

“The northern promised land that wasn’t”: Rosa Parks and the Black Freedom Struggle in Detroit

In 2004, researchers asked high school students across the U.S. to name their top ten “most famous Americans in history” (excluding presidents) from “Columbus to the present day.” Sixty percent listed Rosa Parks, who was second in frequency only to Martin Luther King, Jr (1). There is perhaps no story of the civil rights movement more familiar to students than Rosa Parks’ heroic 1955 bus stand in Montgomery, Alabama and the year-long boycott that ensued. And yet, perhaps because of its fame, few histories are more mythologized. In the fable, racial injustice was rampant in the South (but not the rest of the nation). A quiet seamstress tired from a day’s work without thought refused to give up her seat on the bus, galvanizing the civil rights movement. The country then banded together and eliminated Jim Crow segregation, holding true to its ideals (2).

The real story of Rosa Parks is much more complex—and far more interesting and empowering, as numerous writers such as Herb Kohl, Danielle McGuire, Phillip Hoose, Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward have powerfully documented (3). Indeed, it was Parks’s agency as an activist and ordinary citizen—as well as the community-wide response following her arrest—that turned her action into a movement. Alongtime National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activist, Rosa Parks had spent more than a decade organizing black voter registration, seeking justice against cases of white brutality and legal malfeasance, and advising the youth chapter before her historic bus stand. On December 1, 1955—“pushed as far as I

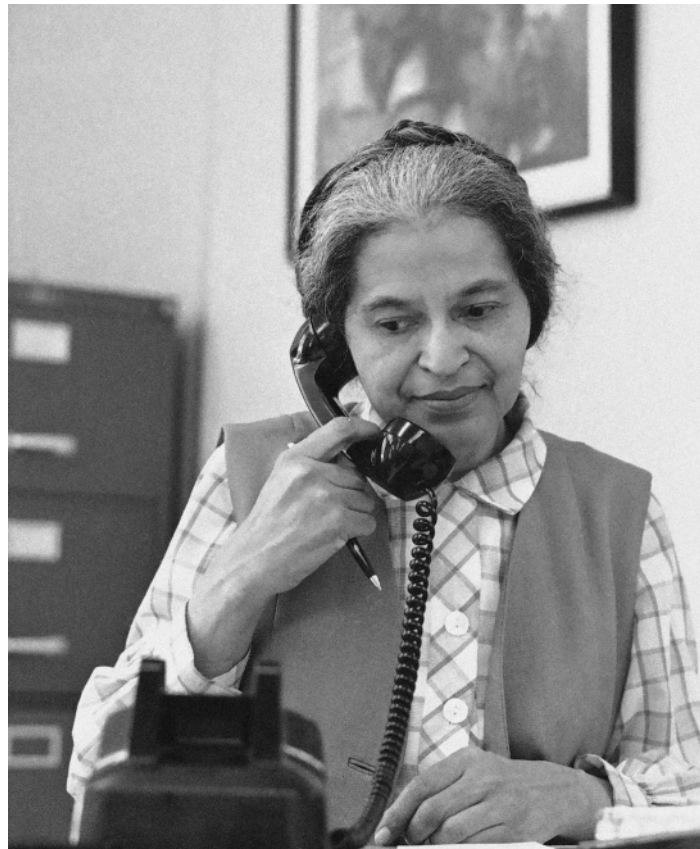


Figure 1. Famous for her civil rights work in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks spent more than half of her life above the Mason-Dixon Line in Detroit, Michigan. She found Detroit nearly as hostile to civil rights as her native South. In this 1971 photograph, Parks attends to constituent needs, working in the office of newly-elected Detroit congressman and former civil rights lawyer John Conyers. Learning about the life of Rosa Parks in the North challenges us to reexamine the scope of the black freedom struggle. (Courtesy of AP Images)

could stand to be pushed”—42-year-old Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. This was not the first time she had resisted on the bus, and numerous other black Montgomerians had also been evicted or arrested over the years for their resistance to bus segregation. For the next 381 days, faced with city intransigence, police harassment, and a growing White Citizens’ Council, Rosa Parks, alongside hundreds of other Montgomerians, worked tirelessly to maintain the boycott. On December 20, 1956, with the Supreme Court’s decision outlawing bus segregation, Montgomery’s buses were desegregated.

