

Martin Luther King Jr.

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Martin Luther King Jr.



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Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, 1963

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A girl marches in a Martin Luther King Day parade.

Introduction

Each year, we celebrate Martin Luther King Day. We remember the life and work of a great African American leader. Who was this man?

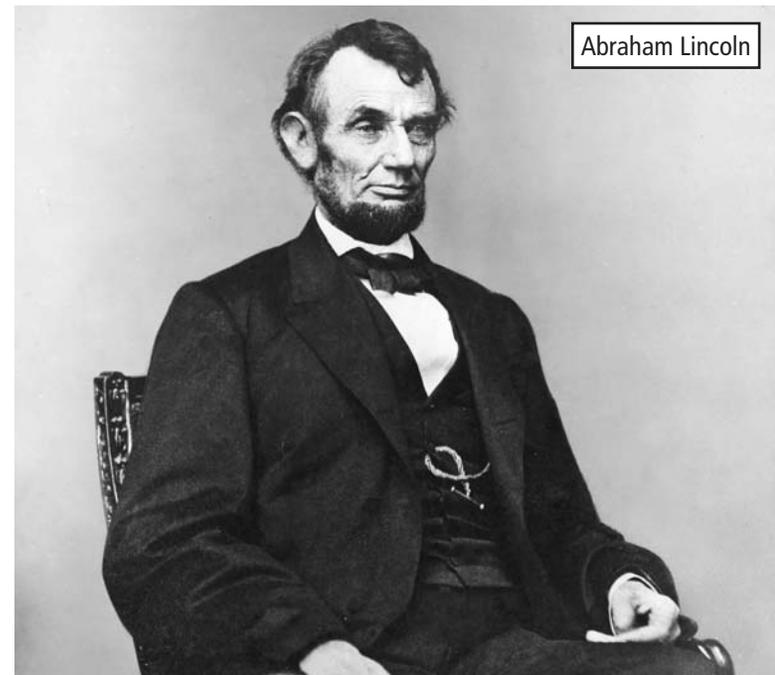
Life in the South

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in 1929. He grew up in a loving family. When he was nineteen, he decided to become a **minister**. His first job was at a church in the state of Alabama.



The childhood home of Martin Luther King Jr.

Alabama is in the South, where African Americans lived under unfair laws for many years. Before the **Civil War**, most black people were slaves to white owners. After the Civil War, **slavery** ended in America. But many states in the South then passed laws to keep blacks apart from whites.



President Abraham Lincoln passed a special law to free the slaves.



A black man drinks from a fountain labeled "For Colored Only." In 1960, around the time this photo was taken, *colored* was the word often used for African Americans.

These unfair laws took away the **rights** of many blacks. Black children had to go to different, poorer schools than white children. Blacks had to use different drinking fountains and bathrooms. On buses, blacks had to sit in the back and give up their seats if whites wanted them.

In 1955, a black woman **refused** to give up her bus seat to a white man. She was put in jail for breaking the law. When Martin heard what happened, he decided to act.



Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat. After her arrest, a police officer took her fingerprints.



Blacks walked or shared cars instead of riding city buses. These women shared a station wagon to get around town.

Starting His Work

Martin wanted all Americans to have the same rights. He believed that if people worked together, they could change the unfair laws. He asked other African Americans to stop riding the city buses until the law was changed. Thousands of them stopped using the buses for almost a year.

Some whites agreed that the law was unfair. Other whites liked things the way they were. They were angry that Martin wanted to change things. Someone even threw a bomb at his house. But the city finally changed the law to allow blacks to sit wherever they chose on buses.



Some angry white people belonged to a group called the *Ku Klux Klan*, or KKK. Members of the KKK burned a cross at a meeting.



A group of marchers run for safety as they are sprayed with powerful fire hoses.

“I Have a Dream”

In 1963, Martin led a **march** to change other laws in the South. Many of the people at the march were children. When police used force to stop the march, some of the children were badly hurt.

