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 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 a 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 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 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 his 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

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Dr. King accepts the Nobel Peace Prize, 1964.

March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, 1965
©JAMES KARALES

Sweet Auburn

Growing Up in Black Atlanta

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

Atlanta in the early 20th century was a mosaic of communities shaped by the people within the city's bounds. Auburn Avenue was the main artery through one neighborhood that came to symbolize prosperity for African Americans.

After the Civil War, ex-slaves bought property east of the city's central business district in the low-lying area of Wheat Street and Butler Street (now Jesse Hill Jr. Drive). By 1881, Butler Street was the center of an area known as Darktown, sandwiched between Courtland and Jackson streets. Business owners and factory workers alike took pride in their surroundings, putting up houses, office buildings, and places of worship in late-Victorian architectural styles.

By 1893 white residents, concerned that "Wheat Street" was viewed as a black neighborhood, petitioned the city council to change the name to Auburn Avenue. The area grew to be a mixture of old and young, prominent and plain, and black and white—until the race riot of 1906 revived segregation.

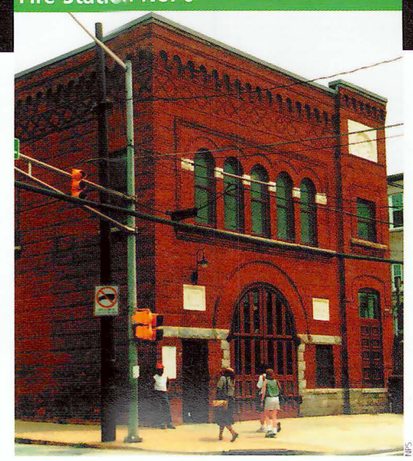
In 1909 the Rev. A.D. Williams and his wife purchased a large home on predominantly black Auburn Avenue. As pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Reverend Williams was not only an eloquent speaker, but a political activist who vigorously supported organizations dedicated to the education, social advancement, and well-being of African Americans. After Reverend Williams died in 1931, his son-in-law Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., took over as Ebenezer's pastor. But it was Reverend Williams's grandson whose name would become synonymous with the civil rights movement in America.

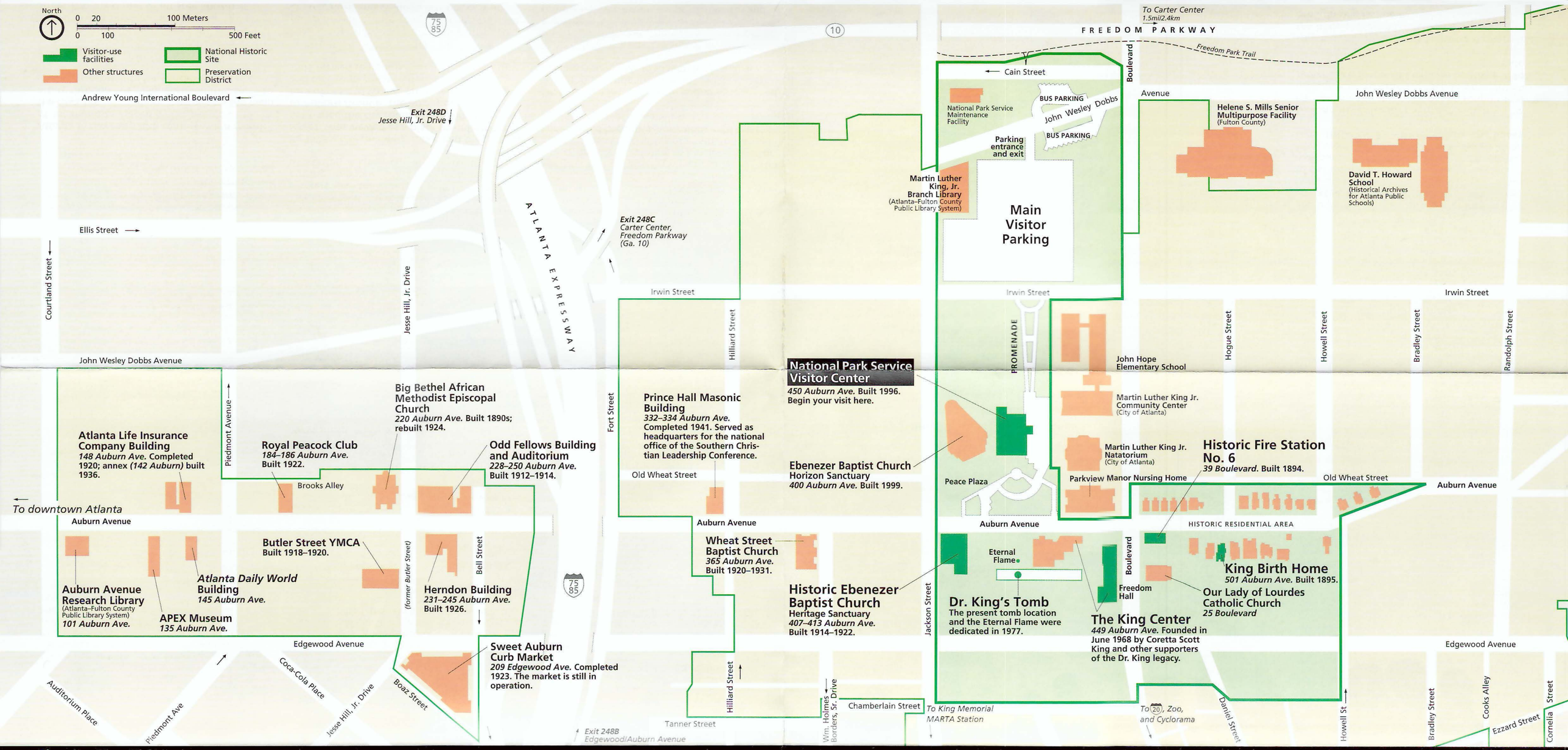
On January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born at his grandparents' home, 501 Auburn Avenue. Young M.L. lived with his grandparents, parents, brother, sister, and other close relatives. Their neighbors were businessmen, porters, teachers, millworkers, clergymen, domestics, and laborers. Nearby were banks, insurance companies, real estate agencies, medical and law offices, funeral parlors, a drugstore, library, and business college—all black-owned or black-operated. Despite Atlanta's segregation laws, political leader John Wesley Dobbs was inspired to call the area "Sweet Auburn." Years later his grandson, Mayor Maynard H. Jackson, added that Sweet Auburn had offered African Americans "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. He returned in 1960 to serve with his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist and to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. 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.

