someone. It can also help that person build empathy.



- Be mindful of your own words; go beyond intent to deeply consider the impact of what you say.
  - Ask family or friends about words or phrases with racist histories behind them that they no longer use. *For example:* many people now ask children to sit “crisscross applesauce” instead of “Indian style.” Kids in the 1970s would have used the older term. Talk about whether it was hard or easy to change language. Be positive about this successful shift in language.
  - Review the list of phrases tied to slavery and racism found in the link below. Do you use any of those phrases or hear them often? Talk with family or friends about how they’ve already eliminated racist language. Then, bring their attention to these phrases. Support one another as you work to get rid of them. This glossary of terms is a good source: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/becoming-us/glossary>.
  - Learn about the differences between culture appropriation and culture appreciation. This resource from Teaching Tolerance can help start a conversation about this: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/appreciation-and-appropriation-outside-the-classroom>. Discuss this with your peers, classmates, teachers, and families. What aspects of Black culture have society appropriated? What do you think should be done to rectify this?

## REFLECTION

Pause to reflect on what you have learned and experienced during the National Youth Summit. In what ways have you expanded your understanding of others? How has your thinking changed about how teens can create a more equitable future?

Use the Beginning-Middle-End thinking routine from Harvard’s Project Zero to help you process and reflect. Think about the discussion you participated in and any related actions you have taken or plan to take. How are these experiences part of your story of fighting to address systemic injustice? Choose one of the questions below to help you plan your answer.

- If you are in the beginning of your story, what might happen next?
- If you are in the middle of your story, what has happened before? What might be about to happen?
- If you are at the end of a chapter in your story, what might that chapter be?

# TIMELINE

## 1939

### Sept 5:

Claudette Colvin is born in Birmingham, Alabama.

## 1952

### Sept:

Claudette Colvin enrolls in Booker T. Washington High School in Montgomery, Alabama.

### Nov:

16-year-old Jeremiah Reeves convicted and sentenced to death.

## 1954

### May 17:

U.S. Supreme Court outlaws racial segregation in public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

## 1955

### Mar 2:

Claudette Colvin refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus and is arrested.

### Mar 18:

Claudette Colvin is tried and convicted of three felonies: assaulting a police officer, disturbing the peace, and violating Alabama's segregation law.

### May 6:

An appeal by Claudette Colvin's legal team results in the dismissal of two felony charges. One, assaulting a police officer, remains on her record.

### Summer:

Claudette Colvin participates in NAACP youth meetings with Rosa Parks.

### Aug 28:

14-year-old Black youth Emmett Till murdered in Mississippi by two white men after he allegedly whistled at the wife of one of the men. Learn more in [this blog post](#) from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

**Oct 21:**

18-year-old Mary Louise Smith refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, pays a fine, and is released.

**Dec 1:**

Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus and is arrested.

**Dec 5:**

The Montgomery bus boycott begins. Rosa Parks is tried and convicted of violating Montgomery's segregation laws.

**Dec 12:**

Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) proposes reforms to bus system and begins talks with white Montgomery city leaders.

**1956****Jan:**

Montgomery's white city leaders and police step up their pressure campaign to intimidate and harass Black leaders, sabotage the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), and undermine the bus boycotts. Learn more about the bus boycotts and the MIA here in this [blog post](#) from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

**Feb 1:**

NAACP lawyers Fred Gray and Charles Langford file *Browder v. Gayle*, arguing that the Alabama state statutes and Montgomery city ordinances mandating segregation were unconstitutional.

**May 11:**

Claudette Colvin testifies at *Browder v. Gayle* trial.

**June 5:**

By a 2-1 decision, the U.S. Circuit Court sides with the plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, agreeing that segregation on Alabama's intra-state buses was unconstitutional. Defendants appeal.

**Nov 13:**

U.S. Supreme Court upholds the circuit court's decision on *Browder v. Gayle* striking down segregated buses in Alabama. Defendants appeal.

**Dec 17:**

U.S. Supreme Court rejects appeals by the City of Montgomery and State of Alabama.

**Dec 20:**

Federal marshals serve written notices to Montgomery city officials to desegregate buses. Montgomery bus boycott ends after 381 days.

# GLOSSARY

## 14TH AMENDMENT

The 14th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified on July 9, 1868. It granted citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.” This included former enslaved people recently freed. Additionally, it said states could not deny any person “life, liberty or property, without due process of law.” A state could also not “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” By directly mentioning the role of the states, the 14th Amendment expanded the protection of civil rights to all Americans. Attorneys and judges have cited it in more litigation than any other amendment.

