

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Brief History of the Civil Rights Movement

Although the third Monday in January commemorates the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., the holiday also celebrates the broader Civil Rights Movement and the many individuals who helped combat the discriminatory social and legal system that, until the late twentieth century, denied African American citizens their equal rights.

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Early History

Although we generally focus on the Civil Rights Movement that began in the 1950s and 1960s, the African American struggle for liberty and equality began much earlier, well before the Civil War. The system of chattel slavery that took hold in the Americas within a year of Christopher Columbus's landing perpetually enslaved Africans, deprived them of basic human rights, and created an entrenched racial hierarchy. Throughout the colonial and antebellum eras, enslaved Africans defied this dehumanizing and violent system, often through acts of passive resistance that lessened the profits of slave-owners. But there were also overt acts of resistance, such as the slave revolts of 1822 led by Denmark Vesey (c.1767–1822) and of 1831 led by Nat Turner (1800–31). The Underground Railroad, a network of black and white antislavery advocates, helped slaves escape and travel to free states in the North. Whether remembered by name or not, enslaved and free African Americans asserted their dignity through acts of passive and explicit defiance and the formation of strong, independent communities.

One of the most famous spokesmen for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for African Americans was Frederick Douglass (1818–95). Born as a slave in Maryland, Douglass taught himself to read and write, and as a young man, escaped his abusive master and settled in the North. Douglass soon became involved in the abolitionist movement and after meeting William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79), became an antislavery lecturer and contributor to abolitionist newspapers. Some white critics doubted Douglass's account of his enslavement and escape, not believing that a self-taught, former slave could be so eloquent. In response to these skeptics, Douglass wrote an autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) which remains one of the most powerful and moving works about the evils of slavery and the reality of life for black Americans in the nineteenth century. (Douglass would go on to write two more autobiographies: *My Bondage and My Freedom* [1855] and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* [1881].)

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The advocacy of abolitionists like Douglass and Garrison contributed to the end of slavery during and following the Civil War. Together, the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), as well as the Thirteenth (1865), Fourteenth (1868), and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery and declared that American citizenship and the right to vote could not be restricted on the basis of race.

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In spite of the abolition of slavery and these constitutional changes, widespread discrimination and segregation persisted. Known as Jim Crow, this system of state and local laws, particularly in the former slave states of the American South, widely denied African Americans the right to vote, prevented them from accessing education and employment opportunities, and restricted the use of public facilities and transportation on the basis of race. African Americans still lacked the rights of citizenship afforded to white Americans and lived in highly segregated, underserved communities.

During the early twentieth century, African American leaders responded in different ways to the continuing legal entrenchment of racial hierarchy through the Jim Crow system. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) was the most well-known African American thinker and educator in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Washington was a member of the last generation of enslaved African Americans, born in Virginia ten years before the conclusion of the Civil War. Aware of the social and political realities of the Jim Crow South, Washington sought to promote racial progress apolitically, via black self-improvement obtained through education and the habits of self-command, avoiding actively antagonizing white leaders.

Washington’s philosophy, often called by others “racial accommodation” because it sought to elevate African Americans within existing segregated arrangements, increasingly drew criticism in the early twentieth century. Other African American leaders, particularly W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), voiced criticism of Washington’s apolitical approach and his willingness to accept white hegemony. The first African American to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard University, Du Bois demanded that black and white citizens be afforded equal rights and sought to combat the racist system on which disenfranchisement rested. Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which became the most influential and powerful African American advocacy group during the early twentieth century, and he remained the editor of its newspaper, *The Crisis*.¹

¹ For more on Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois, see the following selections in your copy of *What So Proudly We Hail*: Frederick Douglass, “The Last Flogging” (240) and “Why Should a Colored Man

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The Civil Rights Movement

With the founding of the NAACP in 1909, a more formal struggle for civil rights that coordinated political, social, and legal resistance to Jim Crow began. The NAACP advocated for the right of African Americans to serve in the US military during World War I and began to coordinate and fund legal challenges to Jim Crow laws. Between the First and Second World Wars, the NAACP challenged laws across the country that denied African Americans their full rights of citizenship and sought federal legislation to protect against lynching, establishing the Legal Defense Fund in 1939 for this express purpose.

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The three decades following World War II, often known as the Civil Rights Era, witnessed dramatic changes in American political and social culture. In addition to the NAACP, numerous other groups emerged to fight for equal rights for African Americans. Their efforts, along with the bravery and dedication of countless individuals, helped strike down laws that enforced segregation and discrimination, and inspired the passage of new legislation that afforded greater protection to African American citizens.

Exploiting the hypocrisy of asking African Americans to give their lives in the service of their country while segregating their units, the Legal Defense Fund secured the desegregation of the Armed Services in 1948. Their success in desegregating public spaces and services continued in the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, argued by Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African American Supreme Court Justice. The court ruled that the guiding principle of segregation—separate but equal—was unconstitutional, and it ordered the integration of schools across the country.²

The court's decision was enforced, and schools were integrated despite local resistance across the South. In 1957, the Governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus (1910–54) ordered the National Guard to bar nine black students from attending the formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, in defiance of the Supreme Court's ruling. In response, President Dwight D. Eisenhower deployed federal troops to accompany the

Enlist?" (511); Booker T. Washington, "Democracy and Education" (516); and W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" (525).

² *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), available at www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=87.

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students and enforce integration.³ In the early 1960s, there were several more instances of conflict when black students trying to enter formerly white universities faced armed opposition and required the protection of federal troops.

Other African American individuals and groups used nonviolent protests and civil disobedience to fight discrimination. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress and secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP, refused to give up her seat for a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and was arrested, tried, and fined. Parks' act inspired the Montgomery Bus Boycott, during which tens of thousands of black residents refused to use the bus system in Montgomery. The protest lasted for 381 days, until the Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of public transit systems was unconstitutional.