Yet the story is even more multi-dimensional than previously recognized. For in August 1957, unable to find work and still facing persistent death threats eight months after the Montgomery boycott ended, Rosa Parks and her family moved to Detroit where her brother Sylvester was living. Parks would remain politically active there for the next forty years (Figure 1). While key aspects of the fable of the simple Montgomery seamstress have been amply challenged, the *southernization* of her story has remained nearly uncontested. Rosa Parks’s sustained critique of northern racism and her half-century of political activities in the Motor City are virtually unexamined (4).

Looking at Rosa Parks’s life in the North provides a different picture of the racial landscape of postwar America and the national dimensions of the civil rights movement. The movement was not simply a struggle between the liberal North and a redneck South, as the fable of Rosa Parks suggests. Parks is so associated with Montgomery, so intertwined

in the public memory with the racism of the Deep South, that the fact that she spent more than half of her life in Detroit hardly penetrates public understanding of her. Her description of Detroit—"the northern promised land that wasn't"—is a palpable reminder that racial inequality was a national plague, not simply a southern malady. What would it mean, then, to follow Rosa Parks northward to Detroit and to foreground the struggle for racial justice in the Jim Crow North?

Coming to Detroit

Rosa Parks made her first visit to the Motor City shortly after her brother Sylvester moved there in 1946, but her husband Raymond had no interest in moving North. In the spring of 1956, in the midst of the bus boycott, she returned to Detroit on the invitation of Local 600, a militant United Auto Workers (UAW) local, to speak to the membership about the boycott. Walter Reuther, the national head of the UAW, opposed inviting Parks to speak, but local members raised the money to bring her themselves (5). Warmly welcomed by the left-wing union activists of Local 600 and the National Negro Labor Council, Parks explicitly linked northern and southern struggles against racial injustice in this talk and other events around the city (6). Members of Local 600 put Parks up at the black Garfield Hotel because in 1956, Detroit's downtown hotels were not open to blacks. Indeed, segregation was rife in the Motor City. Detroit's inner suburbs like Dearborn, Southfield, and Oak Park swelled with whites fleeing black migration to the city. During the bus boycott, the mayor of Dearborn boasted to the *Montgomery Advertiser* that "Negroes can't get in here. . . . These people are so anti-colored, much more than you in Alabama" (7).

So when the Parks family moved to Detroit in August 1957 they found racism "almost as widespread as Montgomery" (8). Arriving in



Figure 2. Opposition to blacks who attempted to move into Detroit's suburbs in the 1950s and 60s had a recent and bloody history. In 1942, hostile white Detroiters placed this sign opposite the Sojourner Truth housing project in the city to prevent black tenants from moving into the building. These tensions helped fuel the deadly Detroit riots of 1943, and undermined the claims of a "colorblind" Detroit that allegedly greeted Rosa Parks when she arrived only fourteen years later. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

the city, Rosa, Raymond, and Rosa's mother lived with family for a bit but then moved to their own place in a neighborhood "almost 100% Negro with the exception of about two families in the block where I live. In fact I suppose you'd call it just about the heart of the ghetto" (9). The visible symbols of segregation were gone, as were some of the most humiliating aspects of public segregation she had so detested in Montgomery—the separate drinking fountains, elevators, buses, and lunch counters. Still, Parks did not find "too much difference" between race relations in Detroit and Montgomery (10).

