

Sarah Keys Evans: A Trailblazer for Justice

"It took many heroes to overturn legally enforced racial segregation. Students learn about Rosa Parks, but they also should learn about Private First-Class Sarah Keys." ~Alan J. Singer, Historian & Professor

Overview

What does it take to change history? In 1952, a young African American Army private named Sarah Keys Evans refused to give up her seat on a bus in Roanoke Rapids, NC. Her stand led to a landmark 1955 Interstate Commerce Commission ruling that helped dismantle segregation in interstate bus travel, three years *before* Rosa Parks's famous protest. In this lesson, students will explore Sarah Keys Evans's story through DNCR's young adult book [Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage](#) and related resources. They will:

- Discover Sarah Keys Evans's role in the civil rights movement.
- Analyze primary sources and historical context of her case.
- Research other North Carolina civil rights activists and their impact.
- Express learning through collaborative art.

Grades

- 5th-8th grade
- Designed for grades 5–8, this lesson can be adapted for other levels.

Materials

- The book, [Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage](#), by Amy Nathan and Sarah Keys Evans, with illustrations by Jermaine Powell.
 - Teachers who are unable to purchase a class set for students can either utilize one copy for a class read-aloud or utilize instead an article about Sarah Keys Evans and tailor the lesson as needed. Sample articles that can be accessed for free include:
 - NCpedia ANCHOR article: [Alone but Not Afraid: Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company](#).
 - NCpedia article: [Sarah Keys: Keeping Her Seat to Stand Up for Her Rights](#).
- Image of the [front cover of the book](#) for projection
- Watch video: [HERstory Spotlight: Sarah Keys Evans - Civil Rights Trailblazer](#) (3:30 min. video)
- Discussion Questions & Journal Prompts for *Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage*, included on p. 3-5

- Supplementary activity sheets are also attached, which can be used to delve into the historical connections woven throughout the book’s chapters, including:
 - Exploring Slavery & Freedom in NC
 - Understanding Segregation in Sarah Keys Evans’ Time
 - Additional US Supreme Court Cases
 - Resisting Segregation

Additional (Optional) Resources

- Watch video [Keeping Your Seat to Take a Stand: Sarah Keys Evans & the Fight Against Jim Crow Transportation](#) – this recording presents the story of Mrs. Sarah Keys Evans, situating it within the context of Jim Crow segregation and transportation activism overall and provides excellent background information for educators.
- View the [Sarah K. Evans Inclusive Public Art Project](#) – this site details the “Closing the Circle” mural created to honor Sarah Keys Evans in Roanoke Rapids, NC, including images and a virtual tour of the mural and an oral history interview with Mrs. Keys Evans.
- Watch video [Visibly Speaking: NC's Inclusive Public Art Project | Sarah Keys Evans | Here's My Story | PBS](#) – This PBS NC production recounts Sarah Keys Evans’s story alongside the creation of the public art project installed to honor her.
- Learn more about artist Jermaine Powell at their website - jermainepowell.com

Vocabulary/Key Topics

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|--|------------------------|
| • Disorderly | • Segregation |
| • Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) | • Trailblazer |
| • Jim Crow | • “Separate but Equal” |
| • Loophole | • US Supreme Court |
| • Monument | • Women’s Army Corps |
| • Slavery/enslaved people | • Trailblazer |

Preparation

Before introducing the story of Sarah Keys Evans, it’s important to prepare students for discussing sensitive historical topics such as slavery, segregation and racism. These issues can be difficult, but they are essential to understanding our shared state and national history and its lasting impact. Even though certain historical topics can be difficult to address; by including stories of resistance and resilience such as Sarah Keys Evans, students can be inspired and celebrate the agency of people who fought for justice for all people. To ensure respectful and empathetic dialogue:

- Establish clear expectations for civil discourse and create a classroom culture grounded in respect and empathy. For strategies, read these [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom.](#)

- Use language that affirms humanity and emphasizes resilience (e.g., “enslaved person” or “freedom seeker” instead of “slave.”)

