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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | King National Holiday | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_alberta_williams_1903_1974) | |
| The establishment of a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., marked the culmination of a long campaign that began soon after King’s [**assassination**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/) and ended on 2 November 1983, with the signing of the legislation by President Ronald Reagan. Public Law 98-144 designated the third Monday in January as an annual federal holiday in King’s honor, and the first official celebration took place on 20 January 1986.  King’s 1968 assassination prompted various efforts to pay homage to the slain civil rights leader. Many communities throughout the nation reacted by naming streets, schools, and other public landmarks after King. In 1973, the first state King Holiday bill (sponsored by Assemblyman Harold Washington) was signed into law in Illinois, and in 1974, similar legislation was passed in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Most other states followed suit during the following decade.  Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) initially introduced a bill calling for a national holiday only four days after King’s assassination, but this proposal garnered little support until the numbers of African Americans elected to Congress increased and King holiday campaigns at the local and state levels gained momentum. The Congressional Black Caucus’ persistent attempts to pass King holiday legislation gained support from the [**Southern Christian Leadership Conference**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) (SCLC), which King had led since its founding in 1957. In the early 1970s the SCLC gathered petitions bearing 3 million signatures in support of the King Holiday. In 1973, the ﬁrst state King holiday bill (sponsored by Assemblyman Harold Washington) was signed into law in Illinois, and in 1974, similar legislation was passed in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Most other states followed suit during the following decade.  During the late 1970s, King’s widow, [**Coretta Scott King**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_coretta_scott_1927_2006/), and the Atlanta-based [**King Center**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_center_atlanta_georgia/) that she founded played an increasingly important role in mobilizing popular support for a holiday. In 1979, Coretta Scott King urged passage of a national King holiday bill when she testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and joint hearings of Congress. In addition, Coretta Scott King directed King Center staff to begin intensive organizing of a nationwide citizens lobby for the holiday and garnered more than 300,000 signatures on a petition before the end of the year. With support from the Jimmy Carter administration, the King Holiday emerged for the first time from congressional committees, but in November 1979, the bill was defeated by five votes in a floor vote in the House of Representatives.  The setback did not end the national campaign. Singer Stevie Wonder composed a song celebrating King’s birth, and his hit recording of the birthday song further increased the holiday’s popular support. On 15 January 1983, more than 100,000 people rallied at the Washington Monument to express support for the King holiday movement. With financial support from Wonder, a lobbying office was opened in Washington, D. C., and eventually this effort secured more than 6 million signatures on petitions to Congress in support of a King national holiday. The King Center began working with Wonder to organize an observance of the 20th anniversary of the 1963 [**March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_march_on_washington_for_jobs_and_freedom/). More than half a million people attended this commemoration march and the rally at the Lincoln Memorial, where they heard speakers call upon the Senate and President Reagan to enact King holiday legislation.  A few weeks before the march took place, the House passed a bill creating the King holiday by an overwhelming vote of 338-90. But the subsequent Senate debate concerning the bill was nonetheless contentious, continuing into the fall of 1983. North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms sought to diminish King’s reputation by calling for the release of [**Federal Bureau of Investigation**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_federal_bureau_of_investigation_fbi/) surveillance tapes on King that had been sealed by court order until the year 2027, while other senators complained that another paid holiday would be too costly. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) vigorously defended King against the allegations of Helms, noting that no evidence of ties between King and the Communist Party had been uncovered. When the Senate finally voted on the bill on 19 October, the packed galleries included numerous prominent proponents of the holiday, including Coretta Scott King, SCLC President [**Joseph E. Lowery**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lowery_joseph_echols_1921/), and [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/) Executive Director [**Benjamin Hooks**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_hooks_benjamin_lawson_1925/). The holiday bill was finally approved by a vote of 78 to 22 (37 Republicans and 41 Democrats voted in favor; 18 Republicans and 4 Democrats voted against).  After the holiday bill became law, the King Center gained congressional support to establish a King Federal Holiday Commission**,** which introduced a variety of commemorative activities, including tree planting ceremonies and the distribution of posters, newsletters, and guides citing the principles of King’s [**nonviolence**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nonviolent_resistance/) teachings. In the 1990s the King holiday theme became “Remember – Celebrate – Act. A Day On. Not a Day Off.” As with other federal holidays, the observance of the King holiday applied only to federal workers rather than employees of state and local governments or of private institutions, but by January 1989 the number of states celebrating a King holiday had grown to 44, and in June 1999, New Hampshire became the final state to pass some form of King holiday legislation.  **SOURCES**  *Encyclopedia of American Holidays and National Days*, ed. Travers, 2006. |