

The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Reverend King gently squeezed Martin's hand as they entered the shoe store. The reverend sat and waved to the chair beside his own. "Take a seat, son."

"Excuse me."

Martin glanced over his shoulder at the store clerk. The man's face looked pink with rage, but his voice never rose above a whisper, "These seats are for white customers. Negroes wait at the back of the store."

Martin's father stood, took his son's hand again, and walked out.

"But, Daddy, we didn't get shoes."

"They can insult us, Martin, but they can only shame us if we let them."

The grim line of the reverend's mouth softened into a smile. "We'll buy shoes from someone who appreciates our business."

The lesson of the shoe store remained with Martin for the rest of his life.

Martin Luther King, Sr., Plants the Seeds of Change

Martin Luther King, Jr.—The Formative Years

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Martin Luther King, Sr., Plants the Seeds of Change

That life began in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. The Reverend Michael King and his wife, Alberta, named their first son Michael. Later, Reverend King changed his and his son's name to Martin Luther in honor of the great sixteenth-century reformer.

Like his chosen namesake, Martin Luther King, Sr., devoted his life to righting wrongs. As pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, the reverend urged the members of his church to stand up to the Jim Crow laws—local laws that denied equal treatment to African Americans. These laws forced African Americans to wait at the back of the store, sit at the back of the bus, go to separate schools, and live in separate neighborhoods. Jim Crow laws even forced African Americans to use separate elevators. These laws violated civil rights, which are guaranteed to all Americans under the United States Constitution.

Reverend King did more than preach about civil rights. He put his words into action. In January 1935, the Reverend organized a protest against the segregation of elevators at the local county courthouse. Eight months later he ran a drive to register African American voters. In 1939, he and several hundred others marched to Atlanta's city hall to demonstrate the political strength of African Americans. He believed his people could use their votes to change the laws and the lawmakers. Martin Luther King, Sr., was planting the seeds for a national civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King, Jr.—The Formative Years

Martin, Jr., admired his father and all the Atlanta ministers who spoke so eloquently for civil rights. They demonstrated the power of words, which fascinated the young King. This fascination with language helped him score high on the college entrance exam in his junior year of high school. On the strength of his scores, Martin skipped senior year and entered Morehouse College at the age of 15.

Morehouse helped Martin see his future more clearly. The young student loved listening to the sermons of Morehouse's president, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, who was also an ordained minister. Dr. Mays could stir people's minds as well as their emotions. He confirmed Martin's notion that the pulpit could be used to improve African American lives. In February 1948, Martin Luther King, Jr., became a Baptist minister, and in June of that same year, he graduated from Morehouse with a bachelor's degree in sociology.

King went on to study religion at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. While there, he was deeply moved by a lecture about the Indian leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, who used passive protests rather than armed rebellion to

force the British out of India. Gandhi suffered a violent end when he was shot to death in 1948. King read all he could on Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence.

After graduating from Crozer in 1951, the young reverend continued his studies in religion at Boston University. While in Boston, Martin met Coretta Scott, who was studying voice at the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1953, Coretta and Martin married in Coretta's hometown of Marion, Alabama. The Kings decided to settle in Alabama, and in September 1954 Martin Luther King, Jr., became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church at Montgomery. In June 1955, King received his doctorate in theology from Boston University.

Joining the Struggle

Soon Dr. King was at the center of Montgomery's civil rights struggle. He worked with organizations such as the Women's Political Council and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, the secretary for the Montgomery NAACP, was arrested for refusing to move to the back of a city bus. In response, the Women's Political Council of Montgomery called on African Americans to boycott, or stop using, the city buses. On December 5, the head of the Women's Political Council and the city's other African American leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to organize the boycott. They elected Martin Luther King, Jr., their president. Montgomery's mayor refused to speak with Dr. King unless the MIA stopped the boycott. The MIA defied the mayor and decided to continue the boycott indefinitely.

Before the boycott ended, someone bombed Dr. King's house, the city of Montgomery tried and convicted him on boycott-related charges, and the Alabama state government outlawed the NAACP. These outrages only made the rest of the nation sympathetic to Dr. King's cause. On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court declared Montgomery's bus segregation laws unconstitutional. The next day, MIA members voted to end the boycott. When the Montgomery bus lines resumed full service, Martin Luther King, Jr., was among the first passengers on the newly integrated system.

Leading the Nation's Civil Rights Movement

In 1957, Dr. King rose from local to national leadership. On January 11, he was elected chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). On February 14, his picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. On May 17, he was honored in Washington, D. C., and delivered "Give Us the Ballot," his first speech to the nation. On August 8, he launched a voter registration drive across the entire South.

