

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Washington, D.C.



“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”

Martin Luther King Jr.

This memorial preserves the memory of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968): visionary, faith leader and public intellectual, unwavering advocate of social justice, and martyr to peace, equality, and justice. As he traveled the “torturous road” toward racial equality during the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. King sought to maintain an “abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind.”¹ Although most widely known for his leading role in the African-American civil rights movement in the United States, Dr. King was also a tireless advocate for the nation’s working class and the oppressed around the world.

NPS Photo

“The fierce urgency of now”²

Dr. King’s sense of urgency was made famous in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), in which he took exception to eight fellow clergymen who suggested that African-Americans wait patiently for civil rights. Yet his vigorous inclination to decisive action preceded his involvement with the movement for civil rights and world peace. Coming from a family of readers, he made an impression as an exceptionally gifted young man, which accelerated his graduation from high school by the age of 15. Descending from an ancestral line of Baptist ministers, his formative years were spent surrounded by various communities of faith and service. By 1955, at the age of 26, he himself was an ordained Baptist minister, had earned his bachelor of arts, bachelor of divinity, doctorate of philosophy, and started a family.

In 1957, the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) dedicated to racial equality and economic justice, and co-founded by Dr. King, elected him as their president. He asked of those in the movement: “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?” He proved unafraid of reinforcing his words in leading by example. He organized sit-ins, kneel-ins, mass meetings, and

boycotts in the face of stern opposition. Images of the violence faced by Dr. King and those allied to the cause spread across the nation, introducing him to a public embroiled in the bitter process of desegregation. Advocates and denouncers alike came to know him through his powerfully rendered speeches and writings, in which he called for those seeking equality to “protest courageously and yet with dignity and love.”

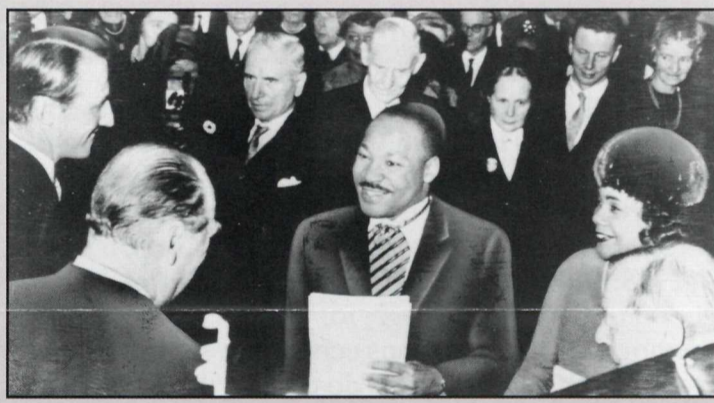


Dr. King with wife and children.

UPI Photo / Library of Congress / LC-USZ62-122978

“An amazing universalism”³

The civil rights movement, galvanized by Dr. King’s leadership, resulted in the passage of a series of Civil Rights Acts (1957, 1960, and 1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). Yet the movement was not bound by the limits of national borders. The Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Dr. King the 1964 Peace Prize for his dedication to nonviolent tactics, an honor which resonated as loud as his powerful writing and oratory to advocates of peace worldwide. His method followed the example of Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Indian independence movement to develop a broad strategy for unarmed resistance. Dr. King was acutely aware of the parallels between the condition of African-Americans and others around the world. Dr. King was personal witness to this relationship, as he visited other nations where such change occurred. He remarked: “An old order of colonialism, of segregation, of discrimination is passing away now.”⁴



Dr. King accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, 12/10/1964.

UPI Photo / Library of Congress / LC-USZ62-122979



President Lyndon Baines Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, 7/2/1964.

LBJ Library photo by Cecil Stoughton



Dr. King speaks to marchers, 8/28/1963.

National Archives Photo 306-SSM-4C5113



Dr. King speaks to marchers, 8/28/1963.

