

>> When Rosa Parks died in 2005, she lay in honor in the Rotunda of the Capitol, the first woman and only the second person of color to receive that honor. When Congress commissioned a statue of her, it became the first full-length statue of an African American in the Capitol. It was unveiled on what would have been her 100th birthday. I sat down with some of my colleagues to talk about their personal memories of these events at the Capitol and the stories that they like to tell about Rosa Parks to visitors on tour.

[Music]

You're listening to "Shaping History: Women in Capitol Art" produced by the Capitol Visitor Center. Our mission is to inform, involve, and inspire every visitor to the United States Capitol. I'm your host, Janet Clemens.

[Music]

I'm here with my colleagues, and fellow visitor guides, Douglas Ike, Ronn Jackson, and Adriane Norman. Everyone, welcome to the podcast.

>> Thank you.

>> Thank you.

>> Great to be here.

>> Nice to be here.

>> There are four of us around this table. I did some quick math, and this is representing 76 years of combined touring experience at the Capitol. And I'm the newbie here with only a decade [laughter]. Before we begin, I'm going to give my colleagues the opportunity to introduce themselves.

>> I'm Douglas Ike, visitor guide here at the U.S. Capitol Building. I am approaching 17 years as a tour guide here at the Capitol.

>> Adriane Norman, visitor guide, October 11, 1988, 32 years.

>> Ronn Jackson, approaching 18 years. This is my life. I don't want to leave. I'll likely be on a cane giving tours here. It is a great joy.

>> So, compared to the time that I've spent at the Capitol, my experience with podcasts is somewhat limited. But, from what I can tell, they are just as much podcasts about the voices of eyewitnesses and enthusiasts as they are about experts. In this case, I feel that we are a combination of all of those things, right? Eyewitnesses to certain events at the Capitol that we're going to be talking about today. I think many of us are enthusiasts in this subject that we are here to discuss. And at this point, as public historians, as people who are tasked with sharing the history of America, the story of America through the artifacts and artworks that we have in the Capitol. We're all experts, right? [Laughter] So, when it comes to Rosa Parks, in particular today, I want to focus first on how you were all eyewitnesses to her final appearance in the Capitol in 2005, October 30th and 31st, with the lying in honor of Rosa Parks. Anyone want to share something that they remember from those days?

>> We'll let Adriane go first, ladies first.

>> Thank you [laughter]. My first thought was that it was such an honor to be a part of it. That was the original thought is that, I'm going to be here for this and be able to witness this. So, that was my first thought. But, as time went on, the thought of the people that loved her so much that they were willing to stand out there in those long lines, because this was before the visitor's center was built so, our visitors were waiting out in the cold overnight. A lot of elderly people, people in wheelchairs, people with walkers and canes that were willing to be here through all of that just to say goodbye to her. And I thought that was very special.

>> I actually came in the next day. I was off so, I came in the morning the day of the first day with my family and friends. And, as we were leaving, I saw the line all the way down to the Washington Monument, people getting ready to come in. And we were talking to the Smithsonian Metro to go home and there were these two little, what I like to call, church ladies. [Laughter] They had their little church hats on and they had their canes and they were just trotting along to go and whoever was driving the shuttle, I don't remember who it was at that time, offered to give them a ride. And one of the ladies said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, we're not going to do that. We're going to do this with Rosa". And she grabbed her friend and she said, "We're going to make our way in because we're going to pay our respects to Rosa". And I just thought, how sweet that was that these two little ladies who should've been out that shuttle, but they made their way down the National Wall, through the line, up the hill, through the Capitol Building to pay their respects to Rosa. That was just so sweet to me. Just amazing. And also, meeting her family. I actually got the opportunity to meet her family because they were coming down to the Speaker's office. And they were so appreciative of everybody being there. One of the nieces, I think, she stopped for a second and looked around the Rotunda and, you know, she was just caught by all these people here to pay their respects to Rosa. And they were trying to get them to leave because they were getting ready to leave and she just stood there for a moment and another one of the relatives said, "Come on, we've got to go, they're trying to leave, they're trying to take us home". And she said, "I just want to look", you know, it was just, it was just something.

