

Years Before Rosa Parks, Sarah Keys Refused to Give Up Her Seat on a Bus. Now She's Being Honored in the City Where She Was Arrested



Private Sarah Keys, circa 1952.

Women's Memorial Foundation Register
BY [OLIVIA B. WAXMAN](#)

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At a time when monument removals have sparked national debates on how to remember the past in the present, residents of one Southern city are facing an uncomfortable episode in its history head-on.

The city of Roanoke Rapids, N.C., and Halifax County are declaring Saturday, Aug. 1. this year “Sarah Keys Evans Day,” 68 years after its police arrested Sarah Keys, a 23-year-old Black Women’s Army Corps private, for refusing to give up her seat on an interstate bus for a white Marine. Fined \$25 (about \$240 today) for disorderly conduct, she filed a complaint that—three years later—resulted in an Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruling prohibiting segregation on interstate buses. A proclamation by local Congressman G.K. Butterfield recognizing Evans’ service to her country will

also be presented at the ceremony, and he will submit it to the official record of the House prior to the event.

Following a grassroots [campaign](#) by local Black educators for more recognition of Evans' contribution to American history, Saturday will also see the socially-distant unveiling of a mural illustrating her ordeal. Featuring eight panels by local artist Napoleon Hill, illustrating moments in her story, it is entitled "Closing the Circle." It symbolizes the city's coming around to recognition of her brave stance, says Charles E. McCollum, chair of the Sarah Keys Evans Inclusive Public Art Project.

"I didn't know about [Evans] until a few years ago," says Vernon J. Bryant, chairman of the Halifax County Board of Commissioners. "It's important that we recognize people in our backyard. Whether it's good history or bad history, it's history."

"It's a proud moment," says Krystal Hargrave, Evans' great-niece. "The community prioritizing honoring her during these really uncertain times goes to prove just how important her contributions were. The mural is a symbol of hope, and for the Black community, a way to have a voice."

Evans, who took that name after she married in 1958, is 91 and living in Brooklyn, N.Y. She cannot attend in person, but her niece Julie Ann Graves, who lives nearby in Chapel Hill, will be representing the family.

Reached by phone in the walk-up to the ceremony, Evans tells TIME she sees the monument as a tribute not only to her but also to all of "the women who have been left out" of the 1950s and 1960s chapter of the civil rights movement.

"Black and white women kept the spark going, and I don't think they've been given enough credit," she says. "Each of us have our own story."

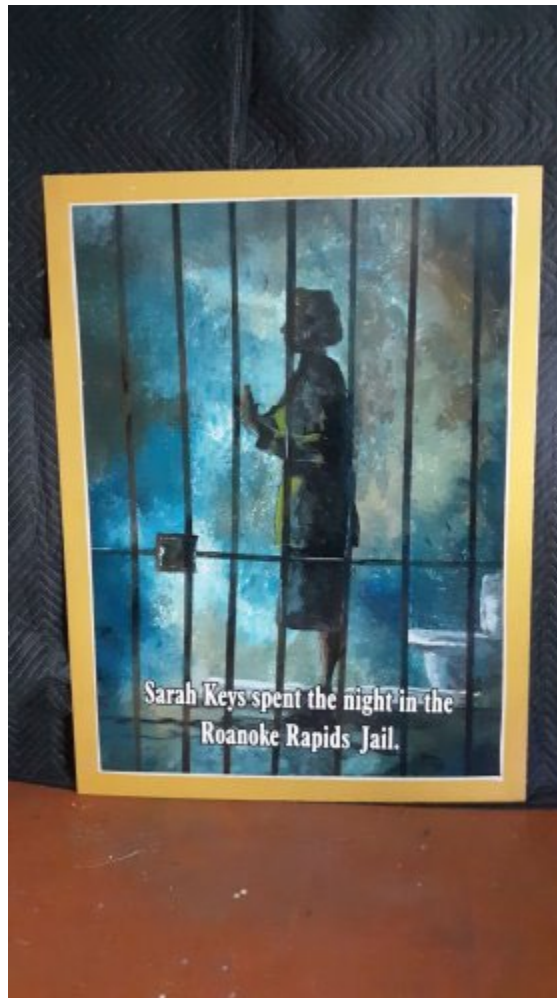
‘I cried and I prayed’

On Aug. 1, 1952, Sarah Keys boarded a bus from Trenton, N.J. to her home in Washington, N.C.—her first visit home since joining the military. When the bus stopped in Roanoke Rapids shortly after midnight to change drivers, the new one told Keys to give up her seat for a white Marine. She refused. Everyone had to get off the bus, and he let everyone get on another bus, but not Keys. Two policeman took her by each arm and escorted her to a police car. Jailers put her in a cell with a mattress so dirty she was afraid to sit down, so she stood all night in full uniform, including her one-and-a-half-inch heels.

