

Statues Are Living Stories

The Rosa Parks Memorial Statue in Montgomery, AL and the Power of Storytelling

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Background

- The Rosa Parks Memorial Statue was unveiled in Montgomery, AL on December 1, 2019
- Life-sized replica of Parks, and stands 30' from where she boarded the bus
- Sculpted by Clydetta Fulmer, and guided largely by Dr. Felicia Bell, Dr. Howard Robinson, and Mr. Nathaniel Allen

Research Questions

- Why – and if – do monuments matter? What are their value?
- What do they “mean” to people? Especially Civil Rights Monuments?
- Does this value differ amongst different communities and groups of people? Within them?
- What role does storytelling play in relation to monuments? Are the stories the same or different between people and communities?
- Do monuments tell stories? The same stories?

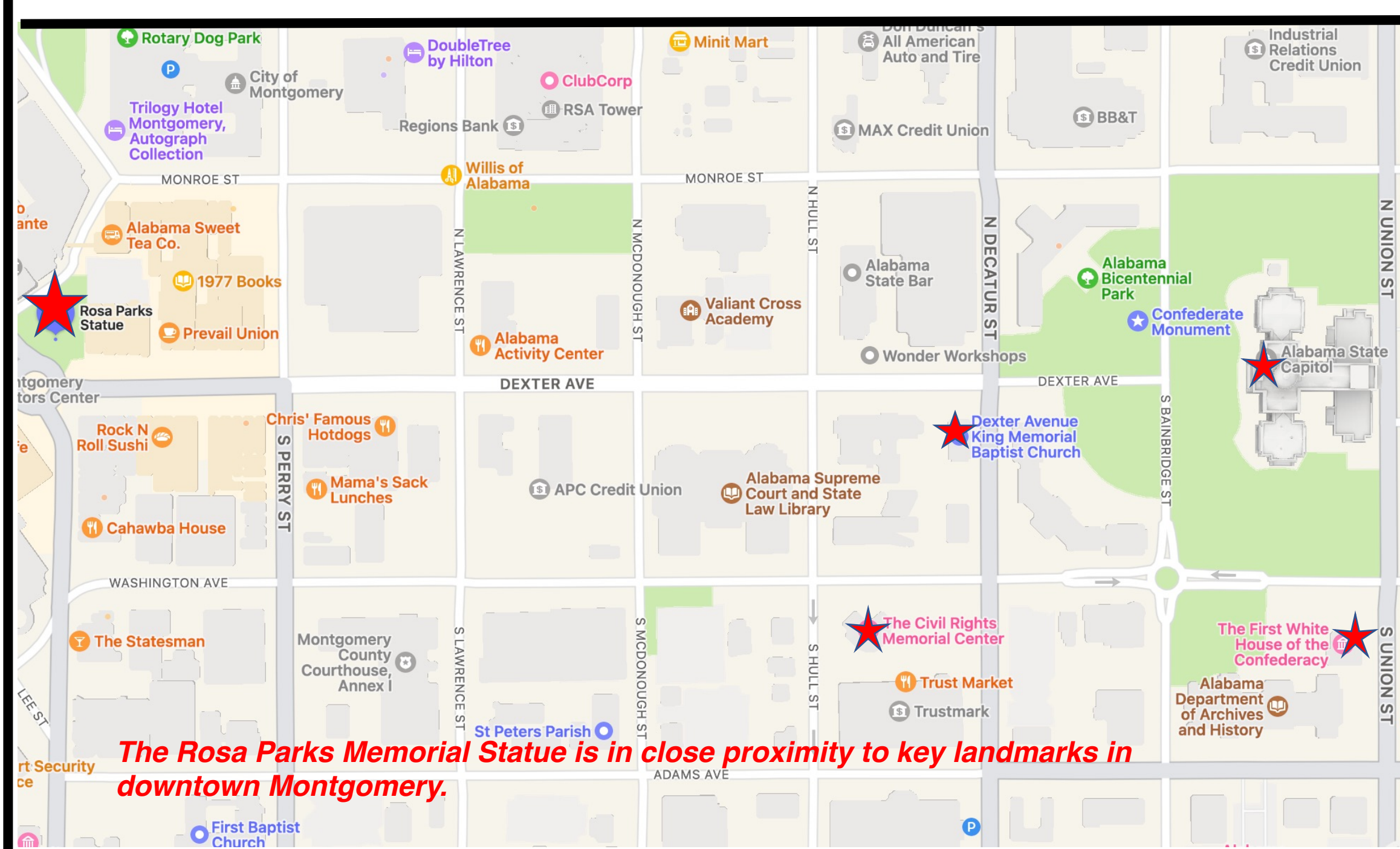
Methods

- Reached out to people connected to the statue (locals, educators, tour guides, etc.)
- Conducted 30-60 minute interviews with each person asking them the same six questions:

1. Who are you, and can you please describe your connection and involvement with the monument?
2. What does it capture best, and what does it fall short on? Is it accurate in relation to its historical context?
3. If you could change anything about the monument, what would you change?
4. From your perspective, how have you seen the community respond to the monument, such as in relation to its creation, location, or message? Has there been any obvious support or backlash?
5. How has this monument personally affected you since it has been completed?
6. Do you think the monument's format – meaning figural, abstract, or more formal, museum-like – matters and makes a difference in how it is valued by the community? Why or why not?
7. (Is there anyone else you know of that I should reach out to on this subject?)