>> Rosa Louise McCauley Parks. I've a lot of thoughts. Let's start with a Congressional Gold Medal Recipient. So, she's in a room that she's familiar with. This funeral is a national funeral with respect to Frederick Douglass, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Dr. King, those lying in state in repose, they didn't have that. Mrs. Parks does. The gravity of that is enormous. So, let's just start with perspective. We talk about lying in state, lying in repose, I think to the general public, it's a national funeral. The casket is closed, but that doesn't detract from the atmosphere. As stated, people waited in long lines. And, when they arrive, it's a moment of prodigious reflection. I think, as a young African American, my age and many younger, there's four or five names, by the time you're six or seven years of age that are in your mind. And one of them, without questions, is Rosa Parks. So, when people, observing them walking around the casket in this moment of reflection, they think of this country coming together. I really can't describe how emotional it was to see people that needed water, to see people that needed physical assistance to get around. I had the midnight shift for this event and, as Douglas stated, it's overwhelming for people,

particularly people of her age. There were people, as Douglas - in wheelchairs over 90 arriving. It was a sense of duty, pride, and country, honoring country, really, for us to serve.

>> Yeah. And Mrs. Parks was 92 when she passed away. So, if we can imagine that many of the people coming were contemporaries of hers, that's something you all have mentioned that, were a lot of older folks that came. And also, Ronn, you mentioned what sort of a groundbreaking moment this was because this lying in honor ceremony had only been done one other time, right? In 1998, there were two Capitol police officers that were killed by an armed gunman that came into the building, but other than, this ceremony was almost unprecedented. And Mrs. Parks was the first woman, and remains the only woman, to have her casket placed in the middle of the Rotunda for ceremony. But really, with Mrs. Parks, this was the first time a private citizen, a person who wasn't - didn't hold any type of elected or appointed office. So, it's unique in several ways. And then, she's only the second African American to have her casket placed in the middle of the Rotunda.

>> In the middle of the Rotunda.

>> For a lying in honor ceremony. So, this is the first on several counts.

>> I didn't stay to work the entire night because I had to get home to my children. But I left about 2:00, I think, in the morning. But about an hour before that, I assisted someone, a woman with her children, getting them up to the Rotunda on the elevator, an African American woman. She had two smaller children who were walking age, but they were little, and one in her arms. And, again, this is about 1:00 in the morning so, I asked her, I said "How long have you been waiting," you know, "to come in?" And she said, "About four hours". But she said she wanted her children to be a part of it so that, when they got older, she could tell them the story. She said that she made sure that they all had naps before they came and they all had their dinner before they came so that they would be somewhat comfortable because she didn't know how long they were going to have to be waiting to come in. But that story stuck out in my mind.

>> Yeah, talk about eyewitnesses. I mean, we're here talking about this. You guys were all there at that time, but all of those people that came. And for a little child to grow up knowing that you were there when that happened.

>> Janet, I'd like to say, for a lot of African Americans, Rosa Parks was a family member and that added to all the emotion.

>> Sure.

>> This was extended family. And, for that matter, the world thought highly of Rosa Parks. We should mention about all the people from throughout the world that came.

>> Yeah.

>> And maybe they were not exactly in the region, but came down and said, let's show respect.

>> No, there were actually people who flew here from overseas to pay their respects, from England, France, Germany. That really surprised me as well. I mean, there were people who

- plus there were people who were already here, but they had made plans to be in other states. They changed their plans so they could come here and pay their respects. But they were from other countries. It's amazing.

>> So, that was 2005, October 30th and 31st was the lying in honor for Rosa Parks. And then, I thought we might jump forward in time to something that happened a little bit more recently. And that was in 2013, February 27th was the unveiling of the statue of Rosa Parks. This clip was courtesy of the House Recording Studio.

>> Ladies and Gentlemen, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, the Honorable John Boehner.

>> Everybody can take a seat, thank you. Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning and welcome to the United States Capitol. This is a red letter day for the American people and I'm glad that you're all here and are taking part in this celebration. Since the era of reconstruction, this chamber which once was the Hall of the House of Representatives, has become home to statues sent by the states. Today, we gather to dedicate a national statue of the late Rosa Louise Parks in recognition of her many contributions to this nation and to the cause of freedom. It's the first statue of an African American woman to be placed in this Capitol.

