Carol Ash

Celebrating the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the center of the exhibits at the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site Visitor Center, eight statues stand on the gradual slope of Freedom Road that overlooks a large window. Visitors can walk past the statues and look out the window, up and over a garden of red, pink, and yellow roses, past a cascading waterfall and across the street to the white marble tomb where Dr. King is buried.

Walking among the statues, visitors can look into the faces of the life size statues. Cast from molds of actual people, the statues represent the anonymous women and men who marched, sat at lunch counters, rode buses, went to jail, and died demanding their constitutional rights. They were young and old, male and female, black and white, healthy and physically challenged. They represent the people of today who continue to seek non-violent solutions for today's social problems and who seek the world that Dr. King envisioned in his "I Have a Dream" speech.

Dr. King touched people in different ways while he was alive and when he died; he continues to touch people through his legacy. His was a new voice in 1955 at the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott. It grew from that of a pastor influencing his congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to that of a leader of the civil rights movement influencing people around the world. His voice grew in strength and eloquence as he lead campaigns in Albany, Georgia, in Selma and Birmingham, Alabama, and in Chicago, Illinois. The civil rights movement, with Dr. King as one of its principal leaders, influenced other movements of the period—women's rights, Native American rights, and gay and lesbian rights.

As a spokesperson for the civil rights movement, Dr. King became the target of threats and hate calls. His home in Montgomery, Alabama was bombed, he was stabbed in Harlem, New York, and he went to jail many times. He continued to speak out against injustice until his voice was silenced in Memphis, Tennessee.

People were stunned and angered by Dr. King's death on April 4, 1968. The reaction was swift and violent. In the five days after his death, 43 women, men, and children died in the rioting that broke out across the nation in more than 100 cities.[1] Plate glass windows were broken, stores looted, and fires set. Federal troops were assigned to protect the White House and the United States Capital. The baseball season, basketball playoffs, and the Academy Awards ceremony were delayed, docks were shut down, and schools, libraries, and businesses were closed.

On April 9, over 500,000 people gathered on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue near Ebenezer Baptist Church and along the funeral route to Southview Cemetery. They said goodbye to Dr. King as his casket was carried on a simple wagon pulled by two mules to his alma mater, Morehouse College, and later to the cemetery where he was buried near his maternal grandparents. Millions of people watched the funeral and procession on television.

Marches, eulogies, and memorials took place across the country. Coretta Scott King, in her book, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.,* writes of the tribute made by two of Dr. King's closest friends, Harry Belafonte and Stanley Levinson. They said "When an assassin's bullet ended Martin Luther King's life it failed in it's purpose. More people heard his message in four days than in the 12 years of his preaching. His voice was stilled but his message rang clamorously around the globe."[2]

NPS rangers conduct daily tours of Dr. King's brick home. On April 9, 1998, visitors experienced a silent walk through the house to reflect upon the 30th anniversay of his funeral.

Family members and visiting dignitaries place wreaths on the gravesite to commemorate Dr. King's birthday in January and his death in April. President Clinton joined Mrs. King and family members in placing a wreath during King Week festivities in January 1995.

In the 30 years since his death Dr. King has enjoyed continued popularity. Individuals, communities, governments, and organizations have celebrated his message by creating physical monuments, conducting research, instituting programs, and holding yearly commemorative events. Scholarly interest in his work remains high. The interpretation of his legacy often leads to controversy over his role and his methods but the physical and intellectual monuments continue to grow.

The museums and monuments are constant reminders that the hard fought gains won by the movement in the 1950s and 60s can be lost or curtailed. The creators of the enduring monuments and yearly events believe the movement is not yet finished. Some Americans still face discrimination, unequal opportunities, and violence. Many individuals dedicate themselves and their organizations to carrying on King's message of nonviolent social change. The visible reminders of the movement challenge the nation to narrow the gap between the ideals of equality and the reality of today's society.

The best known of the physical monuments is the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. Established in 1968 by Coretta Scott King to preserve her husband's legacy and continue his principles of nonviolence, the Center attracts more than one million visitors a year including heads of state, foreign dignitaries, diplomats, and tourists from around the world. Visitors can view exhibits containing personal memorabilia of Dr. and Mrs. King, his crypt in the center of the "Waters of Life" pool, and the eternal flame nestled in the trees directly opposite the crypt. The site on Auburn Avenue was chosen because of its links to Dr. King's childhood, his ministry at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council headquarters down the street.

