

BBC Bitesize

Narrator: America in the 1940s remains a racially divided society. Segregation forces African Americans to live, attend school, travel and eat separately from white Americans. Facing racism, poverty and inequality, they are determined to bring about change.

The foundations of change are laid by everyday people. And civil and human rights activists, such as Ella Baker, teach the next generation of black leaders how to organise. Civil rights activists pursue change in three key ways – passing new anti-discrimination laws, challenging unfairness in court and protesting publicly.

In 1950, Oliver Brown, a black Minister from Topeka, Kansas, wants to send his daughter to the school closest to them, but she isn't allowed to attend, because it's a white only school. Challenging these segregation laws, Brown's legal case goes all the way to the Supreme Court which rules unanimously that segregation in schools violates the US constitution.

But the court ruling meets with massive resistance and because the court failed to put in place a timetable to end segregation, the battle continues.

On the night of December 1st 1955 in Montgomery Alabama, Rosa Parks disobeys segregation custom by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. She has been campaigning against these racist rules for decades and when the bus driver demands that she move for the white passenger, she has had enough and remains seated.

People unite around Rosa Park's defiance and the Montgomery Bus Boycott begins. A young pastor by the name of Dr Martin Luther King Junior helps organise the boycott. Dr King calls for a non-violent response to acts of violence and intimidation.

The boycott leads to another Supreme Court ruling. One that declared segregation on Montgomery's city buses unconstitutional.

However, many local authorities ignore this ruling. By 1960, segregation is still a part of everyday life.

In protest, black college students begin to sit-in at segregated restaurants and this idea spreads across southern states of America. Many are beaten and arrested. But as a result of the sit-ins, some southern cities change their laws.

To end segregation on travel between states, black and white Freedom Riders travel together across state lines. They too are beaten and arrested, causing public outrage, which prompts the federal government to order the immediate desegregation of all interstate buses and trains.

Building on these successes, Dr Martin Luther King Junior helps organise non-violent

protests against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Protestors, including very young children, are attacked with police dogs and water cannon.

Dr King also helps organise a march in Alabama, from Selma to Montgomery, to raise awareness of the need to register black voters.

Despite being met with brutal violence by state police and white terrorists, protestors complete the historic march 3 weeks later.

By 1965, activists have secured major legislative changes – including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ends segregation in public places and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which provides black voters with the protections they need to access their right to vote.

But opposition to racial equality remains strong, and after several attempts on his life Dr King is assassinated in 1968.

The civil rights movement transformed America, but the slow pace of progress means African Americans must continue fighting for equality, giving rise to the Black Power Movement.