Martin Luther King, Jr.

National Historic Site
Georgia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

I HAVE A DREAM

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, at 501 Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia. His father was a Baptist minister, and his mother was a musician. His childhood was not especially eventful. He grew up as the second of three children in a black neighborhood, attending all-black schools. At 19 he graduated in 1948 from Morehouse College in Atlanta. Before he turned 27 he had earned two other degrees, a BD from Crozer Theological Seminary and a PhD in systematic theology from Boston University.

From the time that he and his bride, the former Coretta Scott, moved to Montgomery, Alabama, to accept the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, King was destined to play an important role in the history of the United States. The year after he arrived in Montgomery, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus, and the support group that was organized to defend her and to boycott the bus company, the Montgomery Improvement Association, chose King as its leader. Soon his eloquent voice on behalf of the disadvantaged was heard not only in Montgomery but in many parts of the United States and, ultimately, around the world.

Perhaps King was always committed to non-violence. But his visit to India in 1957 and his personal encounter with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and with Indian teachings of non-violence strengthened his resolve to use them in his quest for racial justice. This resolve is set forth in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, an account of the successful Montgomery bus boycott.

It was evident by 1958 that King's activities in the movement to secure equal rights interfered with his pastoral duties. He was traveling constantly and his association with such other leaders as A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, and Roy Wilkins required regular meetings. Consequently, in 1960, King resigned his pastorate in Montgomery, moved to Atlanta, and became president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a new but rapidly growing civil rights organization committed to non-violence. He also served as co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church and worked with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Increasingly, King advocated and practiced civil disobedience to what he termed "immoral laws." In 1960 he was sentenced to four months in Reidsville State Prison in Georgia for allegedly trespassing at a department store in Atlanta and for violating probation for a traffic violation several months earlier. Because of widespread fears for his safety in Reidsville, his jailing became an issue in the presidential election when Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy expressed his concern to Mrs. King while Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon did not.

In the next few years King intensified his drive for equal rights, staging boycotts in Albany, Georgia, in 1961-62 and in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963. There were violent responses from parts of the public as well as from the police, as homes and churches were bombed and civil rights workers were murdered. Meanwhile, King urged his followers to practice non-violence as they committed acts of civil disobedience. King himself was arrested and jailed. When eight prominent white Birmingham clergymen, in a statement called "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," criticized blacks for disobeying the law, King felt obliged to respond. "An individual who breaks the law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice," said King in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law."

The early summer of 1963 was filled with planning for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, sponsored by the Urban League, the NAACP, the American Negro Labor Council, the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Conference, the American Jewish Council, SNCC, SCLC, and other groups. On August 28, more than 250,000 people of every race and creed marched on Washington. The leaders met with President Kennedy and then several spoke to the assembled crowds. King electrified the audience with his now-famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

It was a momentous year for King. In December *Time* magazine chose him as its man of the year. The following year, at the insistence of King and his followers and with the prodding of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Congress passed the first civil rights bill since 1875. In autumn 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. It was, perhaps, the events of the preceding year as well as his hopes for the future that moved King to write in 1964 his second book, *Why We Can't Wait*. Even as he explained why blacks could not wait, roadblocks were clearly visible. The march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965 to press for a voting rights bill was almost stalled as the opposition gained strength. By this time, moreover, some segments of the civil rights movement began to lose confidence in non-violence as a means of achieving equality. Although the Voting Rights Act became law in 1965, King's efforts the following year to fight discrimination in Chicago were less than successful. The old tactics of boycotting, picketing, and demonstrating were unfruitful. White backlash and more subtle forms of discrimination immeasurably complicated the task.

In 1967 King surprised many observers by speaking out against the Vietnam War. He was aware that his position might undercut his role as spokesman for civil rights, but he was convinced that his position in the movement would be compromised if he did not oppose the war. Thus the Vietnam War was more than a distraction; it became an occasion for King to look at himself, his own people, his government, and the way in which economic privation, political disadvantage, and the relations of nations were interconnected. It was a time of reevaluation and earnest searching for permanent solutions. His quest was expressed in his book *Where Do We Go From Here?*, published in 1967.