In September 1958, Dr. King came out with his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, which told the story of the bus boycott and explained nonviolent protest. At a book signing in New York City, a mentally unbalanced woman named Izola Curry stabbed Dr. King, and he was rushed to Harlem Hospital. While in the hospital, Dr. King issued a statement forgiving his attacker and reaffirming his faith in “the spirit of non-violence.”

By early 1959, Dr. King had recovered enough to visit India for several weeks. There he met with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and other followers of Gandhi, his guiding light along a nonviolent path to civil rights. On returning to the United States, the reverend compared race problems in his country with the caste system in India.

In January 1960, Dr. King left his church in Montgomery to assist his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. His new position gave him more time for civil rights work. Meanwhile, African American students in other parts of the South were also carrying on nonviolent protests. On February 1, four college freshmen in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down at a “whites-only” lunch counter and refused to move. Soon African American students across the South were conducting “sit-ins” at lunch counters. On April 15, African Americans attending Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to organize nonviolent protests at lunch counters and other segregated locations. Later that month, about 50 African Americans staged a “wade-in” at an all-white beach in Biloxi, Mississippi, setting off riots in the city. Then, in May, civil rights protestors got welcome news: President Dwight D. Eisenhower had signed the 1960 Civil Rights Act.

Gaining—and Losing—Ground

Despite the passage of the 1960 Civil Rights Act, Dr. King was uncertain that Eisenhower and the Republican Party would champion desegregation. Dr. King met with John F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate for president. It was the first of several meetings between the freedom fighter and the future president. In 1961, King urged President Kennedy to issue an executive order, similar to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, to outlaw segregation. Instead, the government’s Interstate Commerce Commission finally started to enforce equal treatment of passengers on buses nationwide.

In 1962, Dr. King and the SCLC began “People-to-People” campaigns to encourage African Americans to register to vote. He promoted his message of nonviolent change from Clarksdale, Mississippi, to Petersburg, Virginia, to Montgomery, Alabama. Meanwhile, many whites and even some African Americans tried to undermine his work. White officials in Albany, Georgia put Dr. King in jail. Around the same time, Malcolm X, a leader in the African American Nation of Islam, was arguing that African Americans should stay separate from whites rather than integrate with them. Malcolm X also questioned the value of

nonviolent protest when whites responded by bombing, beating, and killing protesters.

Despite persecution and criticism, Dr. King forged ahead with a protest campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, in April 1963. Dr. King was soon arrested and sent to jail. White clergy called his protest “unwise and untimely” and urged African Americans to wait patiently for justice. Dr. King reminded them in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.” After Dr. King’s release from jail, the protests resumed. On May 7, Birmingham police used dogs, clubs, and cattle prods to scatter 4,000 protesters, and on May 8, Dr. King was jailed again. Three days later, whites bombed the motel where Dr. King had been staying and the home of his younger brother Reverend A. D. King. A month later, civil rights leader Medgar W. Evers was murdered outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

African Americans and their supporters reacted to these hate crimes by rallying for civil rights. In late June 1963, more than 100,000 protesters turned out at Detroit, Michigan, to listen to Dr. King. On August 28, more than 250,000 demonstrators joined the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. At the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King told the demonstrators of his dream that “this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’” “I Have a Dream” remains one of the most moving speeches in American history. After the march, Dr. King and the other organizers attended a reception at the White House, where President Kennedy congratulated them on their tremendous success.

However, even the president could not stop the killing. About three weeks after the march on Washington, D.C., a bomb exploded at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young girls. Dr. King urged President Kennedy to have federal agents investigate the bombing. Instead, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tapped Dr. King’s home phone. In May 2002—nearly 40 years after the bombing—ex-clansmen Thomas Blanton, Jr., and Bobby Frank Cherry were convicted on four counts of arson and murder for the crime. Both men received four consecutive life sentences.

Success Amid Struggle

Despite danger and disappointment, Dr. King continued to lead protests during 1964. He also continued to defend the civil rights movement in speeches and his new book *Why We Can’t Wait*. He met with U.S. senators who supported integration and with Black Separatist Malcolm X. He went to jail in Florida for demanding service at a whites-only restaurant and watched as President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. He launched a nationwide campaign to encourage citizens to vote and denounced the FBI for failing to

protect the lives of civil rights workers. His efforts attracted international attention, and on December 10 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. Only 35 years old at the time, Dr. King was the youngest person ever to receive this honor.

On January 3, civil rights worker Samuel Younge, Jr., was murdered for attempting to use a whites-only restroom at an Alabama gas station. On February 1, Dr. King and 770 other demonstrators were arrested in Selma, Alabama. On February 21, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City. On March 7, leaders of the SCLC and SNCC were beaten as they tried to march from Selma to Montgomery. On August 11, riots erupted in Watts, a mainly African American area of Los Angeles, and continued for five days. Thirty-four people died, more than a thousand were injured, and almost four thousand were arrested.