Black migration to the Motor City swelled in the twentieth century, doubling Detroit's black population between 1940 and 1950 (11). In a northern city like Detroit, the trifecta of state bureaucracy, aggressive policing, and white vigilantism conspired to keep most black families jammed into increasingly crowded neighborhoods while rewarding white families with loans, highways, and municipal services in Detroit's burgeoning white suburbs. Schools were segregated and unequal, and city services were scanty in most black neighborhoods. Fires were common, particularly because many of the buildings were old and made of wood. Moreover, the city picked up garbage only once a week, which meant that in crowded neighborhoods, garbage overflowed. "I don't feel a great deal of difference here, personally," Rosa Parks observed in an interview in 1964. "Housing segregation is just as bad, and it seems more noticeable in the large cities" (12).

Open Housing Struggle

Blacks seeking to move into Detroit's white suburbs encountered many obstacles from banks and realtors, and, if they succeeded, were often met by white hostility and violence (Figure 2). Open housing protests erupted in Detroit, drawing attention to crowded conditions many black families faced in the city and the racial exclusivity of Detroit's suburbs. The claim of a "colorblind" Detroit rang hollow to most of Detroit's black community. Disappointed by the caution of Detroit's NAACP, local activists called for a march to highlight the second class citizenship that blacks encountered in Detroit. On June 23, 1963, Rosa Parks joined Martin Luther King at the front of Detroit's Great March to Freedom (13). The march, held two months before the March on Washington, drew nearly 200,000 Detroiters, nearly all black—rivaling the numbers of Americans that would journey to Washington, D.C. in August (Figure 3).

Later that week, Parks spoke at a luncheon honoring southern civil rights activist Daisy Bates and black millionaire A.G. Gaston. There, she made the comparison between the bus boycott in Montgomery and the open housing movement in Detroit (14). As Parks made clear, blacks in Detroit experienced the same "tiredness" around the persistence of housing segregation that black Montgomeries had felt around the inhumanity of bus segregation. Parks joined the fight around open housing, and when the Detroit Branch of the NAACP led a crowd of two hundred people to protest housing discrimination in suburban Oak Park, on July 27, Parks marched at the front (15).

Rosa Parks at Work

Being a notorious black woman proved to be three strikes in Detroit, and not altogether different from the difficulties she had encountered in Montgomery. Steady, decently-paid work proved elusive. An article in Detroit's black newspaper the *Michigan Chronicle* in 1959 highlighted the economic difficulties her family was encountering: "Work is hard to find" (16). Unknown to most white liberals who had become transfixed with Rev. King's leadership, there had been no welcome wagon from white liberal Detroiters for the "mother of the civil rights movement." Parks found a relatively closed labor market in her new northern home; indeed, black women migrants tended to fare less well economically than black men (17). As in Montgomery, the civil rights community (both white and black) did not offer her any paid



Figure 3. Two months before the March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his original “I Have a Dream” speech in front of a crowd of nearly two hundred thousand Detroiters, assembled for the city’s Great March to Freedom on June 23, 1963. In Alabama, Parks had joined King in the fight to desegregate public transit, while in Detroit, the two combined forces for a similarly pressing issue, the fight for open housing. Contrary to myth, both Parks and King were widely reviled and red-baited by whites, who sent hate mail to both activists. (Courtesy of Detroit News)

employment; “I went to a lot of meetings” Parks noted, “and sometimes when they would take up contributions, but that was never high” (18). So for nearly a decade, the family struggled. Raymond worked as a barber. Rosa took in piecework, and then got a job sewing aprons and skirts ten hours a day at the Stockton Sewing Company. Paid seventy-five cents per piece, it was arduous, exhausting work.

In 1964, Parks volunteered for civil rights lawyer John Conyers’ upstart campaign for “jobs, justice, and peace” in Michigan’s First Congressional District. The district’s boundaries had been newly drawn to address gerrymandering inequities that diminished the voting power of Detroit residents. She helped secure victory for Conyers in the primary by persuading Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Detroit on his behalf (19). King kept his distance from any political endorsements but could not resist Parks’s entreaties. This appearance raised Conyers’s profile considerably, and Conyers won the crowded primary. Upon his election, the new Congressman hired Rosa Parks to work in his Detroit office, attending to constituent

needs—her first paid political position after thirty years of political service.