Even as he sought a resolution of his dilemmas, King continued the task of supporting those who attempted to better their condition. In early spring of 1968 he went to Memphis to assist the sanitation workers who were on strike. It was there that he was fatally shot on a motel balcony on April 4, 1968. News of the assassination set off several days of rioting in some cities as millions in this nation and around the world mourned his death.

King was not only the most eloquent spokesman for racial justice of this time; he was also the most successful. He raised the discussion of human rights to a new level, and he developed techniques and approaches that made activism in civil rights a viable policy by which stated goals could be achieved. He discovered, however, that it was far easier to secure basic civil and voting rights—as difficult as that was—than to remove from a society the racial prejudices and discriminatory practices by which it had lived for centuries. But by his teachings and example, he infused his own and succeeding generations with a commitment to racial equality and a zeal to work diligently for it. That legacy was second in importance only to the goals that he achieved in his own time.

—John Hope Franklin

Dr. King receives the Nobel Peace Prize, 1964

UPI/Bettmann Archive

March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, 1965 *James Karales*

Sweet Auburn

The Black Atlanta of King's Early Years

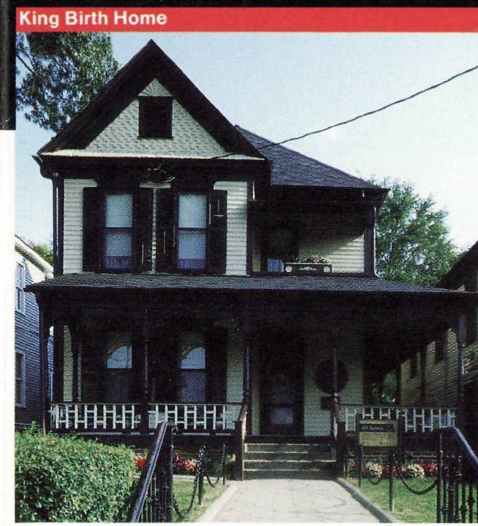
Early 20th century Atlanta was a patchwork of communities, each shaped by the people within its bounds. Auburn Avenue was the main artery through one prosperous neighborhood which over the years had come to symbolize achievement for Atlanta's black people. After the Civil War, former slaves bought property east of the city's central business district on what was then Wheat Street, a busy east-west thoroughfare. Many black entrepreneurs accumulated profits enough to build homes a little farther east, away from the marketplace. Wheat Street grew to be a mixture of old and young, prominent and obscure, and—until the onset of racial trouble in the early 1900s—black and white.

Business executives and factory workers alike took pride in their surroundings, putting up residences, office buildings, and places of worship whose facades displayed the varied components of late-Victorian architecture. In 1893, citizens petitioned the city council to change the name of Wheat Street to Auburn Avenue, which they thought more stylish.

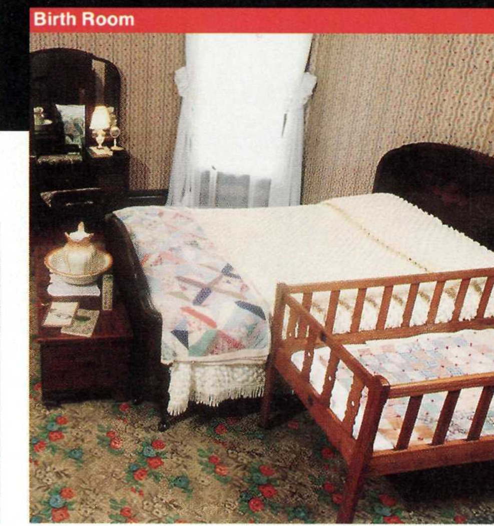
In 1909 the Reverend A.D. Williams, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, purchased a large home on Auburn Avenue. Williams played an important role in the community because the lives of many persons in black Atlanta centered around the church. An eloquent speaker and noted local political activist, he contributed his efforts—and meeting space in his church building—to a number of organizations dedicated to the education and social advancement of black citizens. But it was the minister's grandson whose name would become synonymous with the nation's civil rights movement. On January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born at his grandfather's home.