Procedure

Warm Up: An Introduction to Sarah Keys Evans

1. As a warm-up, show students the cover of the young adult book, [“Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage,”](#) which is illustrated by Raleigh artist [Jermaine Powell](#). (If students do not have their own copies of the book, the cover image can be easily found on numerous pages such as the [uncpress website](#) via a web search.) Ask students to turn to a partner and take 2-minutes to discuss: What do you think “quiet courage” means and why might it matter in history?
2. Allow some student volunteers to share their thoughts and further discuss as a class:
 - What do you notice first about the cover? What made this element stand out to you?
 - What imagery, colors, shapes, or symbols do you see? How might they connect to the book’s title or theme of “quiet courage”?
 - Based on the cover, what do you predict this book is about?
 - How does the art reflect strength, resilience or courage that is “quiet?”
 - Can you think of a time when someone in your family or community showed courage quietly?
 - Have you ever heard the name Sarah Keys Evans? Do you know anything about her?
3. Let students know that Sarah Keys Evans was a young African American woman who made history in 1952 (three years before Rosa Parks) when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina during **segregation**. At just 22 years old and serving in the U.S. Army, Sarah was traveling to her family’s home in Washington, NC from her station in New Jersey. During a bus change in Roanoke Rapids, she was told to move and give her seat to a white person. She refused and was arrested. Despite the danger she faced in the **Jim Crow South**, she stood firm in challenging segregation laws. Her story shows how one person’s bravery can spark big changes.
 - Ask students to share what they already know about segregation and civil rights, including segregation in transportation during the Jim Crow Era. Teachers can go over key vocabulary or history highlights to ensure students have a basic foundational knowledge of the time period.
 - Teachers seeking further introduction for the class can optionally play the brief video, [HERstory Spotlight: Sarah Keys Evans - Civil Rights Trailblazer](#) (you can stop the video at 3:30), which will provide a short overview of Sarah Keys Evans’ story.

Diving into the Book: Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage

**NOTE: Teachers who do not have a copy of the book can still teach about Sarah Keys Evans using the activities provided within this lesson by supplementing a reading from the internet for the book.*

4. Tell students that they are going to learn more about Sarah Keys Evans by reading *Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage*. Teachers can utilize the Chapter-by-Chapter discussion questions below for small group or whole class discussion or prompts for written reflection.

➤ Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Questions & Journal Prompts

- **Chapter 1: A Different Kind of Battle & Chapter 2: A Different Kind of Hero**
 - How did segregation affect Sarah’s family and community?
 - What do her father’s stories about enslaved people and free Black people teach us about courage?
 - Summarize the 1946 change in segregated bus travel that took place.
 - How do you think Sarah’s childhood experiences prepared her for challenges later in life?
 - Journal Prompt: Sarah grew up hearing stories about courage and freedom. How do you think those stories shaped her? Write about a story or lesson from your own life (or family) that taught you about courage or standing up for what’s right.
- **Chapter 3: Quiet Courage**
 - Given the realities of the Jim Crow South, what risks did Sarah face when she refused to move to the back of the bus?
 - How did Sarah respond to fear during her arrest?
 - How does it make you feel considering that Sarah was in an Army uniform when she was arrested?
 - Why do you think this chapter is titled “Quiet Courage?”
 - Journal Prompt: Sarah refused to move to the back of the bus even though it was dangerous. Imagine you were in her shoes. What thoughts and feelings would you have in that moment? Do you think you would realistically have made the same choice given the dangers? Why or why not?
- **Chapter 4: A Plan of Attack**
 - Why do you think Sarah’s father and Sarah decided to go through all the work of fighting her arrest?
 - Who was Dovey Johnson Roundtree and what similarities did she and Sarah have?
 - What was the “loophole” in the law that was created by the Supreme Court case *Morgan v. Virginia* in 1946, and why was it important?
 - Why did the ICC rule against Sarah in *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*?