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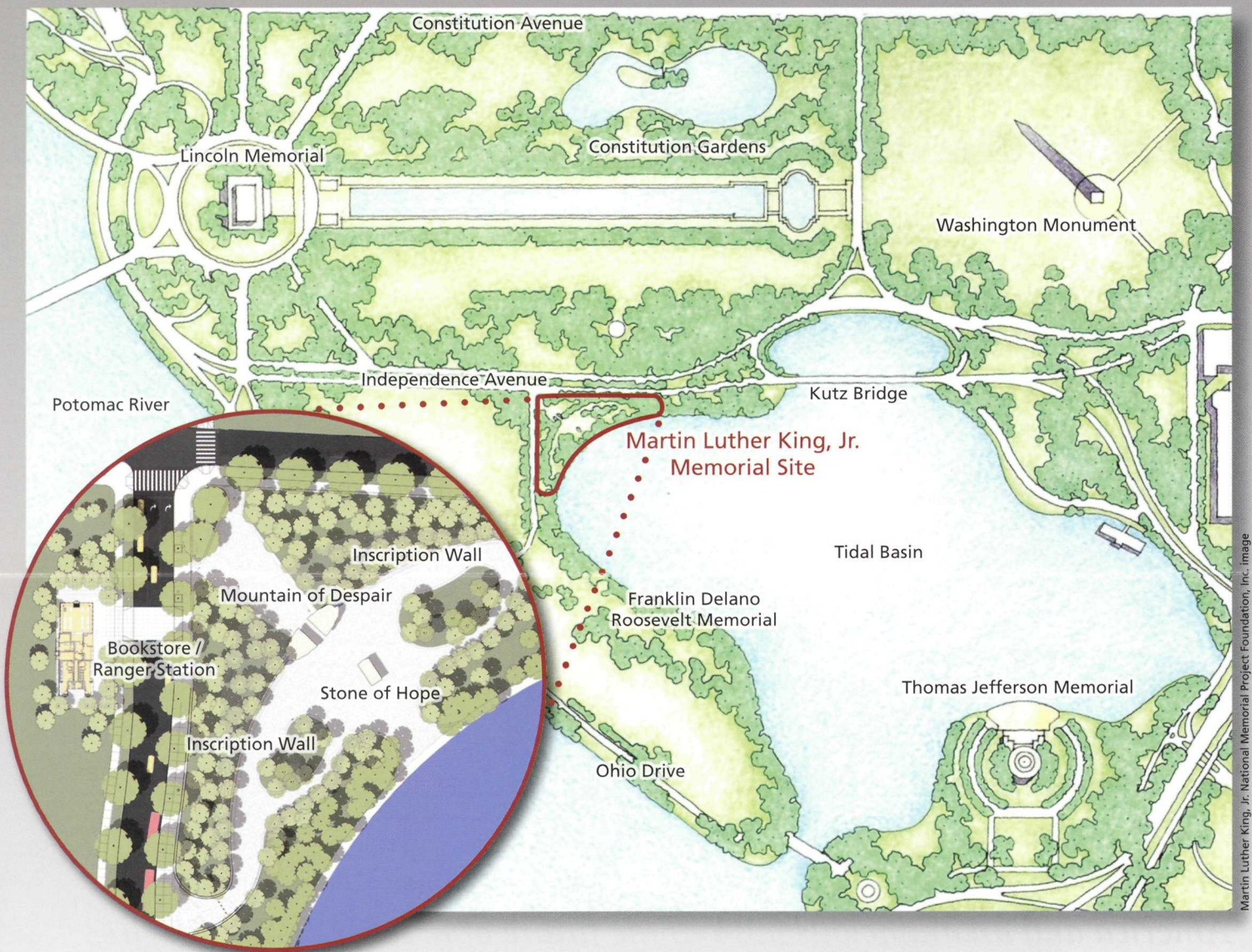
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¹ “Acceptance Speech at Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony,” 10 December, 1964.