Young M.L., as he was called, grew up in a close-knit neighborhood where a wide range of talents and interests made for an independent city within a city. M.L. lived with his parents, grandparents, brother, and sister in a fashionable, though by no means exclusive, black residential area. Their neighbors were businessmen, educators, and clergymen, as well as servants, laborers, and porters. A few blocks away in the commercial district, the businesses and public services—more than 100 on Auburn Avenue alone—included banks, insurance companies, builders, jewelers, tailors, doctors, lawyers, funeral parlors, a newspaper, a library, and a business college. All were black-owned or black-operated. The district thrived. The opportunities available here to

King Birth Home



Birth Room



Photographs by Michael W. Thomas

blacks, even in the face of Atlanta's segregation laws, inspired political leader John Wesley Dobbs to nickname the area "Sweet Auburn." Years later Dobbs' grandson, Mayor Maynard H. Jackson, added that Sweet Auburn had offered blacks "the three B's—bucks, ballots, and books!"

Dr. King never forgot the community spirit he had known as a child. Nor did he forget racial prejudice, the seemingly insurmountable barrier that kept black Atlantans from accomplishing all they might have. It was to Sweet Auburn that he returned in 1960 to serve with his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist and to head the SCLC. And, as the world mourned on an early spring day in 1968, it was to Sweet Auburn that the body of Martin Luther King, Jr., was brought one last time.

North
0 20 100 Meters
0 100 500 Feet

FREEDOM PARKWAY
To Carter Center
From Freedom Parkway, turn south onto Boulevard and follow signs to parking lot.
Cain Street
Boulevard
John Wesley Dobbs Avenue
International Boulevard
Butler Street Exit
Parking lot entrance
PARKING
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY
PRESERVATION DISTRICT BOUNDARY
Ellis Street
Courtland Street
Piedmont Avenue
Butler Street
Fort Street
Hilliard Street
Irwin Street
Hogue Street
Howell Street
Randolph Street
Jackson Street
PROMENADE
Old Wheat Street
Brooks Alley
Auburn Avenue
To downtown Atlanta, Woodruff Park, and Peachtree Street
Atlanta Expressway
Edgewood Avenue
Auditorium Place
Piedmont Avenue
Coca-Cola Place
Butler Street
Boaz Street
Edgewood/Auburn Avenue Exit
Tanner Street
Wm. Holmes Borders Sr., Drive
Chamberlain Street
To 20
Gartrell Place
Daniel Street
Bradley Street
Cooks Alley
Ezzard Street
Cornelia Street

Atlanta Life Insurance Company Building
148 Auburn Ave. Completed 1920; annex (142 Auburn) built 1936. From 1920 to 1980, this was the headquarters of the country's largest black-owned stockholder life insurance company.

Rucker Building
158-60 Auburn Ave. Completed 1904. Atlanta's first black office building was constructed by businessman and politician Henry A. Rucker.

Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church
220 Auburn Ave. Built 1890s; rebuilt 1924. The church's most prominent feature, the "Jesus Saves" sign on the steeple, was added when the structure was rebuilt after a 1920 fire.

Royal Peacock Club
184-86 Auburn Ave. Built 1922. Known as the Top Hat until 1948, this entertainment spot has featured such performers as Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and Aretha Franklin.

Odd Fellows Building and Auditorium
228-50 Auburn Ave. Built 1912-14. Named for a fraternal organization begun in Atlanta in 1870, this six-story complex provided Sweet Auburn residents with space for offices, stores, and meetings.

APEX Museum

Auburn Avenue Research Library

Butler Street YMCA
20-24 Butler St. Built 1918-20. Founded in the basement of the Wheat Street Baptist Church in 1894, the activist YMCA group met in several locations before building new quarters here.

***Atlanta Daily World* Building**

Herndon Building
231-45 Auburn Ave. Built 1926. This multi-use structure was named for its builder, Alonzo F. Herndon, ex-slave and founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company.

Original Coca-Cola Bottling Building

Sweet Auburn Curb Market
209 Edgewood Ave. Completed 1923. Even during the years of legal segregation in Atlanta, both blacks and whites shopped here for fresh produce and meats. The market is still in operation.

National Park Service Visitor Center
450 Auburn Ave. The visitor center has exhibits, a video program, and a schedule of park activities. National Park Service personnel provide information and answer questions.

