

LEVELED BOOKS

# Martin Luther King Jr.

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Written by Bea Silverberg

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Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, 1963

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Growing Up in the South.....	5
Starting His Work .....	11
Marches and Struggles.....	15
“I Have a Dream”.....	18
One Last March.....	22
Glossary .....	24



A girl marches in a Martin Luther King Day parade.

## Introduction

On the third Monday in January, Americans celebrate Martin Luther King Day. We honor a great African American leader who worked for freedom for all people. Who was this man who has a national holiday in his name?

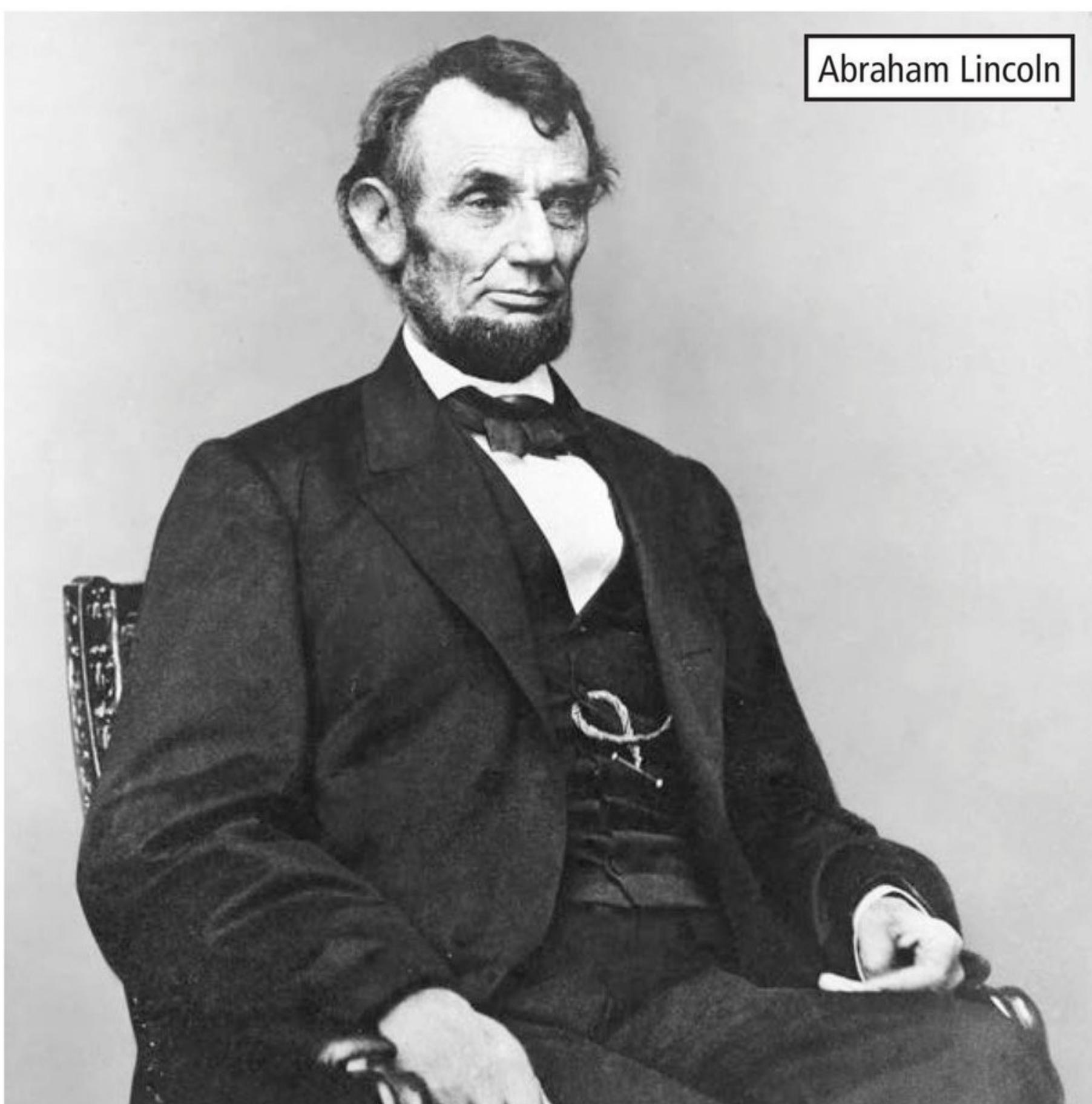
## Growing Up in the South

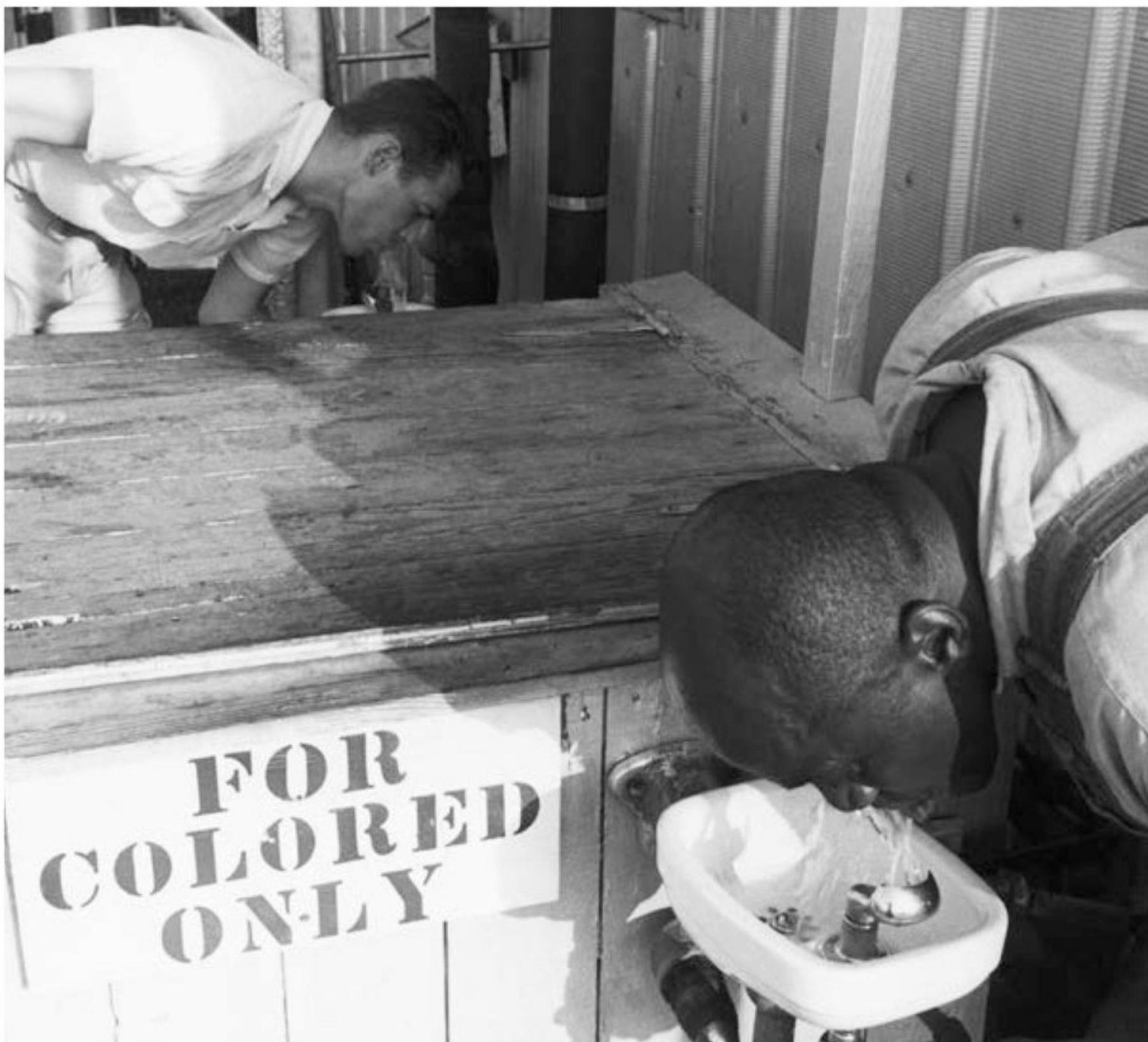
Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. His father was a Baptist minister, and his mother was a teacher. Martin grew up in a busy and loving family. He and his sister and brother studied, took music lessons, and played sports.