“I paced the floor all night, and I cried and I prayed,” she said in a video that was recorded as part of the effort to get a grant to fund the mural. “What is happening to me? What am I going to do?”

She was released the next day and fined. When she got home, her family—who had had no idea where she was—was shocked to hear what had happened. “Sarah was the quietest of us all. This happens to Sarah?” says her sister Cornelia Hargrave of the family’s reaction.

Her father encouraged his daughter to take legal action. After all, in 1946, the Supreme Court had declared state laws enforcing segregation on interstate buses unconstitutional, in *Morgan v. Virginia*, though a loophole allowed private companies to make their own rules. TIME reported back then that the Justices “ducked the racial question and settled everything on the basis of comfortable traveling.” The NAACP referred the Keys family to attorney [Dovey Roundtree](#), who filed a complaint with the ICC on her behalf. It was initially dismissed by an examiner, but Congressman Adam Clayton Powell persuaded the full commission to hear the complaint.



In artist Napoleon Hill's studio, a panel in the new mural shows Private Keys in a Roanoke Rapids jail cell in the wee hours of Aug. 2, 1952, after refusing to give up her seat on an interstate bus to a white Marine.

Courtesy of Napoleon Hill

In the new mural, the first panel portrays a beaming 23-year-old Keys in her Women's Army Corps uniform. The following panels show the bus pulling into the Roanoke Rapids bus station; her arrest; her time in her cell; her father's role as "her greatest supporter for justice;" the setbacks she faced; and Roundtree and Powell. The eighth and final panel illustrates the ICC's Nov. 7, 1955, decision banning segregation on interstate buses.

In *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*—which also responded to a NAACP case challenging segregation on trains and terminal waiting rooms—the ICC [ruled](#):

We conclude that the assignment of seats in interstate buses, so designated as to imply the inherent inferiority of a traveler solely because of race or color, must be regarded as subjecting the traveler to unjust discrimination, and undue and unreasonable prejudice and disadvantage.

By this point, the woman at the center of the case was out of the military and working her dream job as a hair stylist in Harlem. “It is a big relief to have it behind me,” she [told](#) the *New York Times* back then. “My father encouraged me when I needed encouragement.”

“The name of Sarah Keys,” [wrote](#) *New York Post* columnist Max Lerner, “is now added...as a symbol of a movement that cannot be held back.”

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The road to recognition

And yet, what came after was far from the sunshine with which the new mural concludes. Sarah Keys’ story may have ended, but the [fight](#) to end segregated travel reached a new level of national attention when, six days after the ICC decision was made public on Nov. 25, 1955, [Rosa Parks](#) was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, catalyzing the year-long [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#). The ICC didn’t enforce the Keys decision until 1961, amid [attacks on Freedom Riders](#) who rode interstate buses to raise awareness about segregation. As Roundtree summed up in her [biography](#), “It was in the end not simply bloodshed or mass protest or fear that brought the promise of Keys to fulfillment. It was shame.”

And while Americans today enjoy the fruits of Sarah Keys Evans’ persistence, hers is not a household name the way Rosa Parks’ is, and she has chosen to stay out of the spotlight. Reliving the traumatic events of 1952 has become too emotionally exhausting.

Others who have tried to make her better known have hit roadblocks too.

In 2001, author Amy Nathan had stumbled upon Evans' name on a plaque at the [Women's Memorial](#) in Arlington, Va., and thought her story would make a great book. But about two years of interviews later, in 2006, Nathan couldn't find a publisher. "Several editors said to me, 'We already have a book about Rosa Parks, so that sort of covers the topic,'" says Nathan. "So it's a catch-22; she's not heard of because nobody has written a book about her, but then they can't write a book about her because nobody has ever heard of her."

Nathan ended up self-publishing a children's book about Evans in 2006, the same year the U.S. Department of Justice honored Evans with a Trailblazer Award. In 2013, a story on the book in *Our Heritage* magazine caught the eye of Rodney Pierce, who was working for Roanoke Canal Museum & Trail. He had only recently learned about Evans himself and was struck that he hadn't heard the story earlier, even though it took place in his own city. He flagged the Roanoke Valley Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the group presented Evans with an award in 2017, about two years before chapter members applied for and received a grant to fund the "Closing the Circle" mural from the [Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation](#). The state has also approved a [sign](#) that will explain the history that took place near the Roanoke Rapids bus station.

Pierce, now an 8th grade social studies teacher, hopes the mural will lead to more honors for Evans citywide. "This [mural] is the least bit you can do to finally put to rest the ugly period in the history of your city. There's more the city could do. They could make an apology, send her a check for the \$25 fine she paid, work with the local school district to get her story incorporated into the curriculum," he says. "You can't change what has already happened. You've got to embrace it and try to make it right. And this is an ideal time to do it."