Doing much of the daily constituent work for Conyers, Parks often focused on socio-economic issues including welfare, education, job discrimination, and affordable housing. She visited schools, hospitals, senior citizen facilities, and other community meetings and kept Conyers grounded in community concerns and activism. Taking up a variety of urban social issues, Parks heard people’s problems and filled in for Conyers at rallies and other public functions. She often joined the congressman in meetings with community activists and traveled with him to national black events. At some workplaces such as the Detroit office of the Internal Revenue Service and the Army Tank Automotive Command in nearby Warren, they were able to get redress for black workers (20).

The need for more public housing was the social issue closest to her heart (21). Residential density in black neighborhoods was often more than twice that in white neighborhoods (22). Having lived in public

housing herself in the Cleveland Courts apartments in Montgomery, she worked to get money for Detroit public housing, particularly as President Johnson's Great Society programs opened up funding for city needs. Thus, Rosa Parks was well-acquainted with the needs of Detroit's poor and working class and the gross economic and racial divides that plagued the city.

Since 1961, the Parks had been living at 2155 West Grand Boulevard (23). Their neighborhood, Virginia Park, had been compromised by urban renewal and highway construction (24). State-funded urban renewal, slum clearance, and highway construction blazed through Detroit in the decades after World War II. By 1962, almost 15 percent of the city had been cleared for urban renewal (25). In March 1963, the Detroit Commission on Community Relations reported that 10,000 structures had been razed or were scheduled for demolition, displacing 43,096 people, 70 percent of them black. Due to segregation and the construction of the Oakland-Hastings freeway (later renamed the Chrysler Freeway), Virginia Park had grown crowded. To accommodate increasing black migration to the neighborhood, many of the apartments were subdivided. The Parks were never able to buy their own home. Their apartment was located about a mile from the epicenter of the uprising that took place in Detroit in 1967.

The Uprising of 1967

Patterns of police harassment and brutality had been publicized for years by groups like the NAACP (26). The civil rights movement in Detroit had garnered few successes by the mid-1960s. While the city was 35 percent black, there were only 217 black officers and only one black inspector in a city police force of 4,709. Many of the social issues Parks knew intimately from her work with constituents and her own experiences in the city came to a head in the summer of 1967. In the early morning hours of July 23, patrons refused to disperse when police raided an after-hours bar, where people were celebrating the return of two soldiers from Vietnam. At the end of 5 days, 43 people were dead—30 at the hands of the police. Property damage was estimated at \$45 million with 412 buildings completely burned. Parts of the city would never be rebuilt (Figure 4).

While Detroit's political leadership claimed that the riots took them by surprise, Parks questioned the sincerity of Detroit's civic leaders and saw the riot as "the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand" (27). The depth of racial injustice in the Motor City combined with the mask of northern innocence proved frustrating for the mother of the movement. Parks had a class analysis of what underlay the riots, "[I]f you looked beneath the surface, we could see . . . the deprivation. I guess for whatever reasons it came about, I felt that something had to be wrong with the system." (28). Parks located the uprising in the long history of white resistance to civil rights demands: "[King's] philosophy didn't accomplish what it should have because the white Establishment would not accept his philosophy of nonviolence and respond to it positively. When the resistance grew, it created a hostility and bitterness among the younger people" (29).

Parks did not cast her years of activism or her protest on the bus as utterly distinct from the actions of the rioters. The city's leadership along with the federal government tried to downplay the concerns and structural inequalities which fueled these disturbances. While greatly saddened by the damage and the violence, Parks took note of the ways that "the establishment of white people . . . will antagonize and provoke violence" (30). Parks and other civil rights activists also drew attention to the police response. "What really went on," Conyers explained, "was a police riot" (31). Officers raided apartments where supposed rioters were hiding, arresting and assaulting many uninvolved Detroiters.