## BROWDER V. GAYLE

*Aurelia S. Browder v. William A. Gayle* was a lawsuit filed on February 1, 1956, by NAACP lawyers Fred Gray and Charles D. Langford. It referenced four Black women who were mistreated on Montgomery, Alabama, city buses. The lawsuit challenged state and city laws that required segregation on Montgomery buses. In June 1956, a U.S. Circuit Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, which included Claudette Colvin. The defendants appealed the decision. That appeal made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. On November 13 of same year, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s ruling that the statute was unconstitutional. This paved the way for the desegregation of bus lines in Alabama and across the United States. Learn more with [this resource](#) from the King Institute at Stanford University.

## BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION OF TOPEKA

*Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling. It declared that the segregation of Blacks and whites in U.S. public schools violated the 14th Amendment (see above). Chief Justice Earl Warren handed down the unanimous decision on May 17, 1954. It struck down the legal precedent established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which stated that racial segregation in public spaces was legal as long as facilities were “separate but equal.” NAACP lawyer and future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall argued *Brown v. Board of Education*. The lawsuit brought together several cases filed in locations such as South Carolina, Kansas, Virginia, Delaware, and Washington, D.C. It inspired many future lawsuits that aimed to end segregation in other public spaces and facilities. Learn more with [this timeline](#) from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

## FELONY

A crime, typically one involving violence, that is regarded as more serious than a misdemeanor. It is usually punishable by imprisonment for more than one year or by death. Unlike misdemeanors, felonies remain on one’s record for the entirety of one’s life.

## JIM CROW LAWS

The segregation laws known as “Jim Crow” were a formal system of racial discrimination that occurred in the U.S. South. It started at the end of Reconstruction (1877) and lasted until the Black Freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The laws touched almost every aspect of daily life: schools, parks, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, and restaurants. “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs were constant reminders of the forced racial order. In theory, Black Americans received “separate but equal” treatment under the law. Actually, facilities for Black people were often worse than those for white people. White southern authorities also denied Black Americans their right to vote by using literacy tests and other racially motivated criteria. Federal, state, and local governments upheld Jim Crow and many white Americans reinforced it through acts of terror.

## MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

A massive, coordinated effort by Black residents in Montgomery, Alabama, who refused to ride their city’s public buses. It went on for 381 days from December 5, 1955 until December 20, 1956. The arrest of NAACP secretary Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white person, sparked the protest. Participants tried to pressure white city leaders to improve conditions for Black bus riders. At first, they called for courteous treatment of Black riders by bus operators; first-come, first-serve seating for all, with Black seating from the rear and white seating from the front; and Black bus operators driving Black routes. In time, efforts grew into a call to desegregate the bus system entirely.

The Montgomery bus boycott ended after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s ruling (*Browder v. Gayle*) that said segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. The bus boycott showed the potential for nonviolent mass protest to end racial segregation. It served as an inspiration and model for other civil rights campaigns that followed.

## MONTGOMERY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION (MIA)

Black ministers and community leaders in Montgomery, Alabama, formed the MIA on December 5, 1955. It helped plan and direct the Montgomery bus boycott. During 1956, the association organized carpools and held weekly mass meetings with sermons and music. This united the Black community as it boycotted the bus system. The MIA built upon the demands voiced by a group of Black female professionals called the Women’s Political Council. In addition to the goals of the boycott, the MIA worked to better “the general status of Montgomery, to improve race relations, and to uplift the general tenor of the community.” MIA leaders suffered constant surveillance, intimidation, and harassment by Montgomery’s white authorities.

## NAACP (NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE)

The NAACP was founded in 1909 when progressive white activists joined forces with W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American activists. For over a century, the NAACP dedicated its efforts to achieving full political and civil rights for African Americans. At first, the organization focused on ending the practice of lynching. Soon, it began to take on legal cases geared toward eliminating legal segregation (such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Browder v. Gayle*, and many others). It remains the most prestigious and high profile advocacy group on behalf of racial equity for African Americans.

## RACIAL SEGREGATION

The physical separation of people based upon their perceived physical features. The intention is to reinforce notions of white racial superiority. In the U.S. South, segregation was often enforced through Jim Crow laws, which created separate facilities for white and Black people on transport and in public and private facilities such as schools, hotels, restaurants, libraries, swimming pools, restrooms, etc. Segregation took a different form in northern states, where national government housing regulations and real estate agents discouraged Black residents from living in certain areas. Local governments kept many schools segregated even after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision deemed educational segregation unconstitutional. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 declared segregation illegal, but the practice has continued in other forms for decades.

## SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

A term that describes structural inequity in social, political, and/or cultural institutions that favors one party or group over another from the outset. The very nature of the institution causes such inequities to continue and sometimes worsen as time goes on. A common example is systemic racism: that inequities based upon race spread across American institutions, especially in criminal justice, housing, education, etc.

*\*\*Definitions courtesy of the King Institute at Stanford University's King Encyclopedia, the King Center, the Public Broadcasting Service's American Experience website, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. In some cases, definitions have been taken word-for-word from the sources; in others, modifications have been added in consideration of learning levels.*



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## YOUTH SHAPING DEMOCRACY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Check out the Young People Shake Up Elections (History Proves It) video series from the National Museum of American History for more stories of young people shaping democracy in the United States.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/democracy-exhibition/education/young-people-and-elections>

Learn more about the civil rights movement and the role of young people with past National Youth Summits from the National Museum of American History.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/nys>

## CLAUDETTE COLVIN

Read *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*, by Phillip Hoose (2009), winner of the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

Listen to a 2009 National Public Radio interview with Claudette Colvin and Phillip Hoose:

<https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin>

Read an interview with Claudette Colvin in Ellen Levine's book

*Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (1993)

Watch an interview with Claudette Colvin in 2013 on the news site *Democracy Now!*:

[https://www.democracynow.org/2013/3/29/the\\_other\\_rosa\\_parks\\_now\\_73](https://www.democracynow.org/2013/3/29/the_other_rosa_parks_now_73)

Read Roni Jacobson's interview with Claudette Colvin in the October 19, 2007, edition of *Teen Vogue*: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/claurette-colvin-explains-her-role-in-the-civil-rights-movement>

## THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Check out the Civil Rights History Project from the National Museum of African American History and Culture: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/oralhistory/civil-rights-history-project>

Explore related resources about the civil rights movement from the National Museum of American History <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/major-themes/theme/civil-rights-movement>

Learn more about the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/index.html>

Visit Stanford University's Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute for historical context and primary sources on the Black struggle for freedom / civil rights movement and the Montgomery bus boycott, including Claudette Colvin: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu>

See the Library of Congress's documents on the bus boycott, part of its Rosa Parks collection:  
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/rosa-parks-in-her-own-words/about-this-exhibition/the-bus-boycott/>

Read *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, a firsthand account of the boycott by NAACP leader Jo Ann Robinson (1987)

Read *Freedom Walkers: The Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, by Russell Freedman (2006)

Read about other historical figures who attempted to desegregate street cars, buses, trains, and other modes of transportation in the United States:

<https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/desegregation/transportation-protests>

Watch volumes 1-3 of *Eyes On The Prize*, the authoritative documentary by PBS on the civil rights movement (Public Broadcasting System, 1986)

Read the accompanying book, *Eyes On The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, by Juan Williams (1987)

Read political scientist Jeanne Theoharis's biography of Rosa Parks (*The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 2013) and check out the website for her research:

<https://rosaparksbiography.org/bio/>

Read Jeanne Theoharis's book on the framing of civil rights history (*A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, 2018)

## **BROWDER V. GAYLE**

Read about *Browder v. Gayle* in the *Teaching Tolerance* magazine:

<https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/desegregation/transportation-protests>

Check out *Teaching Tolerance*'s corresponding toolkit on *Browder v. Gayle*:

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/toolkit-for-browder-v-gayle>

Read Stanford University's Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute's description of the legal case and trial: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/browder-v-gayle-352-us-903>

Read the Library of Congress's documents on *Browder v. Gayle*:

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/rosa-parks-in-her-own-words/about-this-exhibition/the-bus-boycott/browder-v-gayle-class-action-lawsuit-bus-situation/>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Separate is not equal: Segregated America,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History (<https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/segregated-america.html>)

<sup>2</sup> Quotes in this section taken from Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pgs 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> Quotes in this section taken from Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pgs 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor-Dior Rumble. “Claudette Colvin: The 15-year-old who came before Rosa Parks.” BBC World Service, March 10, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-43171799>

<sup>5</sup> Quotes in this section taken from Gary Younge’s article entitled “She would not be moved” in British newspaper *The Guardian* (Friday, December 15, 2000) and Juan Williams’s book *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), pgs 62-63.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pg 61.

<sup>7</sup> Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pg 61.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pg 77.

<sup>9</sup> Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), pgs 31-32.