The childhood home of Martin Luther King Jr.

In the South, African Americans had always lived under laws that were unfair to them. Before the Civil War, most blacks had been slaves to white owners. During this war, President Abraham Lincoln granted freedom to slaves by passing a special law. But even though black people were freed from slavery, Southern lawmakers passed new laws to keep them separated, or **segregated**, from white people.





Black men drink from fountains labeled "For Colored Only."

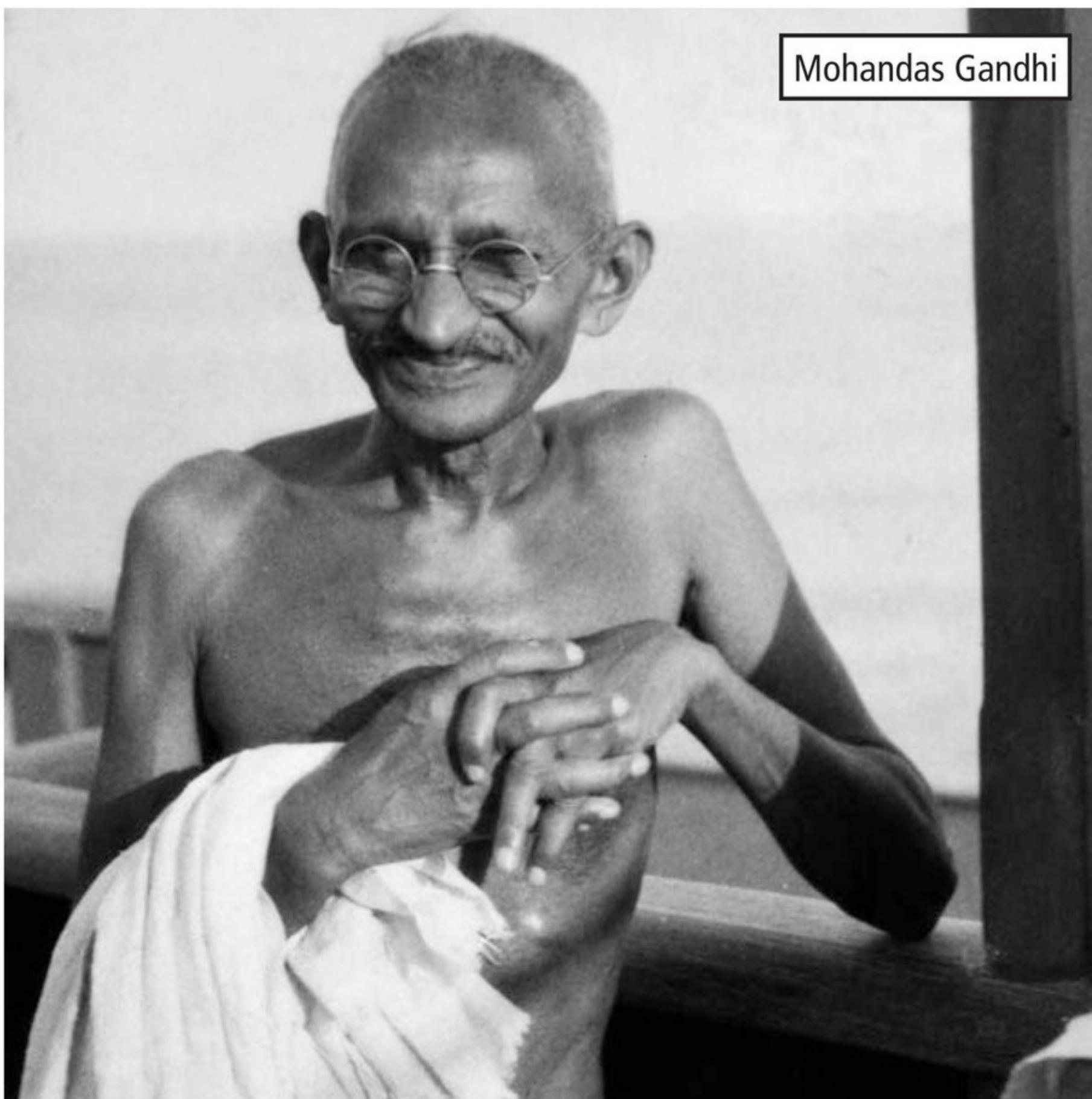
These laws, called *Jim Crow laws*, deprived blacks of many rights. Black children went to separate, poorer schools than white children. On buses, blacks had to sit in the back seats—and give up those seats if whites wanted them. Blacks were forced to use public drinking fountains and restrooms marked "For Colored Only." (In earlier days, African Americans were called "Colored.") White people used drinking fountains and restrooms that were marked "For Whites Only."



