



# LOWER DEXTER PARK



## History Happened Here

The City of Montgomery built this public park on one of the lots occupied by the Montgomery Fair Department Store. Rosa Parks was an assistant to the tailor for Montgomery Fair. On December 1, 1955, Mrs. Parks left her seamstress work, boarded a city bus and helped set in motion events that would undo segregation in the South and uplift human rights for people all around the world.

Montgomery Fair began operations in 1868 as Pollack's Dollar Store at Perry Street and Dexter Avenue. A new four-story flagship store opened in 1907 and became a regional shopping destination. It had entrances on Court Street (Photo 1), Monroe Street (2), and Dexter Avenue (5), as documented by The Department Store Museum. In the Dexter Avenue "Arcade" shoppers could find cosmetics, gloves, leather goods, hosiery, umbrellas, silverware, records and Teen Town departments (3). The annual holiday decorations and parades were festive. Photo 4 is of a Christmas Parade in 1967.

The façade was updated in the 1940s with distinctive white and blue vitrolite (a pigmented, structural glass) and large glass blocks indicative of the art-deco style of architecture popular during the early 20th century.

Montgomery Fair closed downtown operations in the late-1960s as shopping centers across America were relocating to suburban malls. The Court Street section burned down in 1984, leaving behind the two damaged annex buildings.

The City of Montgomery purchased many historic buildings on Dexter Avenue to help stimulate private rehabilitations. Unfortunately, what remained of the Montgomery Fair at 29 Dexter Avenue was deemed structurally unsound. From this setback, the opportunity would emerge to make a new City park and to re-use carefully salvaged materials from the distinctive façade (Photos 6 and 7, 2014).



Dexter Avenue 1950s. Historic Montgomery Photographs courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History.



Above: Rosa Parks, 1956. Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

## Rosa Parks Worked at Montgomery Fair

During Rosa Parks' life, segregation in the South was rigidly enforced by law and custom, including at the Montgomery Fair where she worked between 1954 and 1956. While the Alterations Department was on the upper floors of 29 Dexter Avenue, she sewed in the basement level.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Parks' commitment to stand against the injustice of segregation was galvanized here. Two extraordinary notes that she wrote on Montgomery Fair stationery, now housed at the Library of Congress, document the indignities of living and working in segregated conditions. Mrs. Parks also recorded details to support the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the lawsuits that would ultimately end segregated public transit.

Mrs. Parks' story is stitched into the making of this public space. The City of Montgomery hopes this unique park will provide new opportunities to celebrate Mrs. Parks' life work and wishes.

<sup>1</sup> [The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks](#), Jeanne Theoharis, 2013

"Everyone living together in peace and harmony and love... that's the goal we seek, and I think that the more people there are who reach that state of mind, the better we will all be."

- Rosa Parks [Rosa Parks: My Story](#), with Jim Haskin, 1992

## Vision For A New Urban Park

The renovation of adjacent Dexter Avenue buildings presented an opportunity to create Lower Dexter Park and to preserve and celebrate a piece of Montgomery's history. The salvaged vitrolite tile and glass block façade provides a gateway to this special public park designed to enhance civic life and dialogue across differences. The floating deck is built with sustainable materials and planted with native grasses. This pocket park opened in 2018, creating an intimate community space for downtown residents, workers and visitors. Seating and lighting throughout the park provide a special place to mingle, read and even perhaps reflect on the history of Montgomery and Dexter Avenue.