² “I Have a Dream,” 28 August, 1963

³ “The American Dream,” 4 July 1965

⁴ “The Birth of a New Nation” 7 April, 1957

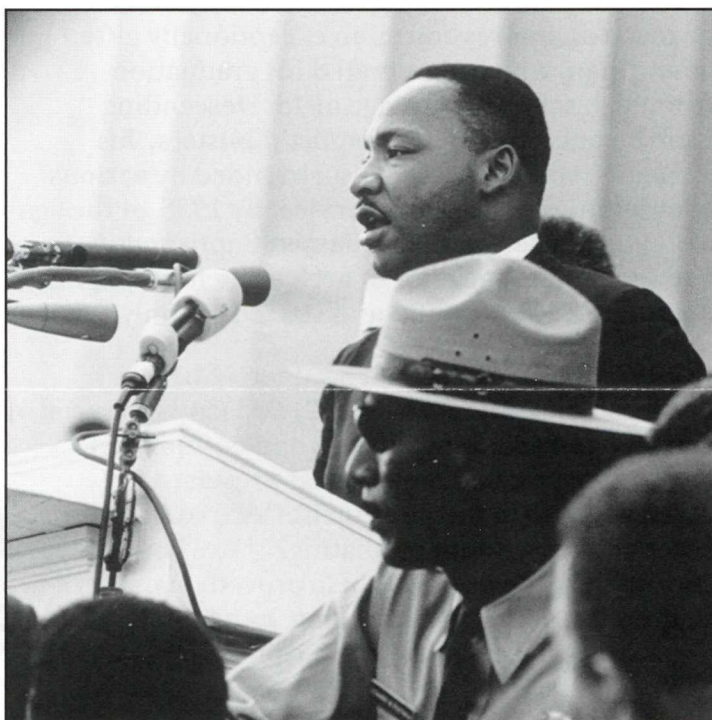


Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, Inc. image

“Not an end but a beginning”⁵

Conceived by members of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, and completed under the leadership of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Foundation, the memorial was dedicated on August 28, 2011, the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The location of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial accentuates his story within the larger narrative of the nation. It reinforces the place of his courageous leadership in the nation’s march toward freedom, proudly standing in the vista between the Lincoln Memorial and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. In 1957, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a clear symbol of freedom, Dr. King delivered his first national address, “Give Us the Ballot.” He returned to the Lincoln Memorial as a key figure supporting the 1963 March on Washington. There, in the defining moment of his leadership in the movement for civil rights, Dr. King delivered his immortal “I Have a Dream” speech. Before an audience of over 200,000 people, he reaffirmed his belief in the ultimate redeemability of the words in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as that “promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”⁶ This statement stresses the basic freedoms and rights which the Thomas Jefferson Memorial’s presence clearly reinforces. Prominently in the center of his memorial, the image of Dr. King stands thoughtful and resolute. The work of master sculptor Lei Yixin, his frame emerges from the Stone of Hope, which stands an impressive 28 feet, 6 inches. It serves as a testament to Dr. King’s leadership in the civil rights movement as a “drum major” for justice, peace, and righteousness. The enormity and strength of the granite reflects the steadfastness with which Dr. King and other members of the movement confronted the

obstacles of segregation and injustice. His image, facing the Tidal Basin, reinforces the boundless opportunities for advancement in the future. The Stone of Hope stands forward of, and is detached from, the Mountain of Despair, a massive gateway representative of the struggle faced in the pursuit of social equality and peace. It also serves as a central entryway for the memorial. Water, representative of vitality and life, descends from fountains flowing from the sides of the Mountain of Despair. The quotations chosen for the inscription walls, which frame the Mountain of Despair and the Stone of Hope, stress four primary messages of Dr. King: justice, democracy, hope, and love.



National Archives Photo 306-SSM-4D(107)16

Dr. King delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech, 8/28/1963.

“Unconditional love will have the final word”⁷

The flowering Japanese cherry trees and their beautiful blossoms, which appear for just a few days every spring, are reminders of the beauty and brevity of life itself. Their return reinforces the tragedy of the untimely passing of Dr. King on April 4, 1968, and the need for persistence in subsequent generations in the struggle for human rights. As the memorial and its environs echo these sentiments in stone, earth, and water, so do the words of Dr. King, delivered in a sadly prophetic speech the day before his death.



National Archives Photo 306-SSM-4C(6)32

Young child in March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom at Washington, D.C., 8/28/1963.



Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life - longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now, I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up 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.”

⁵ “I Have a Dream,” 28 August, 1963.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ “Acceptance Speech at Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony,” 10 December, 1964.
⁸ “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” 3 April, 1968

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