Even in the midst of this injustice and bloodshed, the civil rights movement made strides. In March 1965, a United States district judge upheld the right of protesters to conduct an orderly demonstration, and Dr. King and his followers completed the march from Selma to Montgomery. On August 6, Dr. King and other African American leaders watched as President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and on November 15, the Supreme Court of the United States called for the desegregation of public schools with “all deliberate speed.”

Expanding the Movement

In 1966, Dr. King brought his struggle for equal rights to Chicago. On January 26, he and Coretta moved to an apartment in a rundown neighborhood called North Lawndale. On March 12, Dr. King spoke to an audience of 12,000 at the Chicago Freedom Festival. Then, in June, his attention turned south again when James H. Meredith was shot and wounded near Memphis, Tennessee, while marching for voting rights. On June 7, King and other civil rights leaders took Meredith’s place and led the marchers from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. The march ended with 15,000 people rallying in front of the capitol at Jackson.

Dr. King was back in Chicago on July 10 to launch an open-housing campaign at Soldier’s Field. On August 5, he led a march through Chicago’s southwest side to dramatize the need for equal access to decent housing for African Americans. White onlookers responded by pelting Dr. King and the marchers with stones. Finally, on December 20, Dr. King announced that the Federal Housing Administration was funding a program to restore housing in Chicago’s slums.

Dr. King publicly opposed the war in Vietnam as early as 1965. Other civil rights leaders advised him to focus on civil rights, so Dr. King said little about the war for many months. Then, in 1967, Dr. King resumed his opposition to the war. He delivered anti-war speeches in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. But by late 1967, he turned his attention from peace to poverty. On December 4, he embarked on the Poor People's Campaign, which called on the federal government to help poor African Americans.

Another way Dr. King tried to help the poor was to stand up for workers who demanded a living wage. On March 28, 1968, Dr. King arrived in Memphis to lead 6,000 demonstrators in support of striking garbage collectors. The demonstration ended in fighting and looting. Dr. King was determined to hold a peaceful demonstration in support of the strikers. So he returned to Memphis on April 3. At an evening rally, Dr. King gave perhaps his finest speech—"I've Been to the Mountaintop."

Losing a Leader

On April 4, 1968 Dr. King was shot to death on the balcony of his motel.

His murder set off rioting across the United States. Dozens of people were killed, and the National Guard and federal troops were needed to restore order.

President Johnson declared a national day of mourning on April 9—the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was buried. Many who had heard Dr. King speak on April 3 recalled his eerily prophetic words:

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land! I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.

On April 11, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968. It did not create a promised land for African Americans, but it did bring them closer.

In 1986—fifteen years after Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered—President Ronald Reagan declared the third Monday in January a federal holiday honoring Dr. King's birthday. The holiday is celebrated in countries around the world.

Dr. King is entombed on Freedom Plaza, which is located in Atlanta, Georgia and surrounded by the Freedom Hall Complex of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Historic Site. The site, recognized as a National Historic Landmark, was declared a [National Historic Site](#) on October 10, 1980 by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Books by Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Stride Toward Freedom, New York: Harper & Row, 1958.
- The Measure of a Man, Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1959.
- Why We Can't Wait, New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Strength to Love, New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- The Trumpet of Conscience, New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
(Posthumously).

LINKS

Morehouse College

<http://www.morehouse.edu/>

Crozer Theological Seminary

<http://www.crcds.edu/home800.asp>

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays

<http://www.stpaul.k12.mn.us/bmays/#bmaysbiography>

Mohandas K. Gandhi

<http://www.engagedpage.com/gan1.html>

Coretta Scott King

http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/whm/bio/king_c_s.htm

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

<http://www.naacp.org/>

Rosa Parks

<http://www.rosa-parks.info/rosa-parks/>

Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)

http://www.africanaonline.com/orga_montgomery_improvement_association.htm

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

<http://sclcnational.org/history.asp?itemid-3022&siteid-2607>

Jawaharlal Nehru

<http://www.itihaas.com/modern/nehru-profile.html>

Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC)

<http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc>

Dwight D. Eisenhower

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/president/de34.html>

John F. Kennedy

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/president/jk35.html>

Malcolm X

<http://www.cmgww.com/historic/malcolm/>

“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

http://liberationcommunity.sanford.edu/TopicPages/letter_birmingham.html

Sixteenth Street Baptist Church
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/al111.htm>

“I Have a Dream”
<http://web66.coled.umn.edu/new/MLK/MLK.html>

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
<http://www.fbi.gov/aboutus.htm>

Lyndon B. Johnson
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/president/lj36.html>

Nobel Peace Prize
<http://www.nobel.se/peace/>

James H. Meredith
<http://www.geocities.com/jamesmeredith2002/history.htm>

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”
<http://www.afscme.org/about/kingspch.htm>

Martin Luther King Jr., National Historic Site
<http://www.nps.gov/malu/>