Speaking to TIME, Evans says she knows change takes time, but she's skeptical of whether protests on the streets will lead to substantive policy change anytime soon.

“There will always be a movement of some sort,” she says, but argues today's movement doesn't seem to rise to the level of being called a civil rights movement. “I think grandmothers in years past had more advice than anyone you might have listened to [today]. ”

So what's her advice?

“Keep on reading,” she says, “and keep on listening.”

Historical Markers and War Memorials in Rocky Mount, North Carolina

EdgecombeCounty(75) MartinCounty(25) PittCounty(18)

Rocky Mount is in Edgecombe County

Edgecombe County (31) ▶

Halifax County (75) ▶

Martin County (7) ▶


Nash County (25) ▶

Pitt County (28) ▶

Wilson County (18) ▶

Touch name on this list to highlight map location.

Touch blue arrow, or on map, to go there.

1▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — E-117 — [Anna Easter Brown](#) — 1879-1957 — 

A founder in 1908 of Alpha Kappa Alpha, nation's oldest sorority for African Americans; history teacher. Her grave is ¼ mile east. — [Map](#) (db m48677) HM

2▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [Around the "Y" Community](#) — 

This marker dedicated on September 1, 2007 memorializes and honors a predominately African American community. Originally the community was known as around the "Wire" today it is known as the "Y" community. It sprang up in the early 20th . . . — [Map](#) (db m94563) HM

3▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [Douglas Franklin Davis](#) — 1948-2007 — 


In 1977, Douglas Franklin Davis began his retail career in Rocky Mount. In 1994 he purchased the building and it became Davis Furniture Company. He always believed in a thriving downtown. He owned three area businesses. Davis was a pioneer in the . . . — [Map](#) (db m97981) HM

4▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [Dr. Junius Daniel Douglas 1874-1973](#) — *Distinguished Pharmacist and Entrepreneur* — 


Operated the Douglas-Armstrong Drug Company in the Douglas Building that he developed circa 1916: prominently located, three blocks west, at the corner of NE Main St, and E Thomas St. It is the anchor building for the Douglas Block and was the . . . — [Map](#) (db m97961) HM

5▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — E-74 — [Dred Wimberly](#) — 

Former slave. Voted for better roads, schools, and colleges as State representative, 1879, 1887; and State senator, 1889. His home stands here. — — [Map](#) (db m44998) HM

6▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [Lincoln Park Historic District](#) — 


The Lincoln Park Historic District , which is located in the northeast section of Rocky Mount, was constructed from 1948 through 1953 featuring single family housing, one restaurant, and motel. The restaurant and motel was owned by Clarence E. . .
. — — [Map](#) (db m118803) HM

7▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — E-112 — [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) — 1929 ~ 1968 — 


In his speech, Nov. 27, 1962, in gym 200 yards S.E., civil rights leader delivered refrain "I have a dream," used in Lincoln Memorial address, 1963. — — [Map](#) (db m44900) HM

8▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [Miss Anna Easter Brown](#) — 

Founding Member Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated Lived in this residence (1926-1857). Educator - Brick Junior College (1910-1926). Booker T. Washington High School (1926-1952). Historian - Annual Negro History Exhibit . .
. — — [Map](#) (db m49016) HM

9▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — E-119 — [Thelonious Monk](#) — (1917-1982) — 

Jazz pianist, composer, and architect of bebop. Wrote "Round Midnight" (1944). Born 1 mile south. — — [Map](#) (db m97780) HM

10▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — [This Bell](#) — 


The first one purchased by the City of Rocky Mount, 1910 Preserved & Mounted by Burlington Industries, Inc. and its Rocky Mount Plants, 1977 — — [Map](#) (db m94460)

11▶ North Carolina (Edgecombe County), Rocky Mount — E-70 — [William R. Cox](#) — 

Confederate general. His brigade fought in last infantry action at Appomattox. Later Congressman; Secretary U.S. Senate. Home here. — — [Map](#) (db m44997) HM

12 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — ["The Bethel Heroes"](#) — *Nash County Confederate Soldiers Monument* — 

(West Face) C.S.A. 1861 - 1865 (South Face) The names of the Confederate Soldiers from Nash county can be found in the Memorial Volume of the various libraries of the state and the Clerks Office of Nash . . . — — [Map](#) (db m46436) HM

13 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Adolphus Staton](#) — *Medal of Honor Recipient* — Veterans Memorial at Jack Laughery Park — 

The President of the United States in the name of The Congress takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to Adolphus Staton Lieutenant, U.S. Navy. Place and Date: Vera Cruz, Mexico, 22 April 1914. Born: 28 . . . — — [Map](#) (db m169677) HM WM

14 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Agent Orange Victims](#) — 