Prince Hall Masonic Building
332-34 Auburn Ave. Completed 1941. Georgia's most influential black Masonic lodge constructed this building which currently houses the national offices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Ebenezer Baptist Church
407-13 Auburn Ave. Built 1914-22. Following the example of his father and grandfather, Martin Luther King, Jr., served as co-pastor from 1960 until 1968.

Wheat Street Baptist Church
365 Auburn Ave. Built 1920-31. Sonamed because the original structure was built when Auburn Avenue was called Wheat Street, the church has been a community institution since the late 1800s.

Plaza
Behold Statue, Rose Garden, Fountain, and Amphitheater.

Gravesite
In the early 1970s, Dr. King's body was moved from the Southview Cemetery to a site next to Ebenezer Baptist Church. The present memorial tomb was dedicated in 1977.

The King Center
The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., was founded in 1968 by Coretta Scott King and others. The center is headed by the Kings' younger son, Dexter Scott King. This organization continues Dr. King's work toward economic and social equality.

Fire Station No. 6

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church and School

Watkins-Anderson Building
443-45 Edgewood Ave. Built 1905-10. This commercial structure has been completely renovated. 443 houses NPS staff offices and 445 continues service under lease as a barbershop.

Double "Shotgun" Row Houses
472-488 Auburn Ave. Built in 1905 for Empire Textile Company mill workers. Theoretically, a gunshot could enter and leave the house through the perfectly aligned doorways, hence the name "shotgun."

Martin Luther King, Jr., Birth Home
501 Auburn Ave. Built 1895. The Queen Anne style house is restored to its appearance during the years 1929, when King was born, to 1941, when his family moved to a house on Boulevard.

Alexander Hamilton, Jr., Home
102 Howell St. Built 1890-95. This elegant house, whose architectural details include a Palladian window and Corinthian columns, was home to Atlanta's leading black building contractor in the early 1900s.

Bryant-Graves Home
522 Auburn Ave. Built in 1893-95. Former occupants include two prominent black citizens, Rev. Peter James Bryant and real estate developer Antoine Graves.

Charles L. Harper Home
535 Auburn Ave. Built about 1895. Professor Harper, who lived here from 1910 to 1945, was principal of Atlanta's first black public high school, Booker T. Washington High.

A Walk Through the Park and Preservation District

"Auburn Avenue was like a grand lady," recalled a journalist. "In her prime she was the talk of the town—young, vivacious, and beautiful. Everyone loved her, respected her, and wooed her."

This prosperous era is represented by many buildings that date from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Since Sweet Auburn is still an active community, with its original structures privately owned and occupied, most buildings in the national historic site and preservation district are not open for tours. There are two important buildings, however, that you are encouraged to visit: the Martin Luther King, Jr., Birth Home, restored to recreate the childhood years of Sweet Auburn's most famous resident, and the Ebenezer Baptist Church, important to the King family for four generations.

Martin Luther King, Jr., Birth Home Located at 501 Auburn Avenue, the nine-room, two-story Queen Anne style residence was built in 1895. Fourteen years later, King's grandfather, A.D. Williams, bought the house. For the next 32 years it was occupied by the Williams-King family. On Thanksgiving Day 1926, Williams' daughter Alberta married Martin Luther King, Sr., a young minister. The couple moved into an upstairs room. King worked weekdays, preached Sundays, and spent evenings at the city's Morehouse College studying toward his divinity degree. Their three children—Christine, Martin Jr., and A.D. King—were born here. The Kings always stressed to their children the importance of education. Daddy King claimed that even before Martin Jr. could read, "he kept books around him, he just liked the idea of having them." The Kings and Alberta's mother remained here after Williams died in 1931. Ten years later, after the death of his grandmother, 12-year-old Martin and his family moved a few blocks away to a home on Boulevard.

Ebenezer Baptist Church Martin Luther King, Sr., known as Daddy King, once proclaimed Ebenezer Baptist Church a home for everyone "from PhD's to no D's." Ebenezer was founded at another location in 1886, eight years before the Rev. A.D. Williams was named pastor. The present Gothic Revival structure was completed in 1922.

