

Written by Staff Writer
Friday, 21 June 2013 13:01 -



Through a collaboration between the city of Columbia, Historic Columbia Foundation, the University of South Carolina and Columbia Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Columbia SC 63 committee will unveil a marker on Friday, June 28, 2013 at 9 a.m. at the corner of Washington and Main Streets to rename the corner, Sarah Mae Flemming Way, in honor of Civil Rights activist, advocate and pioneer, Sarah Mae Flemming.

Mayor Steve Benjamin, Richland County Councilman Kelvin Washington, and Asia Hall, granddaughter of Sarah Mae Flemming, will be on hand to pay homage to this Civil Rights trailblazer Sarah Mae Flemming.

Flemming, who was assaulted and ejected from a bus after attempting to exit from the front doors, set legal precedent during this pivotal time in our nation's history when filing a lawsuit against the bus operator. This honorary street naming will be a lasting indication of the long-fought battle African Americans endured during this time, and will also display how far we as a city and nation have come.

BEFORE ROSA PARKS: SARAH MAE FLEMMING AND THE PURSUIT OF EQUAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The impact of the Brown decision was felt almost immediately in South Carolina. Recognizing the opening created by the verdict, state NAACP officials sought a test case to expand the application of the ruling beyond schools to other areas of daily life.

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On June 24, 1954, Sarah Mae Flemming, a young African American domestic worker, boarded a bus operated by South Carolina Electric and Gas Company. On that morning, the bus was crowded, and blacks were forced to stand in the aisle to accommodate white passengers. When a seat became vacant near the front, Flemming sat down. The driver demanded she move to the back. Flemming moved to comply but violated racial custom by attempting to exit the front of the bus because the rear was crowded. The driver struck and ejected Flemming from the bus on the corner of Main and Washington streets.

With the aid of the NAACP, Flemming filed a lawsuit. In *Sarah Mae Flemming v. South Carolina Electric and Gas Company*, Flemming's lawyers argued that the state's existing statutes mandating segregated seating denied Flemming's right to equal protection under the 14th Amendment and the recently rendered Brown verdict. After an unfavorable decision in South Carolina District Court, Flemming's legal team issued an appeal. On July 14, 1955, the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the principle applied schools in the Brown decision could be expanded to public transportation, and by extension other public accommodations. The court could not rule on the question of damages and sent the case back to South Carolina District Court. After a prolonged campaign of intimidation, which included the burning of a cross on the front lawn of the home of Flemming's lead attorney, an all-white male jury eventually ruled that SCE&G was not guilty of any wrongdoing. While she received no compensation and eventually faded from the public spotlight, Flemming's heroic actions provided as an important legal precedent for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, inspired by the globally recognized activist Rosa Parks.