- Why do you think Sarah decided to keep fighting even when it was difficult?
 - Journal Prompt: Sarah and her father had to make a big decision: whether to fight her arrest in court. Imagine you were advising Sarah at that moment. What would you tell her to do and why? What risks and benefits would you consider?
- **Chapter 5: Never Give Up**
 - How do you think the ICC's first decision made Sarah feel?
 - What was the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case and how did it impact Sarah's appeal to the ICC?
 - What decision was made by the ICC regarding state-to-state travel and why was this decision so significant for civil rights?
 - How does Sarah's story connect to Rosa Parks, whose famous arrest took place one week after Sarah's case was won?
 - Because Sarah never gave up, how did her actions positively impact all people? What other situations can you think of through history where because a person or a group of people did not give up, despite great hardships, they made a positive difference?
 - Journal Prompt: Sarah's case was first denied, but she didn't give up. How do you think persistence changes history? Write about why persistence is important in your own life and give an example of when persistence paid off for you or someone you admire.
- **Chapter 6: Inspiring Others**
 - Why do you think Sarah's story was unknown for so long?
 - How do monuments and historical markers help communities remember unsung heroes?
 - How do you think it gets decided who and/or what events get memorialized?
 - Journal Prompt: Sarah's story was unknown for a long time. Why do you think some heroes are forgotten? Write about someone you think deserves more recognition and explain why their story matters.
- **Afterword: Courage Spreads**
 - What are the various ways Sarah Keys Evans and her actions are being commemorated? Who took the lead on ensuring her story is not forgotten?
 - What does Sarah's life teach us about the impact of "quiet courage" and in what ways was she a "Trailblazer for Justice?"
 - How does Sarah's story connect to the story of other civil rights leaders you have learned about?
 - Why does the author compare Sarah's experience to a "battle"? What role did persistence play in her victory?
 - What does the phrase "Trailblazer for Justice" mean in the context of Sarah's life?

- Journal Prompt: Sarah Keys Evans is now honored with a mural and a Historical Marker. If you could design a tribute to someone who showed “quiet courage,” who would it be and what would it look like? Describe your design and why you chose that person.
- **Supplementary activity sheets are also attached**, which can be used to delve into the historical connections woven throughout the book’s chapters, including:
 - Exploring Slavery & Freedom in NC
 - Understanding Segregation in Sarah Keys Evans’ Time
 - Additional US Supreme Court Cases
 - Resisting Segregation

Culminating Activity Options: Celebrating Courage

5. After exploring Sarah Keys Evans’s story and its historical context, students will synthesize their learning through either an art project or a writing project. Both options encourage creativity, critical thinking, and historical empathy.

➤ **Option 1: Faces of Courage Collaborative Mural**

- To process what they learned about Sarah Keys Evans, while also expanding their understanding of other less known civil rights activists with North Carolina connections, students will design a collaborative mural in which each student (or small group of students) creates one panel or section featuring:
 - A portrait or symbolic representation of a NC civil rights activist
 - A primary source (photo, newspaper clipping, etc.) related to the activist
 - A short quote or phrase that reflects their courage or impact
 - Visual elements that connect to their historical context
 - Creative elements, such as using color to symbolize emotions or incorporating textures (fabric, magazine clippings, recycled materials) or mixed media for depth.
- Students should also write a short artist’s statement (3-5 sentences) explaining how their design, and the person featured, reflects courage. Upon completion, all panels will be combined into a large mural to be displayed in the school.
- A sample of the many civil rights figures with North Carolina connections include:

Ann Atwater	Golden Frinks
Louis Austin	Harvey Gantt
Ella Baker	Floyd McKissick
Julius Chambers	Pauli Murray
Anna Julia Cooper	Dovey Johnson Roundtree
Dorothy Counts	James E. Shepard

John Hope Franklin
Dudley Flood

Nina Simone
Robert F. Williams

➤ **Option 2: A Letter to the Family of Sarah Keys Evans**

- Sarah Keys Evans passed away on November 16, 2023, at the age of 95. Her courageous stand against segregation in 1952 and her role in the landmark *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* case helped pave the way for civil rights progress, yet her story is still being discovered by many today. Write a letter to the family of Sarah Keys Evans explaining why her story inspires you. Your letter might:
 - Explain what you learned about her life and the impact of her actions.
 - Express gratitude for her bravery and persistence.
 - Connect her courage to today’s world; how does her example influence your thinking about fairness, justice, or standing up for what’s right?

6. After students have completed their culminating assignment, engage in a Gallery Walk or Sharing Circle:

- If students created art, display the mural panels and allow a “gallery walk.” Students leave sticky notes with positive comments or questions on each piece.
- If students wrote letters or essays, invite volunteers to read excerpts aloud or post them on a “Wall of Courage.”

7. In a closing class discussion or exit ticket ask:

- What is one thing you learned about Sarah Keys Evans that surprised you?
- Why does her story matter today?
- What does “quiet courage” look like in our world now?

Supplementary Activity Sheets

- Exploring Slavery & Freedom in NC
- Understanding Segregation in Sarah Keys Evans' Time
- Additional US Supreme Court Cases
- Resisting Segregation

Name: _____ Exploring Historical Connections to the Story of Sarah Keys Evans

Part I: Exploring Slavery and Freedom in NC

In “Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage,” the book describes caves where enslaved people escaping slavery hid. The land was owned by free Black men who risked arrest for helping them.

