Rosa Parks, in her own words, revealed at the Library of Congress

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WASHINGTON — Rosa Parks is known as "the first lady of civil rights" and "the mother of the freedom movement." Her refusal in 1955 to give up her bus seat for a white male passenger led to her arrest and inspired a campaign to end racial segregation on buses.

Despite her pioneering role in the fight for racial equality, the public has never thought of Parks as an angry protester. Instead, she has always been portrayed as proper, gentle and ladylike.

A black-and-white photograph that shows Rosa Parks re-enacting her refusal to give up her seat fits the image we have of her. She is conservatively dressed in a hat and patterned dress, and holding her handbag tightly on her lap so as not to bother any of the other passengers. She certainly does not seem militant — that is, combative and aggressive.
Calm, Determined, Angry

However, there was much more to Parks than her public image suggests. Journals and letters from roughly the same period as her 1955 arrest show that she was feeling hurt and angry. They reveal that she saw the daily humiliations of segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, as soul-crushing, to the point that “the line between reason and madness grows thinner.”

“Such a good job of ‘brain washing’ was done on the Negro, that a militant Negro was almost a freak of nature to them,” she wrote. An African-American who spoke up forcefully against injustice was often “ridiculed by others of his own group.”

Both versions of Parks’ persona — the calm, if determined protester and the furious agitator — are revealed in intimate detail in a newly released trove of documents. The collection includes 7,500 manuscripts and 2,500 photographs collected throughout her long life.

The documents are on loan to the Library of Congress for the next decade.

The public will have access to the collection beginning Wednesday, which would have been Parks’ 102nd birthday. She died in 2005 at age 92.

Much We Did Not Know

The journals detail her daily life as a seamstress in the Montgomery Fair department store, where black employees were forced to eat lunch leaning up against the blacks-only bathroom. They show her raw anger at the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi, less than four months before Parks’ arrest. Parks called Till’s murder a killing “that could be multiplied many times in the South.”

The documents are very varied. They range from a peanut butter pancake recipe scribbled on the back of a bank envelope, to a program for a brunch honoring activist Angela Davis, whose defense on murder charges she supported. There are postcards from the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., a worn Bible, and a badge in her name for the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration drive of 1964.

Parks’ image as a shy, proper black woman “was the public persona she thought was important to maintain because of the tenor of the times she lived through,” said Adrienne Cannon, an expert on African-American history working for the Library of Congress. “But in this collection, we hear more of that militant voice.”
Cannon said that she believed Parks — whose political activism was better understood among civil rights activists and historians than the general public — wanted history to see her in a more complex light. The papers were maintained as a sort of time capsule, for a day when her more militant side could be understood.

“She held onto them until the end of her life, the most personal of the personal, because she wanted us to know the true Rosa Parks,” Cannon said.

**An Early Activist**

The story begins at an early age. Parks recalls her fear as a 6- or 7-year-old, “keeping vigil with my grandpa” who stood watch with a shotgun to protect their rural Alabama home from the Ku Klux Klan.

“I wanted to see him kill a Ku Kluxer,” she wrote.

Parks was already an activist — influenced by her husband, her grandfather, and an Alabama civil rights group known as the Women’s Political Council — by 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man.

“I had been pushed around all my life and felt at this moment that I couldn’t take it any more,” she wrote. “When I asked the policeman why we had to be pushed around? He said he didn’t know. ‘The law is the law. You are under arrest.’

“There is just so much hurt, disappointment and oppression one can take,” she wrote.

Parks’ arrest for refusing to give up her seat inspired a 13-month campaign in Montgomery. Blacks began boycotting buses — that is, they avoided taking them — as a way to pressure bus companies into ending segregation. The protest ended after the U.S. Supreme Court declared that segregated public buses were not constitutional.

**A Pope And A President**

The documents on view at the Library of Congress show that Parks was deeply involved in the boycott. For example, on the back of a datebook from Montgomery Fair, she jotted names of carpool drivers, who were needed to help blacks avoid using the bus.

Parks, who lost her job after her arrest, moved with her husband to Detroit in 1957. She did not find steady employment until 1965, when she began working for Democratic Congressman John Conyers Jr.

Documents from her later life include a photo with Pope John Paul II and the certificate for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, signed in 1996 by President Bill Clinton.
Parks never had children, but later in her life received birthday cards from students all over the world. Among them were a batch she kept from the Prairie View Intermediate School in Texas, sent in 2000.

“Dear Mrs. Parks,” a boy named Zack wrote in orange crayon. “I think what you did for African-Americans is great. Was it scary to go to jail?”
Quiz

1. Select the paragraph from the section "Much We Did Not Know" that identifies civil rights issues important to Parks aside from the bus segregation laws.

2. Which sentence from the article BEST explains why Parks decided to protest segregation and the bus rules?
   
   (A) They reveal that she saw the daily humiliations of segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, as soul-crushing, to the point that “the line between reason and madness grows thinner.”
   
   (B) “Such a good job of ‘brain washing’ was done on the Negro, that a militant Negro was almost a freak of nature to them,” she wrote.
   
   (C) An African-American who spoke up forcefully against injustice was often “ridiculed by others of his own group.”
   
   (D) Both versions of Parks’ persona — the calm, if determined protester and the furious agitator — are revealed in intimate detail in a newly released trove of documents.

3. Read the opening sentence from the article.

   *Rosa Parks is known as “the first lady of civil rights” and “the mother of the freedom movement.”*

   The sentence above explains one of the main ideas of the article. Which paragraph explains another main idea from the article?

   (A) However, there was much more to Parks than her public image suggests. Journals and letters from roughly the same period as her 1955 arrest show that she was feeling hurt and angry. They reveal that she saw the daily humiliations of segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, as soul-crushing, to the point that “the line between reason and madness grows thinner.”

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   (C) “Such a good job of ‘brain washing’ was done on the Negro, that a militant Negro was almost a freak of nature to them,” she wrote. An African-American who spoke up forcefully against injustice was often “ridiculed by others of his own group.”

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If this article were rewritten to focus on the civil rights movement, which paragraph would be MOST USEFUL?

(A) Parks’ image as a shy, proper black woman “was the public persona she thought was important to maintain because of the tenor of the times she lived through,” said Adrienne Cannon, an expert on African-American history working for the Library of Congress. “But in this collection, we hear more of that militant voice.”

(B) Parks was already an activist — influenced by her husband, her grandfather, and an Alabama civil rights group known as the Women’s Political Council — by 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man.

(C) Both versions of Parks’ persona — the calm, if determined protester and the furious agitator — are revealed in intimate detail in a newly released trove of documents. The collection includes 7,500 manuscripts and 2,500 photographs collected throughout her long life.

(D) Despite her pioneering role in the fight for racial equality, the public has never thought of Parks as an angry protester. Instead, she has always been portrayed as proper, gentle and ladylike.
Answer Key

1. Select the paragraph from the section "Much We Did Not Know" that identifies civil rights issues important to Parks aside from the bus segregation laws.

   **Paragraph 8:**
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