

## This Day in History... January 15, 1929

# Birth of Martin Luther King Jr.

Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia.

The middle child of a Baptist minister, he was born Michael King Jr. In 1931, his father succeeded his grandfather as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. It was at this time that his father changed his name to Martin, in honor of the German Protestant leader Martin Luther. Michael Jr. eventually adopted this name change as well.

King was a bright child, skipping two grades as a student at Booker T. Washington High School. He entered Morehouse College in Atlanta when he was just 15. Perhaps because of his young age, King was an unmotivated student during his first two years in college. He questioned religion and seriously considered not joining the ministry. Then, in his junior year, King took a Bible class that renewed his faith and set him on the path to become a minister.

After graduating from Morehouse in 1948 with a degree in sociology, King attended the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. He was a model scholar, elected student body president, and was valedictorian of his graduating class. King went on to earn his doctorate at Boston University, where he met his wife, Coretta Scott. By the time he was 25, King earned his PhD and was serving as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

It was in Montgomery, in December 1955, that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. After she was arrested that night, King met with E.D. Nixon, head of the local NAACP chapter, as well as other local civil rights leaders, to coordinate a bus boycott. King was young, well-trained, and new to the community, so he didn't have many enemies. As such, he was selected to lead the boycott, providing a voice for the civil rights movement. King inspired the protesters to withstand the harassment that followed in the coming months. During the protest, King's home was among several that were attacked. After more than a year, their efforts helped push the city to end its segregation of public transportation.

Following that victory, King and a group of 60 ministers and civil rights activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). They united black churches and encouraged them to hold nonviolent protests for civil rights reform. And in 1960, King met with the students who had held a sit-in at a North Carolina university, protesting segregated lunch counters. He encouraged them to continue to use nonviolent means, eventually leading to the desegregation of lunch counters in 27 Southern cities.

In April of 1963, while participating in the Birmingham Campaign, which sought to end Jim Crow policies in Birmingham Alabama, King was arrested. This was the 13th time he was arrested out of 29 during his life. While in jail, he wrote what has been called "one of the most important historical documents penned by a modern political prisoner." In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King responded to those who called for law and order by comparing the protests to the illegality of the Boston Tea Party, while noting that everything Hitler had

done had been legal. King wrote, "One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'" Further, he stated, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive

peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

King led one of his most famous demonstrations in August 1963 – the March on Washington, where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. The march, and King's eloquent speech, brought national attention to the movement and was a major stepping stone in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this accomplishment.

Though King wasn't part of the first Selma March, which turned violent, he helped plan one two days later. Under his guidance, 2,500 protesters marched to a police barricade, knelt in prayer, and turned back. Again, King's protest sparked national attention and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed shortly after.

In the coming years, King continued this quest for change through nonviolence, but a younger faction of militant activists arose that believed his efforts were too weak to make change. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated by a white supremacist on his hotel balcony. King's death sent shockwaves across the nation.



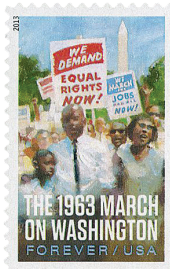
*Martin Luther King Jr. Day was first celebrated as a federal holiday on January 20, 1986.*



*King and his father changed their names to Martin Luther in honor of the Protestant leader.*



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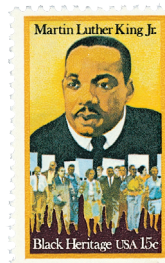
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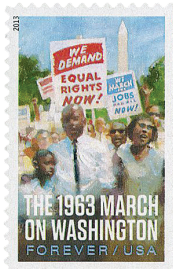
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