The King center is part of a larger monument to Dr. King. In 1980 President Jimmy Carter signed legislation creating the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site to "...protect and interpret for the benefit, inspiration, and education of present and future generations the places where Martin Luther King, Junior was born, where he lived, where he worked and worshiped, and where he is buried." Visitors sense the forces that shaped Dr. King's childhood as they tour his birth and boyhood home, walk the streets of his "Sweet Auburn" neighborhood, and meditate in the historic sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The house at 501 Auburn Avenue was the first birth home of an African American to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The church is also listed on the National Register and the business section of Auburn Avenue is included in the Preservation District of the site. Twenty buildings and Fire Station No. 6 on the birth home block have been restored to the 1930s time period that Dr. King lived on Auburn Avenue.

In addition to the statues on freedom road, the National Park Service Visitor Center contains six exhibit areas that trace the history of the civil rights movement and Dr. King's role as its spokesperson. Two videos shown in the auditorium describe the Sweet Auburn community during Dr. King's childhood and chronicle his influence within the movement.

Other physical monuments to his legacy include the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee where the room he occupied on April 4th has been restored and visitors can reflect on that fateful evening. Exhibits in the lower level of the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC, tell the story, visually and with sound, of the March on Washington and the "I Have a Dream" speech of August 28, 1963. In Montgomery, Alabama, a simple black marble wall and black disc with water cascading over it preserve for future generations the names of people who died during the civil rights movement beginning in 1955 and ending with Dr. King's death in 1968.

Another memorial to his legacy is the federal holiday legislation signed by President Reagan in 1983 and first celebrated in January 1986. Black history month activities during February often center on Dr. King's speeches, life, and contributions to the movement and American life.

In 1998 we marked the anniversaries of two significant events: the 35th anniversary of Martin Luther King's March on Washington and the 30th anniversary of his death on April 4, 1968.

Special events took place in Atlanta and Memphis to commemorate the 30th anniversary of his death on April 4th and the funeral on April 9th. In addition to private wreath laying ceremonies at the gravesite, special video presentations were offered at the National Park Service Visitor Center

auditorium. The movie, *At the River I Stand*, was featured from April 3-9 and Dr. King's funeral procession as seen in the movie, *Montgomery to Memphis*, was featured from April 9-12.

Visitors had the opportunity to hear his "I've been to the Mountaintop" speech in historic Fire Station No. 6 and on April 9, they heard the "Drum Major Instinct" sermon as they entered the historic sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church; this was the last sermon Dr. King preached from Ebenezer on February 4, 1968.

Also on April 9, visitors were invited to participate in a silent tour of Dr. King's Birth Home. After a short introduction by park rangers, visitors walked silently through the home reflecting on his childhood there, on his life and death and on his continuing legacy.

A commemorative service at the Masonic Temple, site of Dr. King's "I've been to the Mountaintop" speech delivered the day before his death, was the highlight of activities in Memphis, Tennessee. Events also included a morning march through downtown, a candlelight vigil at the Lorraine Motel, now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum, and a series of adult and youth forums.

The eight statues on Freedom Road symbolize the reasons why we commemorate Dr. King and, through him, all the warriors who marched. We commemorate to learn and relearn the lessons they taught us about perseverance, courage, and nonviolence. We commemorate to celebrate the great strides that have been made. We commemorate so that we will remember.

Notes

1 Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1976).

2 Coretta Scott King. *My Life with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Avon, 1970).

References

Elliot, Jane. *Anatomy of Prejudice.* Address given at Kennesaw State University, January 1998.

Carol Ash is a park guide at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site.

Photos are from the park's collection.

Future Anniversaries

Brit Allan Storey

Centennial 2002
Bureau of Reclamation

The Bureau of Reclamation is in the process of planning activities to commemorate and celebrate its 100-year anniversary and its role in western water development and to direct attention to its future. This will include recognition of 15 years of accomplishments in shifting the Bureau's mission/focus.

Planning is still in process, but among the activities under consideration are: a centennial symposium on the history of Reclamation; national, regional, and local anniversary events; exploring the possibility of a commemorative postage stamp; photographic, art, and museum exhibits; a video on Reclamation's history; poster(s); use of Reclamation's website for centennial materials and announcements; books on the history of Reclamation Projects, the history of Federal dam construction (a joint project with the Corps of Engineers and the National Park Service with support and involvement of the Public Works Historical Society, faculty at Princeton University, Lafayette College, the University of Houston, and History Research Associates of Missoula, Montana); Reclamation oral history; and the papers presented in the centennial history symposium.

Reclamation's centennial celebration was first championed by Joe D. Hall, Deputy Commissioner of Reclamation in 1992-3, and planning and institutional support have been building since then. Because of the long lead time and active involvement of the bureau's history staff, centennial plans include both major history activities and celebratory activities looking to Reclamation's future. Work on centennial activities