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Abstract: Presents a biography of African-American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Background and education; Organization of the 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama; Belief in the effectiveness of nonviolent protest; Arrest after protesting the segregation of public bathrooms in Birmingham, Alabama; Impact on the creation of the Civil Rights Act; Participation in the 1963 march on Washington, and delivery of the 'I Have a Dream' speech; Assassination in 1968.

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Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the most important figures in the history of the United States Civil Rights movement. In the 1950's and 60's, African Americans reached a point at which they could no longer tolerate the racial inequality of American society. King, Jr. used his leadership abilities to encourage his fellow African Americans to come together and protest against societal injustice in a nonviolent manner. Nonviolent protests led by King, Jr. proved fruitful, with the U.S. government making legal changes to end racial discrimination.

Childhood and Youth

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His family heritage was rich with community leaders and social activists, such as his maternal grandfather, Adam Daniel Williams. Williams founded the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and among his many civic contributions, led a protest that won money to build public schools for African American children. King, Jr.'s father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. was a powerful leader in Atlanta's African American community.

King, Jr. experienced racism early in life, with one incident leaving a lasting impression. He was at a store with his mother when a white woman suddenly slapped him on the face. Using a racial expletive to refer to King, Jr., the woman claimed that he had stepped on her foot. It was this and similar experiences that led King, Jr. to fight for the rights of his fellow African Americans.

[Education and Leadership](#)

Admitted to Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of fifteen, the precocious King, Jr. explored his faith and trained to become a minister. He finished his degree in 1948 and was ordained as a Baptist minister.

He then continued his education at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. After graduating in 1951, King, Jr. enrolled in Boston University's doctorate of theology program. It was then that he discovered the writings of the Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had used nonviolent resistance to lead his country toward independence. Nonviolence, along with his Christian faith, became the foundation for King, Jr.'s work in the U.S. Civil Rights movement.

While King, Jr. was in Boston, he went on a blind date with a woman named Coretta Scott, a student at the New England Conservatory. The couple's relationship progressed quickly and in 1953 they were married. Soon afterward, they moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where King, Jr. became pastor at the Dexter Avenue Church.

[The Montgomery Bus Boycott](#)

It was during this time that King, Jr. became involved in the fight for equality through nonviolent protest. In 1956, he helped to organize a bus boycott in Montgomery, after Rosa Parks, an African American woman, was asked to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. The police were called and Parks was arrested in accordance with Alabama segregation laws. King, Jr. called upon the citizens of Montgomery to stop riding public buses. The boycott lasted for a year, with hundreds of citizens carpooling or walking miles to their destination to avoid riding the buses. The issue was brought to the U.S. Supreme Court, at which time the segregation laws of Alabama were declared unconstitutional. This was King, Jr. and his supporters' first victory in the fight against segregation.

King, Jr. and the Montgomery bus boycott encouraged many African Americans to stand up against discrimination. However, some civil rights groups, such as the Black Panthers, saw King, Jr.'s nonviolent methods as useless and therefore did not support him. The Black Panthers and others believed that only violence would bring about real change. The clash between violent and nonviolent protest would become more intense throughout the 1960's as the civil rights controversy intensified.

[Protests in Birmingham](#)

In 1963, King, Jr. led a series of protests in Birmingham, Alabama to demand that department stores desegregate their rest rooms and dressing rooms, and provide equal opportunity employment.

King, Jr. was arrested for taking part in the marches. From his cell, he wrote the famous "Letter from A Birmingham Jail." The letter contained one of his most eloquent cries for equal rights. While King, Jr. was in jail, the marches continued.

However, Birmingham police refused to concede to the activists' demands. Instead, they resorted to violent means to keep crowds under control. Journalists documented the events and reported stories and showed images of defenseless people being mistreated by the police. A public outcry ensued, causing Birmingham authorities to give in. A committee was formed, comprised of African American and white residents, to begin integrating Birmingham schools. It was also promised that department stores and lunch counters would be integrated.

[Political Progress](#)

The unrest in Birmingham attracted the attention of President John F. Kennedy, who responded by introducing the Civil Rights Bill to Congress. This bill would end legal discrimination in public places throughout the country.

Support for the new bill led to public meetings and rallies across the United States. The largest of these rallies occurred on August 28, 1963. More than 250,000 civil rights supporters traveled to the nation's capital for the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." King, Jr., one of the speakers for the event, delivered his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream." It inspired listeners to look to a future free of discrimination and to work together to bring it about. The collective efforts of the demonstrations held across the U.S. forced Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Tragedy Strikes

Throughout his many years of fighting for civil rights, King, Jr. learned about the powerlessness of the poor. Thus, in 1968, King, Jr. made poverty a focal point of his work by starting the Poor People's Campaign.

As part of his campaign against poverty, King, Jr. traveled to Memphis, Tennessee to support a strike by the city's garbage collectors. On April 4, 1968, King, Jr. was killed by an assassin's bullet while standing on a balcony at a Memphis hotel.

Authorities arrested James Earl Ray for the murder of King, Jr. after finding evidence in his home that made him a suspect. Ray confessed to King, Jr.'s murder, but soon after he recanted. Ray claimed that the police had forced him into a false confession. Despite this denial of guilt, the authorities jailed him.

People expressed rage and sorrow. Riots exploded across the United States. Over 100,000 people attended King, Jr.'s funeral in Atlanta.

Although King did not live for more than forty years, he was able to make an enormous difference in the way the issue of race is viewed in America. Through great adversity, King used his leadership skills to introduce concepts of nonviolent resistance. His persuasiveness forced legislative change that began the end of legal segregation and discrimination against African Americans in the United States.

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By Sara Ann McGill

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