[Applause and Cheering]

>> The one overwhelming word that I heard during the ceremony, excuse me, once the statue was unveiled, powerful. If I may share something, there was a group of kids from Brooklyn, New York, a couple years later. As I'm apt to do with young people, I will ask them one or two words about a statue's posture, not about their life. And I hear words, brave, determined, all of us at this table have heard that about Mrs. Parks. This young man used the word regal. Stayed with me.

>> That's powerful, very powerful.

>> I remember, when the statue was sort of in production, we would hear things about it periodically. And I remember hearing that it wasn't going to show a literal bus seat, but it was going to have a suggestion of a bus seat. So, let's just, for our listeners, maybe describe the statue a little bit.

>> If I could try to describe the statue, the base is about, oh, two and a half feet. It's bronze and she's probably six and a half to seven feet vertically. Envision her seated on the driver's side of the bus and her head is turned to the right. She's wearing glasses. Her purse, if I'm not mistaken, is on the left hand side. And I just think you see Rosa Parks above her chin. It's, oh it's so emotional. It captures your attention. That's what I think about in terms of the statue, it's above her chin and you're just affixed to her. You really are.

>> I like the fact that her ankles are crossed. As Ronn mentioned, she has a little purse and these little lace-up shoes, the detail of this statue is just beautiful. The fact that she was so strong and so determined, but yet, so dainty at the same time. There's an interesting fluid motion there with how the artist tied that in.

>> Yeah, the whole thing is actually almost nine feet tall, with the granite pedestal. And then the bronze of it has been sculpted to sort of look like she's sitting on an extension of the rock. But she's facing out sort of towards the viewers with this look of determination which is really, I think, striking.

>> All - I may, again, thank all of you for joining us in this wonderful ceremony today. In many ways, the statue speaks for itself which is a blessing because no words can do justice to Rosa Parks. Here in the old hall, as she casts an unlikely silhouette, unassuming in a lineup of proud stares, challenging all of us once more to look up and to draw strength from stillness. The child Rosa Parks was shy, reserved, at least on the outside. On the inside, she was absolutely absorbing the Gospel, listening closely to God who, as she said, was "everything to me". Through every ordeal, she'd repeat some scripture to herself. From Corinthians, we were all made to drink from one spirit. From Luke, the parable of the persistent widow who prays and prays for an unjust judge until, finally, he sees the light. So, it's no surprise that, when warned that she would be arrested, Rosa Parks didn't have to look very far for courage. She really didn't have to look anywhere. I felt quite determined, I felt determination, I should say, come over my body like a quilt on a winter night. You see, humility isn't compatible with bravery. And we put God before ourselves when we make in God we trust not just a motto, but a mission, as Rosa Parks did, any burden can be lifted. This statue speaks for itself. And today, we speak for a nation committed to remembering, and more importantly, emulating Rosa Parks. So, we place her here, here in a chamber where many fought to prevent a day like this. And right in the gaze of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy. It brings to mind, Lady Liberty herself, rising amid the titans of finance and presiding over New York Harbor, with a promise of America clear for all to see. For when these trappings of ceremony come down and people from all walks of lives and backgrounds and beliefs will pass through here, pass by one another, some on their way to cast a vote, some just on a tour, it'll be an ordinary route, but one that about half a century ago would have been clearly improbable. I can think of no more perfect way to capture the vision of a more perfect union than to which Ms. Parks has already started.

>> You know, for someone to be tired that day, she looks like a pillar of [laughter] strength. That someone that was tired, you know, how she's depicted is, you know, look at all the statues in that room and I think you could make the argument, that captures your attention probably just as much as [inaudible].

>> It does, it does.

>> Visitors, I find visitors spot her from across the room.

>> Instantly, instantly.

>> Almost the second that they walk in.

>> Yeah.

>> And they're drawn to her. And almost every tour, I have to say, "All right, folks, we're going to do this half of the room first and then we're going to go over there" and sort of let

them know that we're going to head that way. Or else, they start to drift. They're drawn in by it.

>> Isn't it interesting, the two statues that flank her are taller, but you don't, they don't get the same attention.

>> You don't, yeah, you don't see them.

>> Yeah.

>> What's funny is you walk into that room and people see her and, you know, we're talking about other things in the beginning. And somebody will raise their hand and, like, "Well when are you going to talk about Rosa?" [Laughter].

>> He's right.

>> I'm going to get to it, but no, when are you going to talk about Rosa?

>> Yeah.