<p>1. Why would hiding in caves be dangerous for both the freedom seekers and the free Black landowners?</p>	<p>2. How might hearing about the people who hid in the caves have influenced Sarah’s own courage years later in 1952?</p>
<p>North Carolina in 1860:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White people: 629,942 • Enslaved people: 331,059 • Free Black people: 30,463 	<p>3. Quick Math: What percentage of the population was enslaved? What percentage was free Black people?</p>

Primary Source Review: North Carolina laws from the 1700s–1800s

- 1741: Enslaved people could not leave the plantation without written permission.
- 1741: Runaway enslaved people could be hunted down and even killed.
- 1830: Enslaved people could not teach others to read or write (punishment: 39 lashes).
- 1830: Freeing an enslaved person over age 50 required court approval and proof of “meritorious service.”

<p>4. What was an enslaved person risking by running away?</p>	<p>5. What would make running away both physically and mentally demanding?</p>	<p>6. What are other ways enslaved people resisted when running away was too great of a risk?</p>
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Free Black People Before the Civil War

Not all Black people in North Carolina were enslaved. Some were born free; others gained freedom by fighting in the American Revolution or being freed by Quakers. However, even though they were free, their rights were restricted. For instance, free Black people:

- Lost the right to vote in 1835.
- Couldn't attend public schools (opened in 1839 for white students only).
- Couldn't own anti-slavery books after 1830.

7. What do the laws about enslaved people and free Black people tell you about their lives?

Part 2: Understanding Segregation in Sarah Keys Evans' Time

Segregation means keeping people apart because of the color of their skin. In Sarah's North Carolina hometown, segregation affected everyday life:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Separate schools for Black and white children• Separate sections in libraries• Stores often didn't let Black customers try on clothes• Restaurants made Black customers order take-out from the back door• Movie theaters: white people sat downstairs, Black people only in the balcony	<p>8. How would these rules make someone feel? How might they affect a family's choices about where to go and what to do?</p>
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Segregation and "Separate but Equal"

In **1896**, the U.S. Supreme Court decided a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It began when **Homer Plessy**, a Black man in Louisiana, was arrested for sitting in a train car for white passengers. He did this on purpose to protest segregation laws. At the time, Louisiana required train companies to have "equal but separate" spaces for Black and white passengers.

The Supreme Court said this law was allowed under the Constitution. This created the idea of "**Separate but Equal**," meaning states could separate people by race as long as things were supposedly equal. In reality, Black facilities were almost never as good as white ones. This decision allowed segregation laws for many years. One justice, **John Marshall Harlan**, disagreed. He wrote that the Constitution is "**color-blind**" and that all citizens should be equal under the law.

<p>9. How is Homer Plessy's case similar to Sarah's?</p>	<p>10. Why was Justice Harlan's dissenting statement important?</p>
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Primary Source Review: 1900s Segregation Laws in North Carolina

- 1903 School Law:**
 "All white children shall be taught in the public schools provided for the white race, and all colored shall be taught in the public schools provided for the colored race; but no child with negro blood in his veins, however remote the strain, shall attend a school for the white race."
- 1901 Library Law:**
 "The State Librarian is hereby authorized to fit up a separate place for the use of the colored people who may come to the Library for the purpose of reading books or periodicals."
- 1949 Bus Law:**
 "Every common carrier by motor vehicle [bus] to provide separate but substantially equal accommodations for the white and colored races at passenger stations or waiting rooms...and on all common carriers by motor vehicles operating on a route or routes over which such carrier transports passengers of both races."

<p>11. What was the purpose of these laws?</p>	<p>12. How would laws like these have affected Sarah as she was growing up?</p>	<p>13. How do you imagine these laws shaped Sarah's feelings about fairness and courage?</p>
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14. What did it take to finally end legal segregation?

Part 3: Additional Supreme Court Cases

Several Supreme Court cases shaped Sarah Keys Evans's fight to end bus segregation. The words used, or left out, in these cases made a big difference.

Morgan v. Virginia (1946)

This case said Virginia's segregation law could not force Black travelers to sit in certain places on buses traveling between states. The Court explained that states cannot make rules for buses crossing state lines. But the decision did not say anything about individual bus company rules. That gap allowed bus companies to make their own segregation policies, which is why Sarah Keys Evans was arrested in 1952.