Perhaps the most egregious event came when police killed three young men in the Algiers Motel. While the officers claimed a gun battle



Figure 4. Civil rights and labor activist William Lucy (left) of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees surveys the destruction caused by the 1967 Detroit riots. According to Rosa Parks, black discontent over the social inequities endemic in the city and white resistance to change triggered the uprising. In its aftermath, Parks helped form the Virginia Park district council which promoted a projects to rebuild the area, including the construction of the only black-owned shopping center in the country. (Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University)

had occurred, no weapons were ever found, and witnesses said the young men were deliberately murdered by the police. When the officers faced no sanction and Detroit's newspapers refused further investigation, local activists led by Dan Aldridge and Lonnie Peek called for an independent hearing—a "people's tribunal" in the words of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader H. Rap Brown. The tribunal took place at the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Milton Henry, co-founder of the Republic of New Afrika, served as one of the prosecutors; Ken Cockrel, co-founder of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, was the judge. Parks served as a juror, as did writer John Killens.

Right after the 1967 uprising, living so close to its epicenter, Parks helped form the Virginia Park district council to help rebuild the area. Committed to economic and political empowerment, Parks had long been a leader in her block association and looked for ways to promote local economic development and opportunities for neighborhood youth. The council helped facilitate the building of the Virginia Park community plaza shopping center, where the riots had first begun. It would be the only black-owned shopping center in the country (32).

Making Trouble

Testament to the racism that plagued her new hometown and the national character of the civil rights movement, the last encounter between Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. took place in the spring of 1968 in the exclusive Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe. Parks and a friend went out to hear King. "There was a horrible mess when he tried to speak out there," she explained. "They disrupted the meeting. . . . It was an all-white city" (33). While their activism is usually associated with the South, both Parks and King had long stressed the national character of America's race problem in their speeches. "The racial issue that we confront in America," declared King in a speech to the

National Urban League in 1960, “is not a sectional but a national problem. . . . There is a pressing need for a liberalism in the North that is truly liberal, that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South.”

Moreover, despite the popular belief that Parks and King were beloved outside the South by the early 1960s, she and Martin Luther King were regularly called Communists for their support of open housing and desegregated schools in the North. Parks continued to receive hate mail and calls well into the 1970s in Detroit. One 1972 letter from Indiana made clear the writer’s objections to her move North: “Why didn’t you stay down South? The North sure doesn’t want you up here. You are the biggest woman troublemaker ever” (34).

Conclusion

The idea of the South and the movement unfolding there—and its presumed *difference* from the North—provided a handy but false dichotomy that bedeviled northern activists like Parks (35). In cities like Detroit, public officials regularly refuted black demands with the charge that “this is not the South,” willfully ignoring a growing civil rights movement around housing, schools, jobs, and police brutality. Attributing black poverty and educational deficits to a “culture of poverty” rather than systematic inequality, northern liberals repeatedly expressed their shock at rising militancy and the urban uprisings of the late 1960s—conspicuously forgetting decades of civil rights struggles in their cities which had produced negligible change. To see “troublemaker” Rosa Parks move to a northern ghetto in 1957, to see her active around school and housing segregation, welfare, and police brutality in the 1960s and 1970s, destabilizes that dichotomy, demonstrating the national character of American racism and the many battlefields of the black freedom struggle. □

Endnotes

1. Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, “‘Famous Americans’: The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes,” *Journal of American History* 94 (March 2008): 1188–89.
2. Portions of this essay are taken from my forthcoming biography of Rosa Parks, *Fearless: Rosa Parks and the History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013). See also Jeanne Theoharis “‘A Life History of Being Rebellious’: The Radicalism of Rosa Parks” in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
3. Herbert Kohl, *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (New York: The New Press, 2005) highlights the ways the many myths of the story takes away a sense of agency for young people. See also Danielle McGuire *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010); Phillip Hoose *Claudette Colvin: Twice Towards Justice* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2009); Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward “Dress modestly, neatly. . . as if you were going to church”: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, Peter Lin and Sharon Monteith, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004). The organizing that led to and sustained the bus boycott are well-detailed in Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw’s *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 2005) and in Stewart Burns’ masterful compilation of primary research *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
4. There has not yet been a scholarly biography of Rosa Parks. The only book on her is Douglas Brinkley’s short un-footnoted book *Rosa Parks: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2000), which he did for the Penguin Lives series, which details briefly her work in the North. Her young adult autobiography with James Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Life* (New York: Dial Books, 1992) is an invaluable resource but also gives short shrift to the Detroit portion of her life.
5. Interview with General Baker, October 21, 2009.