In memory and honor of those whose lives were affected by the chemical Agent Orange — — [Map](#) (db m169584) WM

15 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Bishop FC Barnes](#) — *June 22, 1929 - July 11, 2011* — 

Bishop FC Barnes founded and established the Red Budd Holy Church in May of 1959 in Castalia, NC. He pastored Red Budd for over 52 years. Bishop Barnes was not only an awesome pastor, teacher and preacher, but he was also a renowned gospel singer. . . . — — [Map](#) (db m97973) HM

16 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-87 — [Cornwallis](#) — 

The British Army under Gen. Cornwallis marching to Virginia camped here at Crowell's plantation on May 8, 1781. — — [Map](#) (db m45519) HM

17 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Donaldson's Tavern](#) — 

The site of Donaldson's Tavern Stage coach station for the overland trail lies on the opposite bank of the river. Here Lafayette was entertained while on his Southern Tour in 1825. [DAR Emblem] Erected by Micaiah . . . — — [Map](#) (db m45697) HM

18 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-88 — [Falls of the Tar Church](#) — 


Constituted as Particular Baptist, 1757; Rev. John Moore & Joshua Lawrence among early ministers. Now Primitive Baptist. — — [Map](#) (db m44751) HM

19▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Falls Road Bridge](#) — 

Originally, the Nash-Edgecombe county line was the midline of the Tar River at the Falls to give each county an opportunity to capitalize on the value of the Falls. After the original bridge was burned by the Union during the Civil War, Edgecombe . . .
. — — [Map](#) (db m95004) HM

20▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [First Post Office of Rocky Mount](#) — 

On this site on March 22, 1816 the first post office of Rocky Mount was established. James C. B. Atkinson, Post Master. — — [Map](#) (db m97928) HM

21▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Hardees Food System](#) — 

Founded here in 1961 by Jim Gardner and Leonard Rawls. Now a major US fast food chain. — — [Map](#) (db m169628) HM

22▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Harold Bascom Durham, Jr.](#) — 

Second Lieutenant, U.S. Army, Battery C, 6th Battalion, 15th Artillery, 1st Infantry Division,. Place and date: Republic of Vietnam, 17 October 1967, Born 12 October 1942, Rocky Mount, N.C. Citation: 2D Lt. Durham, distinguished himself . . .
. — — [Map](#) (db m97718) WM

23▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-59 — [Jim Thorpe](#) — 1886 - 1953 — 

Indian athlete, star of the 1912 Olympics, made his professional baseball debut with Rocky Mount Railroaders, 1909. Ball park was 300 yds. W. — — [Map](#) (db m45801) HM

24▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-31 — [Lafayette](#) — 

On his American tour, Lafayette spent the night of February 28, 1825, at the home of Henry Donaldson which stood near this spot. — — [Map](#) (db m46153) HM

25▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Nash County Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) — 

Dedicated To Veterans that served during the Vietnam Conflict — — [Map](#) (db m169500) WM

26▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-72 — [North Carolina Wesleyan College](#) — 

Methodist. Liberal arts, senior co-educational college. Chartered Oct., 1956; opened 1960. — — [Map](#) (db m31072) HM

27▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-118 — [Operation Dixie](#) — 

Black leaf house workers in eastern N.C. unionized in 1946. First pro-union vote, at tobacco factory 1 block W., precursor to civil rights movement. — — [Map](#) (db m48914) HM

28▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-61 — [P.T. Barnum](#) — 


First stop of record with own circus troupe was ½ mile S.E., November 12-13, 1836. No show is recorded, but Barnum preached a sermon. — — [Map](#) (db m48657) HM

29▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — E-7 — [Rocky Mount Mills](#) — 

Second cotton mill in State. Building begun, 1818. Federals burned, 1863. Soon rebuilt. — — [Map](#) (db m45923) HM

30▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Rocky Mount Mills School](#) — 


On this site stood the Rocky Mount Mills School Est. 1896 Closed 1946 Built and operated by Rocky Mount Mills to provide grades 1-7 for the benefit of the Mill Village children — — [Map](#) (db m97751) HM

31▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [The ACL 303](#) — 

May 27, 1902 • Built by the Pullman Car Company as an office car for the personal use of J.H. Moore, President of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. Moore named the car "Thanis". 1905 • Repossessed by the Pulman Car Company . . . — — [Map](#) (db m46159) HM

32▶ North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Veterans Memorial At Jack Laughery Park](#) — 

In Honor of All Men and Women who served their Country in the United States Armed Services — — [Map](#) (db m169594) WM

33 ► North Carolina (Nash County), Rocky Mount — [Walter Fenner "Buck" Leonard](#) — *Baseball Hall Of Famer Rocky Mount Native* — 

Born near this spot in 1907. Rose to fame in the Negro Leagues, 1933-50. Won Negro National League pennant nine straight years