Excerpt from the Court's opinion in *Morgan v. Virginia*: *"As no state law can reach beyond its own border nor bar transportation of passengers across its boundaries... seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel require a single uniform rule... Consequently, we hold the Virginia statute invalid."*

15. How would you rewrite these words to ensure there was no legal loophole for individual companies to make their own segregation rules, and instead make it clear that everyone, regardless of their race, should be able to sit anywhere on a bus?

Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

The landmark Supreme Court case ***Brown v. Board of Education*** declared an end to legal segregation in public schools. Before this decision, many states had laws requiring separate schools for Black and white students under the idea of "separate but equal," from the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case.

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Court decided that separate schools were inherently unequal and denied Black children equal opportunities. This case was a major turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. It showed that segregation violated the Constitution's promise of equality and helped influence later rulings, including the decision in ***Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company***, which ended segregation on interstate buses.

Excerpt from the Court's opinion: *"Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does... We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal..."*

16. How would *Brown v. Board of Education* help Sarah Keys Evans’s case? Why would the same principle of equality matter for both schools and transportation?

***Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* (1955)**

The **Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC)** decision in *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* (on Nov. 7, 1955) said the bus company was “*found to be engaged in certain practices subjecting Negro passengers to unjust discrimination and unreasonable prejudice and disadvantage...Order entered requiring defendant (bus company) to cease and desist from such practices.*”

The ICC noted that such discrimination was prohibited by the **Interstate Commerce Act of 1887**, which said: “*That it shall be unlawful for any common carrier...to subject any particular person...to any undue or unreasonable prejudice or disadvantage in any respect whatsoever.*”

17. Why do you think the ICC used the same words that were in the 1887 law when writing its decision in *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*?

Part 4: Resisting Segregation

“Sarah Keys Evans: The Power of Quiet Courage” explains how Sarah Keys Evans’s father sought out education for himself and worked to give his children a better education than what segregation allowed. As a teenager, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he attended Dunbar High School, the first high school for Black students in the U.S. Unlike the “vocational” school in his hometown that taught only job skills, Dunbar offered an academic curriculum and included subjects like math, science, history, and writing.

After serving in the Navy during World War I, he returned home to Washington, North Carolina. When Sarah and her siblings were born, schools were still segregated and Black students and white students could not attend the same schools. Thus, he helped the Catholic Church start an academic curriculum school for Black students. Sarah and her siblings went to this school. By creating this school and standing up against unfair laws, Sarah’s family showed how courage and education could fight segregation and open doors for future generations

<p>18. How do you think this school gave Sarah chances to learn things segregation tried to limit?</p>	<p>19. How might her education have helped Sarah feel confident taking a stand during her bus ride in 1952?</p>
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Dovey Johnson Roundtree (1914–2018)

Dovey Johnson Roundtree was a trailblazing African American lawyer from Charlotte, NC. Before becoming an attorney, she served in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II. Like Sarah Keys Evans, Roundtree personally experienced bus segregation when she was removed from a bus for refusing to give up her seat. These experiences fueled her determination to fight injustice.

In 1955, Roundtree represented Sarah Keys Evans in ***Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company***. Her legal work led to a historic ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) that declared such segregation unconstitutional, three years before Rosa Parks’ protest. In her memoir, *Justice Older than the Law*, she stated: “We were determined that Sarah Keys would not be humiliated again. The law was on our side, and we would make it speak.”

<p>20. What challenges do you imagine Dovey Johnson Roundtree faced as a Black woman lawyer in the 1950s?</p>	<p>21. What impact did Dovey Johnson Roundtree and Sarah Keys Evans make on the Civil Rights Movement?</p>
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1961 Freedom Rides

In May 1961, civil rights activists called Freedom Riders rode buses through the South to protest unfair segregation. Even though the Supreme Court had already ruled that segregation on buses was illegal, many states and bus companies *ignored the law*.

The rides were dangerous; some riders were beaten and buses were attacked. This caught the attention of **Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy**, who pushed the government to enforce the rule against segregation on interstate buses. Kennedy quoted **Justice John Marshall Harlan** saying: “Our Constitution is color-blind and does not allow classes among citizens.”

<p>22. How do you imagine Sarah Keys Evans felt about the 1961 Freedom Rides?</p>
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