>> You know, so interesting how people perceive a room when you walk into it. You know, first, they're taken by the statues anyway, then they see her and it's like, okay, let's go look at where she is. Let's go see where she is.

>> So, I find that most of our visitors don't need to be told who Rosa Parks is. And, Ronn, you mentioned this earlier that, you know, she's someone who you learn about at a really young age. What I often find myself saying to the visitors is, you know, I learned about her in school when I was a kid, but what I learned was, she was a seamstress who, one day, decided not to give up her seat on the bus. And, like you said, that she was tired. And it wasn't until much later in my life that I heard the story that she said, "It wasn't just that I was tired, I was tired of giving in". Right? And it's something that I had to learn that I wasn't taught, you know, that I had to learn on my own, that this was a planned action on the part of the civil rights movement. That she was a part of something and that she'd been an activist really her whole life.

>> It is my honor to accept into the Capitol Art Collection this statue of Rosa Louise Parks, a Lady of Liberty for our times and all time. And, with that, it's my pleasure to introduce the President of the United States.

[Applause]

>> Thank you. Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, Leader Reed, Leader McConnell, Leader Pelosi, Assistant Leader Clyburn, to the friends and family of Rosa Parks, to the distinguished guests who are gathered here today. This morning, we celebrate a seamstress, slight in stature, but mighty in courage. She defied the odds and she defied injustice. She lived a life of activism, but also a life of dignity and grace. And, in a single moment, with the simplest of gestures, she helped change America and change the world. 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. I thank all those persons, in particular, the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, both past and present, for making this moment possible.

[Applause]

A childhood friend once said about Ms. Parks, "Nobody ever bossed Rosa around and got away with it". That's what an Alabama driver learned on December 1, 1955. Twelve years earlier, he had kicked Mrs. Parks off his bus simply because she entered through the front door when the back door was too 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. And, when they met again that winter evening in 1955, Rosa Parks would not be pushed. When the driver got up from his seat to insist that she give up hers, she would not be pushed. When he threatened to have her arrested, she simply replied, "You may do that". And he did. A few days later, Rosa Parks challenged her arrest. A little know pastor, new to town and only 26 years old, stood with her. A man named, Martin Luther King Jr. So did thousands of Montgomery, Alabama commuters. They began a boycott, teachers and laborers, clergy and domestics through rain and cold and sweltering heat day after day, week after week, month after month, walking miles if they had to. Arranging carpools where they could. Not thinking about the blisters on their feet, the weariness after a full day of work. Walking for respect. Walking for freedom. Driven by a solemn determination to affirm their God-given dignity. Three hundred eighty-five days after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, the boycott ended. Black men and women and children re-boarded the buses of Montgomery, newly desegregated. And sat in whatever seat happened to be open.

[Applause]

And with that victory, the entire edifice of segregation, like the ancient walls of Jericho, began to slowly come tumbling down. It's been often remarked that Rosa Parks' activism didn't begin on that bus. Long before she made headlines, she had stood up for freedom, stood up for equality, fighting for voting rights, rallying against discrimination in the criminal justice system, serving in the local chapter of the NAACP. Her quiet leadership would continue long after she became an icon of the civil rights movement working with Congressman Conyers to find homes for the homeless. Preparing disadvantaged youth for a path to success. Striving each day to right some wrong, somewhere in this world. And, yet, our minds fasten on that single moment on the bus. Ms. Parks, alone in that seat, clutching her purse, staring out a window, waiting to be arrested. That moment tells us something about how change happens or doesn't happen. The choices we make or don't make.

>> You have to take into account what it was like for them in that time. Not only did you have to give up your seat and move to the back of the bus, but to get on the bus was a whole lot of work. Because you got on the front, paid your fare, got off the bus, went to the back door, then got on the bus and even still had to give up your seat when the bus got full.

>> Sometimes the driver would drive away after you paid.

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> You got off and went to - they wanted you to go in the back door.

>> Right, right, and would pull off and leave you standing there.

>> I have gotten tremendous reactions from visitors just sharing with them the detail that the bus drivers were armed with guns. And you see the look on people's faces when you say something like that and their whole understanding of the event shifts, just that little bit.