Around the country, people saw how African Americans were treated. More and more people wanted to change the laws to be fair to everyone. When Martin led a march in Washington, D.C., more than 250,000 black and white Americans marched with him.



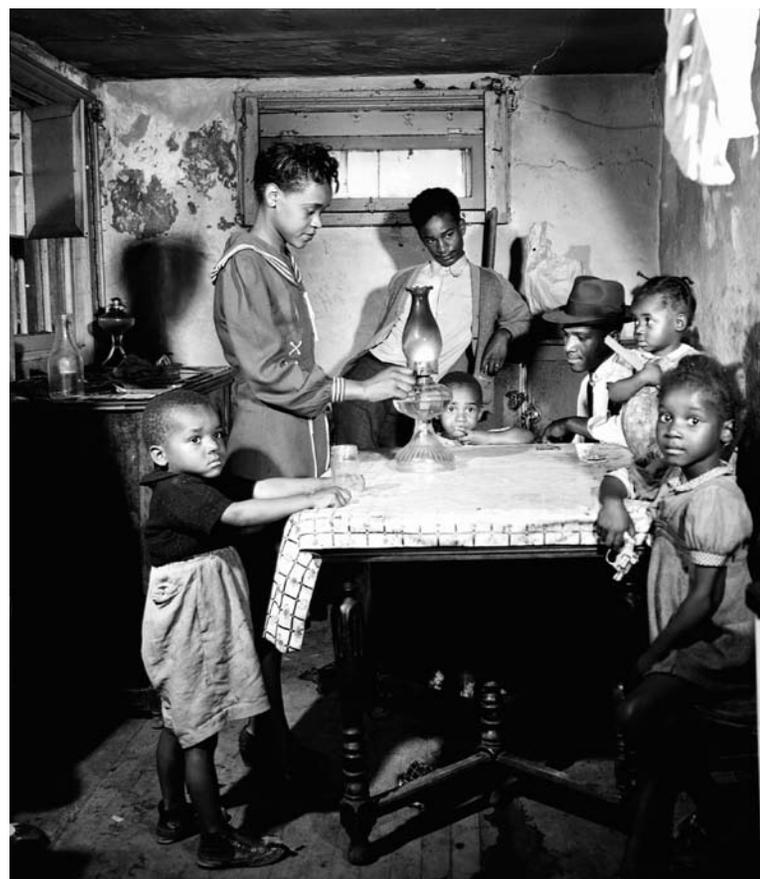
Martin’s 1963 March on Washington ended near the Washington Monument. At that time, it was the largest march ever held in the capital.



Martin Luther King Jr. gives his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

At the march, Martin spoke to a cheering crowd. He shared his dream that one day, the color of a person's skin wouldn't matter. All people would be "free at last." The next year, the United States passed a law ending the **separation** of blacks and whites.

The work wasn't over, though. Many blacks were still poor. Their lives were still hard. Martin kept working for better homes, schools, and jobs for them. Then in the spring of 1968, Martin was shot by a white man.



A poor family in their Washington, D.C., apartment



Martin died at age thirty-nine. People around the world felt shocked and sad. Martin Luther King Jr. was a hero who worked to make the world a better place. Today we remember him for helping to make the laws fair for people of every color.

Glossary

- Civil War** (*n.*) the war between the Northern and Southern states of the United States of America (1861–1865) (p. 6)
- march** (*n.*) an organized walk through the streets by people who are supporting or protesting something (p. 11)
- minister** (*n.*) a spiritual leader in a Protestant church (p. 5)
- refused** (*v.*) turned down or did not go along with something (p. 8)
- rights** (*n.*) freedoms or powers that people can justly claim (p. 7)
- separation** (*n.*) the process of keeping things apart (p. 13)
- slavery** (*n.*) the state or condition of being a slave, or the property of another person (p. 6)