King Birth Home

Fire Station No. 6





Planning Your Visit

Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site was established in 1980 in order to protect and interpret for the benefit, inspiration, and education of present and future generations the places where Martin Luther King, Jr., was born, where he lived, worked, and worshiped, and where he is buried. Park sites include the visitor center, Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, The King Center (Dr. King's Tomb and Freedom Hall), Fire Station No. 6, and the Birth Home. Book and gift sales are available at each site except the Birth Home.

The Preservation District Surrounding the national historic site is the preservation district, which helps to maintain the historic integrity of Sweet Auburn. This is still an active community. Most buildings within the national historic site and preservation district are privately owned and are not open to the public.

The National Park Service Visitor Center Begin your visit here. Rangers will answer questions and provide orientation to the park. The visitor center has a museum, interactive exhibits, and films about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement.

Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (Heritage Sanctuary) Built 1914–1922. From their childhood years Ebenezer served as a central and sacred place for Martin and his siblings, Christine and Alfred Daniel. On Feb. 25, 1948, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was ordained and appointed associate pastor to his father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. For the last eight years of his life, Dr. King served as Ebenezer's co-pastor with his father. His brother followed in his footsteps as co-pastor until July 1969. As the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. King used Ebenezer to meet and plan civil rights strategies based on the principles of nonviolent direct action.

Ebenezer was also the scene of tragic episodes. On April 9, 1968, Dr. King's funeral was held at Ebenezer. In June 1974 Dr. King's mother was fatally shot while playing the church organ for Sunday morning worship.

The King Center (Freedom Hall) and Dr. King's Tomb Personal artifacts and timelines relating to Dr. and Mrs. King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Rosa Parks are on display at Freedom Hall. In the early 1970s Dr. King's body was moved from Southview Cemetery to a nearby site at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The present gravesite was dedicated in 1977. Take some time to reflect in this setting.

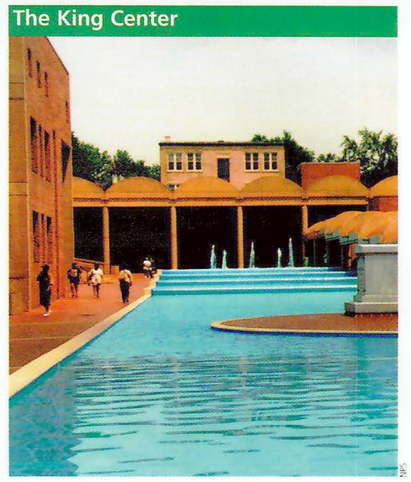
Historic Fire Station No. 6 Built 1894. This is Atlanta's oldest standing firehouse. It is now a museum that tells the story of desegregation of the city's fire department. On display is a 1927 La France fire engine, a type that young Martin would have seen.

The King Birth Home Built 1895. Dr. King was born January 15, 1929, in his grandparents' home at 501 Auburn Avenue. For his first 12 years Martin lived in a multi-generation household: his two siblings, parents, maternal grandparents, a great aunt, and an uncle. In 1941 the family moved into a brick home on Boulevard. The Birth Home has been restored and furnished to reflect the 1930s and 1940s.

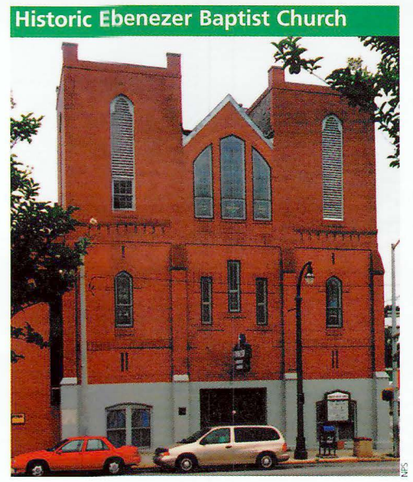
Getting to the park From I-75/I-85, take exit 248C (Freedom Parkway, Carter Center); turn right onto Boulevard; take immediate second right onto John Wesley Dobbs Avenue to bus/visitor parking. From I-20, take exit 59A (Boulevard, Cyclorama, Zoo); go north on Boulevard for almost two miles; turn left on John Wesley Dobbs Avenue to parking. **Mass transit system:** At the MARTA Five Points Station, take Bus No. 3, Auburn Avenue Eastbound directly to the park; or take the MARTA East-West Rail Line to the King Memorial Station. The park is about one mile north of the station from Jackson Street.

Hours of operation The park is open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Winter hours are 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Summer hours are 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. All park sites are self-guiding except the King Birth Home. Ranger-conducted tours of the home are offered year-round. Each home tour is limited to 15 people and available first-come, first-served. **Early registration at the visitor center is highly recommended**.

The King Center



Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church



More Information
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