>> You know, for what we do, I try to give equal commentary to whatever statue I talk about. But you do find yourself, at least I find myself, tilting to Mrs. Parks, giving just a bit more context. I mean, there have been people that have had encounters like Mrs. Parks well before that. My goodness, even locally here in Alexandria in the 19th Century, we could talk about a lady, Ms. Brown that was on a train that was injured. So, I try to give a little bit of context, say, look, this was not the first person. Particularly, we have so many people that aren't from our country, they might think, look, this is the person that started it and we try to say, look, this is kind of where things change immediately. There's a boycott so, again, perspective. Giving more stories of people involved in the past.

>> It brings to account, too, other names like Pastor Vernon Johns.

>> Oh, Dr. Johns, sure.

>> Who was pastor before Dr. King. And he was pivotal in a lot of starting things to turn around as well. And, you know, he fought in his own way. Some people did not support him, but he fought, in his own way, to change things as well.

>> You know, we spoke a little earlier, when we mentioned about the Gold Medal that Rosa Parks received, the Congressional Gold Medal which is the highest award that Congress can give. And the medals, since they're given to individuals or groups, they're made - custom made for that occasion. And so, there's a relief, a little kind of a rondel portrait of her on the medal. The sculptor, Artis Lane, who made that also sculpted the bust of Sojourner Truth which we have in the Capitol Visitor's Center. And just thinking about other people who tried to desegregate public transportation, Sojourner Truth right here in Washington, D.C. raised the issue that, you know, she was expected to ride in a different section of public carriage. Yeah, and Ronn, you mentioned it was actually a young lady who worked for Congress who, in Alexandria, Virginia, just a very short distance away experienced the same thing. So, I think that's a really important point that visitors should understand that this was something that was happening all over the nation.

>> Yes.

>> Not just in Alabama.

>> No.

>> And Mrs. Parks herself, when she moved to Detroit, said that the things she experienced in the North were different than she experienced in the South, but not necessarily better.

>> Both my parents were raised in Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, not too far from Tuskegee. So, they were older when they had me, I understand the whole concept of what life was like there. And the benefit of those who, just if anyone international is listening, you have to understand that, when you're walking down the street and you can't even hold

hands with the person that you're married to, connected with. Or if you're walking down the street and someone who is not African American, you have to literally walk across the street to the other side to get out of their way. Those kinds of things. And that's what she was tired of and tired of just ignoring it and saying, "No. No more. No more of this." And then, to see her be able to stand up by sitting down, and saying, "No more". You know.

>> Janet, what Rosa Parks did was nonviolent, peaceful, impactful. I wonder how long it would have taken for some action if she doesn't do what she did. I wonder just how long it, you can't help but reflect about that.

>> My parents were traveling through the South by car during this time period. And my mother was thirsty and wanted water, very simple, just wanted water. My dad said he pulled over to a diner, side of the road, they get out, they go in to the front, you know, my wife needs water. The person that met them at the door said, "Sure, we'll give her water, but she's going to have to come around to the back". This is the type of things that were going on. You know, and of course, they left, but they experienced all of this personally which, you know, is why it was so important for my dad to be there on the day that the statue was unveiled.

>> Rosa Parks tells us, there's always something we can do. She tells us that we all have responsibilities to ourselves and to one another. She reminds us that this is how change happens, not mainly through the exploits of the famous and the powerful, but through the countless acts of often anonymous courage and kindness and fellow feeling and responsibility that continually, stubbornly expand our conception of justice, our conception of what is possible. 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. 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. And that is why this statue belongs in this hall, to remind us, no matter how humble or lofty our positions, just what it is that leadership requires. Just what it is that citizenship requires. Rosa Parks would have turned 100 years old this month. We do well by placing a statue of her here. But we can do no greater honor to her memory than to carry forward the power of her principle and a courage born of conviction. May God bless the memory of Rosa Parks and may God bless these United States of America
[applause]

>> Thank you to the House Recording Studio for providing that audio.

[Music]

In 1999, Rosa Parks was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal designed by an artist who made another significant work of art in the Capitol. In our next episode, we get to hear from two of the artist with statues in the Capitol collection.

[Music]

Thank you for listening to Shaping History: Women in Capitol Art. For more information or to book a tour, please go to visitthecapitol.gov. The interviews included in this podcast

represent the personal reflections and opinions of the interviewees and should not be considered as the official views or opinions of the U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center, the Architect of the Capitol or members of Congress.