6. Beth Bates, “‘Double V for Victory’ Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941–1946” in *Freedom North* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 33.
7. Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), 378.
8. Brinkley, 67.
9. Interview with Rosa Parks, Civil Rights Documentation Project (CRDP) on file at Howard University, 28. Gregory Skwira, “Abus ride a boycott, a new beginning,” *Blacks in Detroit: A Reprint of Articles from the Detroit Free Press* (Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 1980), 18.
10. Parks, CRDP, 26.
11. Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33.
12. As quoted in Sylvia Dannett, *Profiles of Negro Womanhood Volume 2* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Educational Heritage, Inc, 1966), 293.
13. Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 268.
14. “She Started the Revolt,” *Michigan Chronicle* (June 29, 1963).
15. Arthur Johnson, *Race and Remembrance: A Memoir* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 63–64.
16. “Ala. Boycott Heroine Can’t Find a Job!” *Michigan Chronicle* (May 23, 1959).
17. Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 39.
18. Interview with Rosa Parks, *Black Women’s Oral History Project [BWOHP]* vol. 8 (Westport: Meckler, 1991), 256.
19. Interview with John Conyers in his office, March 11, 2011.
20. Interview with Leon Atchison, Larry Horowitz, and JoAnn Watson, May 5, 2011.
21. I am grateful to conversations with Douglas Brinkley that helped me clarify this point.
22. Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).
23. Rosa Parks File 2/7 Box #2 of the George Metcalf Papers on file at the Schomburg Library.
24. Elaine Lutzman Moon, *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: The History of Detroit’s African American Community, 1918–1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 381.
25. Dillard, 260.
26. See Box III C64, Folder 6 and Box II: C65, Folder 5 of the NAACP files at the Library of Congress.
27. Selby, 66.
28. Brinkley, 202–3. Parks, BWOHP, 256.
29. Selby, 66.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Hampton, *Voices of Freedom* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 391.
32. Phone interview with Dorothy Aldridge, October 24, 2010.
33. Interview with Rosa Parks by Steven Millner in *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955–1956* (New York: Carlson, 1989), 566.
34. File 1-7, Box 1 of Rosa Parks Papers on file at the Walter Reuther Library of Wayne State University.
35. For further expansion of this argument, see Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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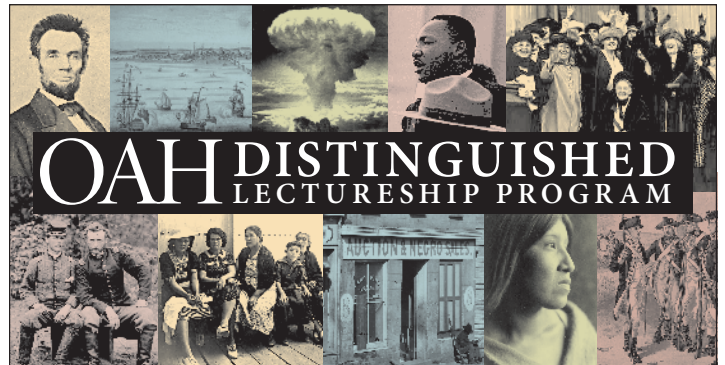
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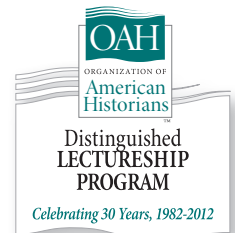
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