

14 MLKs, Senior and Junior



Martin Luther King, Sr., born in Stockbridge, Georgia, became pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Here, in 1975, at age 75, he delivers the last sermon of his 44-year ministry there.

Mike King was a Georgia sharecropper's son who was teased when he went to school because he smelled of the barnyard. "I may smell like a mule," he said, "but I don't think like one." He could handle the teasing—but he couldn't handle his father. The man drank too much and was violent when he was drunk. Mike's mother had saved some money, so she bought him an old car—a Model T Ford—and he headed off to the big city: Atlanta. As he drove away from home, he passed a

two-story brick house that belonged to a banker. "I'm going to have a house like that," he said, "and I'm going to be a bank director, too."

King was muscular, energetic, and ambitious, with a zest that attracted people. In Atlanta he worked on the railroad and discovered that what he really wanted to do was preach. So he did that, on Sundays, in small Baptist country churches. Then he learned of a girl, Alberta Williams, who was the daughter

Martin Luther King, Jr., met Coretta Scott in Boston, where she was studying singing. This photo shows them with three of their four children in 1963, the day after an Atlanta school refused to admit their son Martin Luther III (left).



What's in a Name?

Negro, black, colored, Afro-American, and African American are all words used to describe those who are descended, in whole or in part, from people of African origin. Words, like other things, have fashions. *Negro* was the preferred term for many generations. Today, *African American*—or *black*—is most people's choice.

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of the leading Negro preacher in Atlanta. She was a student at Spelman College and a talented organist. Before they even met, he decided he would marry her.

In the segregated South, the church was the center of the black world. It was the place where you took your troubles and your heart and found friends and support in an often unkind world. The minister was apt to be the most respected and best-educated man in the black community.

There was no way a rough country boy could marry the daughter of the Reverend A. D. Williams. Why, both her mother and her father had college degrees. Young King couldn't even speak properly. Well, Mike King decided, if it was necessary, he would get an education. So he went to a public school and said he wanted to learn. They tested him and found he was barely ready for fifth-grade work. King was 20. They brought a big desk into the fifth grade and he sat there with the 10-year-olds and did his lessons and worked at night. A few years later he was finished with high school, but that wasn't enough. To be accepted in the Williams family he needed a college degree. So he went to Morehouse College—where the Reverend Williams had studied—took the entrance tests, failed them, and was turned away. But there was no stopping Michael Luther King. He marched into the college president's office, right past an exasperated secretary, told the president he wanted to go to college and that he would work hard and do well, which is exactly what he did. He got a college degree; and he got the girl he wanted; and, eventually, he got his father-in-law's church, and a two-story brick house—and he even became a bank director.

But what he was proudest of was his family. He and Alberta, who was church organist, took their three children everywhere and beamed with pride at their accomplishments. His older son, named for him and called M.L., was a small, wiry, athletic kid who loved to play ball and had lots of friends. When M.L. was five, his father changed their names. Each became Martin Luther King, after the German priest, Martin Luther, who had founded Protestantism.

Martin Sr. and Alberta made sure their son had a good education. They sent him to a laboratory school at Atlanta University, to segregated Booker T. Washington High School, and, at age 15, to Morehouse College. Martin intended to be a doctor. During the summers—they were World War II years—he went off to Connecticut and picked tobacco. There he changed his mind: he would become a minister. His father told the church members that young Martin had been "called by God to the pulpit." But Martin's friends joked



After he grew up and became famous, Martin Luther King, Jr., wasn't often seen laughing in public. But he had a great sense of humor and loved to tell jokes with friends.



King with a portrait of Gandhi, who, he said, taught him that "there is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men."

Captain Charles Boycott was a 19th-century Irish land agent and owner whose tenants got mad when they thought his rents were too high in a time of poor crops. They refused to cooperate with him. Without workers, his land, crops, and animals were useless. Local merchants wouldn't supply him. Eventually Boycott was forced off his land, but his name passed into the English language. To *boycott* something is to refuse to use it or have anything to do with it.

that it was the hot sun of the tobacco field that had something to do with his decision.

Martin Luther King, Jr., chose Crozer Seminary, in Pennsylvania, to study theology—about religion—and he chose well. That small, elite school had white and black students from North and South, some Asian Americans, several American Indians, and students from other lands. It was an astounding mix—unique in its time. For a privileged boy from a protective family, living with all those people was an education in itself.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been a cut-up at Morehouse, became the valedictorian—the top student—in his class at Crozer. Books were piled high on his bedroom

floor; sometimes he read all night. There he discovered that he had a passion for words and ideas and a talent for public speaking.

At Morehouse, King had read a book by Henry David Thoreau called *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau believed in the power of nonviolence. He believed in the power of even "one honest man" to create great change in the world.

At Crozer, King learned about India's great leader Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, and that Gandhi had been inspired by Thoreau. Gandhi, a small, skinny lawyer with a squeaky voice, was the honest man Thoreau believed in. He led millions of people in nonviolent boycotts and marches to protest British rule in India. When British soldiers taunted and beat and jailed Gandhi and his followers, they didn't fight back with fists or guns; they just kept peacefully marching and protesting. Gandhi's reasoned courage and calm dignity turned away the guns and cannons of a mighty empire. Gandhi showed the world the power of goodness and right action. India became free. Martin Luther King was fascinated to discover that Gandhi had been full of rage when he was young and had learned to control his anger. King was often angry. Could he teach himself self-control? Could he teach others?

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s new learning seemed to expand his ideas on Christianity and Christian love. In his father's world, Christianity was simple and sure; at Crozer, King found a Christianity that was questioning.

He still wasn't finished with school. After Crozer he went to Boston University for more study and reading and for a Ph.D. (that made him the Reverend *Dr.* Martin Luther King, Jr.). His professors

wanted him to become one of them: a teacher and a scholar. But Martin wanted to be a preacher. He had an idea that a minister could do things to make the world better. He wanted to fight injustice. He wanted to lead his people—the black people—because he thought they had a message for all people. Segregation and racial hatred were wrong. Injustice and unfairness were wrong. Social cruelties and meanness hurt everyone (like a worm that turns a good apple rotten).

The more Martin Luther King, Jr., thought about Thoreau, and Gandhi, and about Christian ideas on loving your

enemies, the more he began to believe in the power of peaceful protest. When he thought about America's founding idea, that "all men are created equal," he wondered if nonviolent action could be used to actually bring that equality to all people. Could nonviolence overcome the evil of segregation? He knew it wouldn't be easy.

How *do* you face evil?

You can turn away from it, which is the easiest thing to do.

You can fight it with weapons or fists—which is harder, and may hurt or kill people.

The hardest way of all is nonviolence. It means standing up to evil without weapons. It means taking punches and not returning them. Now that takes courage.

Martin had a lot to think about. He wasn't sure how he would lead his people—he just knew that was what he wanted to do. In the meantime, his father was getting impatient. He wanted his son as assistant pastor at his fine big church in Atlanta, Georgia. But Martin Jr. decided he would start his career at a small church in a quiet city. He had no idea that an explosion—called the "civil rights movement"—was about to begin in that quiet city.

It was Montgomery, Alabama, and soon everyone in America would know about it.



"I went to bed many nights scared to death by threats against myself and my family," said Dr. King to his Montgomery congregation. "Then in my kitchen...I heard a voice say, 'Preach the gospel, stand up for the truth, stand up for righteousness.' Since that morning I can stand up without fear." Here, Dr. King delivers a sermon from the pulpit of an Atlanta church in 1967.

To ~~convert~~ is to lead, cease, and goad with words.