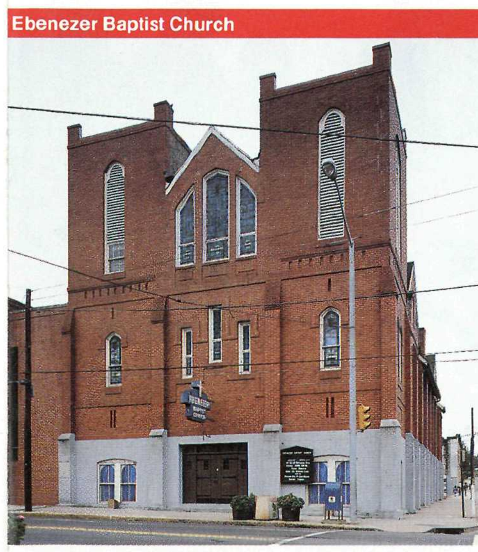
Like churches everywhere Ebenezer was a place for worship and fellowship. But Ebenezer's role in the community was not limited to religious matters. An article in the *Atlanta Daily World* reported that when the Reverend Williams proudly announced on 1929 that Ebenezer was nearly out of debt, "the church dedicated itself to the advancement of black people and support of every righteous and social movement."

For more than 80 years, the ministers of Ebenezer were members of the same family. In 1931, upon Williams' death, his son-in-law, Martin Luther King, Sr., took over as pastor and served until he retired in 1975. King family life revolved around the church. Five-year-old Martin Jr. and his sister Christine formally joined the church in 1934 at a revival led by a visiting evangelist. The young King preached his first sermon here at age 17 and joined his father as co-pastor from 1960 to 1968. In 1957, an organizational meeting for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was held at Ebenezer. Martin Luther King, Jr., became the SCLC's first president.

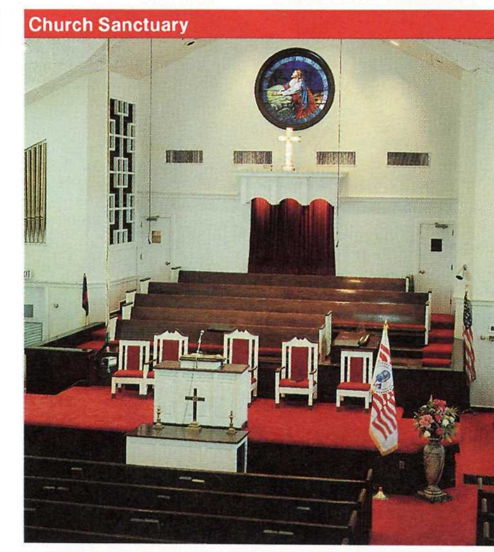
Ebenezer was also the scene of tragic episodes. Crowds gathered here in April 1968 to view Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, body as it lay in state. In 1974 Dr. King's mother was fatally shot by an assassin as she was playing the church organ.

The Preservation District The national historic site is adjacent to the preservation district, which helps to maintain the historic atmosphere of the Sweet Auburn community. Buildings within the district include Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Wheat Street Baptist Church, the Odd Fellows Building, the Prince Hall Masonic Building, the Royal Peacock Club, and the Sweet Auburn Curb Market. Institutions such as the Butler Street YMCA, the SCLC, the *Atlanta Daily World*, and radio station WERD are preserved, along with small and large businesses, social service agencies, and many residences that belonged to prominent Atlantans.

Ebenezer Baptist Church



Church Sanctuary



Photographs by Michael W. Thomas

Getting to the park
From I-75/I-85, exit at Freedom Parkway/Carter Center; turn right at the first stoplight onto Boulevard. Follow signs to the park. From I-20, take I-75/I-85 north and proceed as above.

Hours and facilities
Stop first at the visitor center, located at 450 Auburn Avenue, open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Here you will find information, exhibits, a video presentation, and schedules of activities. You may tour the historic areas; guide booklets are available.

Administration. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, which includes the Birth Home, Ebenezer Baptist Church, the grave site, and numerous historic buildings, was established in 1980 to preserve the birthplace and boyhood surroundings of the nation's foremost civil rights leader. The site is adminstered by the National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

More information Contact: Superintendent, Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, 450 Auburn Avenue, NE, Atlanta, GA 30312-1525; 404-331-5190; www.nps.gov/malu on the Web.

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