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The Montgomery Bus Boycott inspired similar acts of collective civil disobedience to challenge discriminatory local laws. Four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina staged a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter that only served whites. Their protest soon gained the support of hundreds of other students, both black and white, in Greensboro, and it sparked similar protests against segregated restaurants and commercial spaces. Widespread news coverage and the economic toll of the demonstrations forced businesses across the South to begin integrating in the summer of 1960.

Encouraged by the success of the sit-ins, students founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which organized student nonviolent protests against discrimination and segregation. SNCC, along with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), initiated "Freedom Rides," in which black and white activists rode buses through the South to test the 1960 Supreme Court ruling that interstate transport could not be segregated. Their efforts faced violent opposition; many of the students were attacked, beaten, and jailed.

Outside volunteers were far from the only victims of racial violence. In one of the most horrific acts of brutality, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a common meeting place for local civil rights leaders, was bombed on September 15, 1963. The explosion early on a Sunday morning killed four young girls—Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson (age 14), and Cynthia Wesley (age 14)—and injured many others.

³ To watch the videotape of his speech, see [http://whitehouse.c-span.org/Video/SignificantEvents/WHSE23.aspx](http://whitehouse.archives.gov/video/significant-events/WHSE23.aspx).

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In addition to desegregation, voter registration became an important goal for the Civil Rights Movement. Across the South, African Americans largely remained disenfranchised through poll taxes, literacy tests, and other onerous requirements intended to prevent them from voting. In 1961, several national civil rights organizations began coordinating with African American community leaders to begin registering black voters. The united efforts of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) intensified in the summer of 1964, known as the Mississippi Freedom Summer, during which student volunteers, most of whom were white, registered black voters across Mississippi. Their efforts encountered fierce and often violent opposition from local whites and resulted in the deaths of at least three volunteers, as well as social and economic repercussions for African Americans who tried to register to vote.

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Movement organizers also used widely publicized marches to draw national attention to the political and social inequalities faced by African Americans and to increase public support for the Movement's efforts. The famous March on Washington in August of 1963 attracted more than 200,000 protesters, who gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. King also helped to organize another important march two years later, the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery, which called for equal voting rights. Media coverage of the campaigns and public outrage over racial violence strengthened national support for the Civil Rights Movement and put pressure on the federal government to offer greater protection for the rights of black citizens.

In response, Congress passed two landmark pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). First proposed by President John F. Kennedy and signed into law after his death by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Civil Rights Act broadly prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin and invalidated any state or local laws that had previously enforced discriminatory practices. The Voting Rights Act disallowed the numerous restrictions on voting rights that localities had used to exclude African Americans from the franchise. Together, these pieces of legislation solidified the efforts of grassroots organizations and individuals who fought to end segregation, disenfranchisement, and segregation.⁴

⁴ The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act can be found at www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=97 and www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=100, respectively.

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With the political rights of blacks protected by federal law, African American leaders began to shift their focus to other social and economic issues, such as increasing employment and housing opportunities. Many black communities, especially those outside the South, remained angered by persistent social and economic inequality, a feeling perhaps most clearly expressed in the Watts Riots, which broke out in Los Angeles in 1965. Six days of rioting injured more than a thousand people and resulted in several thousand arrests. King became a vocal opponent of the continuing social and economic inequality, and following his assassination in 1968, riots again broke out in cities across the country. In response, Congress passed the final major piece of civil rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Commonly known as the Fair Housing Act, this law offered greater protection against discrimination for Americans of all races, genders, nationalities, and religions in their efforts to rent, own, and finance their homes.

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The Rise of Black Power

Even before King's death, dissatisfaction and frustration over persistent social and economic inequalities led to factions within the Civil Rights Movement. The most influential figure for a more militant brand of black activism was Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little; 1925–65). Little converted to the Nation of Islam, a religious group that inflected Islam with teachings of black supremacy, and took the surname "X" to signify that while he would never know his true African ancestry, he had "replaced the white slavemaster name of 'Little.'" Malcolm X rose quickly through the ranks of the Nation of Islam and became one of the group's most vocal and visible spokesmen in the late 1950s and early 1960s, advocating the separation of black communities from mainstream white society.

In March 1964, Malcolm X announced his break with the Nation of Islam. After returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca, he adopted radically different ideas. He began practicing Sunni Islam, and came to see the faith as a religion of racial unity and equality. Malcolm X was assassinated by members of the Nation of Islam in 1965, but his posthumous autobiography became extremely influential.

Other black leaders began to question the Movement's commitment to nonviolence and its goal of integration and found a new direction in the ideology of "Black Power" expressed by Malcolm X. Stokely Carmichael (1941–98), who became head of the SNCC in 1966, challenged the philosophy of nonviolence by responding to white violence with an equal show of force, and argued that blacks should focus on economic and cultural

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independence rather than integration into white society. Another group influenced by the teachings of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, formed in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton (1942–89) and Bobby Seale (b. 1937), espoused more militant views and advocated Black Nationalism, a belief in establishing the independence of African American communities to combat the economic plight and racism they faced. Although the Black Power movement eventually became publicly quiescent, the ideas and example of Malcolm X still command considerable attention in African American communities and on college campuses.

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Conclusion

The establishment of the national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1983 reflects the struggles of many individuals to achieve equal rights for African Americans. The holiday has become a symbol of a movement that is much larger than one leader and includes the work of generations of Americans. By setting aside the third Monday in January, we not only honor the memory of King, but also pay tribute to the Americans who resisted slavery, battled Jim Crow and racism, and struggled to secure equal rights for all Americans.