- Asked these questions because they related both to personal experience and community feelings
 - Broad-er questions would gather more diverse and valuable information
- Recorded each with a microphone then uploaded to Otter.ai, a software converting audio files to text

Downtown Montgomery Map



* Via <https://americanhistory.si.edu/profile/1692>.



The Rosa Parks Memorial Statue in Downtown Montgomery

Findings

The Rosa Parks Memorial Statue has transformed Montgomery.

- ✓ Her stories have come to life, and connected people to the history of Montgomery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the city of Montgomery
- ✓ Helped inspire new artists and art, showing them the power of connecting their art to the community
 - ✓ Not the spark of the Montgomery art movement, but has supported the change
- ✓ Unexpected connections between individuals and groups have occurred, starting cross-worldview conversations

The fact that the monument is a figure matters.

- ✓ People have connected with her as if she was alive, such as giving her flowers or taking photos with her
- ✓ Her location permits frequent interaction with people, who learn her story and all of those connected to her

While there is both support and criticism,

- ✓ Questions have arisen about how Montgomery artists can use their power to inspire and bring people together, and make change



Image via <https://www.wafl.com/2019/12/01/statue-honors-rosa-parks-civil-rights-foot-soldiers-downtown-montgomery/>.

Interviews & Responses

Dr. Felicia Bell

Dr. Felicia Bell is the former director of the Rosa Parks Museum at Troy University in Montgomery. She is currently the senior advisor to Dr. Anthea M. Hartig, the Elizabeth MacMillan Director at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

"It was important that the statue would sit at street level so that people, viewers could be directly you know, on level with it when standing and you get an idea of that you, you know, that she's just like you... I don't think she would have wanted to be on a pedestal."

"I think it needed to be a figure. And, because that is, that's how people identify with her... if you think about how she is depicted in popular culture... people identify with her: the person, the figure."



*Image via www.americanhistory.si.edu/profile/1692.

"When you're standing there, you can kind of get an idea of what the environment what it was like when she was standing nearby, and what she would have seen and perspective, that location, and then looking up Dexter Avenue to the Capitol, and so you kind of get an idea of the views and vistas around and what she would have seen."

"I remember, like, in the cold days, I remember driving by, and I would see people would put a scarf around her neck, the statue, or sometimes I would see a rose in her hand. On her birthday, you know, or something like that. So, you know, it's interesting to see how the public engages with it."

Professor Nathaniel Allen

Professor Nathaniel Allen is the Art Department Chairperson at Alabama State University. He is also on the City of Montgomery Public Art Commission, which guided the city towards funding the Rosa Parks Memorial Statue. He is also an accomplished artists in various mediums such as painting, illustration, digital work, and many others.



*Image via www.alasu.edu/cvpa/visual-arts/departments-chairperson-nathaniel-allen.

"Every once in a while, you'll see a photo where some tourists or somebody will come through and put flowers in or like on Sunday, sometimes she'll have flowers in her hand. And it's like, oh, people are taking care of her."

"And the general population, like 'It's great, oh, it's great!' But that may say a little bit more about the kind of growing pains that Montgomery is having... the art community here has been neglected for a long, long time; a lot of people who grew up here, or from here, that are still here, talked about 10 years ago contemplating moving, because it was just like Montgomery's not gonna- there's just no hope, they're not gonna do anything."

"This single woman that's makes this little presence, but it was kind of, in a way, like a refreshing change. To me, it's like, okay, this is still kind of an iconic person, and it still represents strength. And we talked about her stance and how she needs to be very much solid and resolved and unmoving; I don't know if frail is the right word, but still vulnerable. That is different from heroic statue kind of projection that [Confederate monuments] put on."

I think because it's at that human scale, or a little bit lower, because she's a little bit smaller than the average height. I think that, in a way, communicates that in order to be heroic and make these kind of substantial changes, to the country, world, whatever, you don't have to be this hero-like figure."

Mr. Kevin King

Mr. Kevin King is the founder of The King's Canvas, a creative placemaking space in Montgomery. The King's Canvas gives Montgomery residents, especially lower-income residents, access to art supplies and space to create art, while also offering formal entrepreneurial and life skill development training for artists for financial success from their art.

"Once you start talking about the history, and they've never heard it before, it makes them want to go, because somebody like me who's not necessarily from here, I'm still a part of this community. And they respect what I have to say; some stop and say, 'Wow, we haven't heard this.' And so now you encourage people to go to see the benefits of actually having that level of exposure to memorials and monuments and civil rights attractions."



"But I also think that as we create, we will continue to have conversations with people who aren't like minded, and we can use our art to inspire people."



*Images via www.thekingscanvas.org

"And it's life in that, it's life in being able to have a conversation with someone with a different worldview. By interpreting artwork, and you allow me to have a conversation with you that you wouldn't otherwise have."

"We have an emergence of artists who are not only... Well, I mean, people who realize that they weren't even artists who stopped – who were like me – who stopped doing art for a long time, and started to get back into it because now it's a system that they can kind of, you know, be that they can be introduced to and participate in and build... And so I think the future, I think people are saying now that there are opportunities for them."