A poor family and their Washington, D.C., apartment

As Martin grew up, he learned from his parents and his teachers that the laws calling for segregation were unfair. African Americans were suffering from not having equal rights. Many of them were poor and could not find jobs. Martin wanted to help African American people gain full freedom and **civil rights**.

Martin was a bright student. At age fifteen, he went to college near his home in Atlanta. He then went north to continue his religious education. He decided when he was nineteen that he would be a Baptist minister like his father. He had read about Mohandas Gandhi, the great leader from India. Gandhi believed in using love, not hate, to stop injustice. Martin decided that he, too, wanted to use peaceful, **nonviolent** ways to help people.



While he was up north, Martin met his future wife, Coretta Scott. She was studying to become a singer. On their first date, Martin told Coretta he wanted to marry her. He liked her for her beliefs and her commitment to **equality**, as well as her beauty. In the summer of 1953, they got married. A year later, Martin took his first preaching job at a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama.



This photo of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, was taken three years after they married.



Children at an integrated school in Washington, D.C., in 1954

## Starting His Work

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that schools could no longer be segregated, or divided, by **race**. The Court ordered schools to **integrate** so that different races could attend the same school. With this important ruling, African Americans became very hopeful that they could change society. Martin and other leaders encouraged people to work together peacefully to win civil rights for everyone, no matter their race or religion.



Members of the KKK burn a cross at a meeting.

But some white people were not happy with the Supreme Court ruling. They fought integrated schools. A group of white people called the *Ku Klux Klan* (KKK) tried to prevent blacks from having equal rights. Members of the KKK wore white robes and hoods to hide their faces. Their actions were often violent. Many other white people, while not violent, opposed integration as well. Yet many other whites around the country supported integration and full equality for blacks. Some worked along with blacks to gain civil rights.

In December 1955, something important happened in Montgomery, where Martin and his family were living. A black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. She was arrested. The black citizens of the city were outraged, and they decided to **protest**. They refused to ride city buses because they wanted an end to segregation on the buses. This kind of protest, in which people refuse to participate in something in order to force a change, is called a *boycott*. It is a peaceful means of protest.



Rosa Parks is fingerprinted in Montgomery, Alabama.

Martin became the leader of the Montgomery bus boycott. People supported the boycott by walking or carpooling, but they would not ride the buses. The boycott went on for over a year. The city would not change the segregation law. Many angry threats were made to Martin and his family. Once, their house was bombed. No one was hurt, but Martin realized that he and his family were in danger. In November 1956, the boycott ended in victory for the African American community. Soon after that victory, the Supreme Court ruled that Alabama could no longer segregate riders on buses.



A church-operated station wagon provided transportation to blacks during the Montgomery bus boycott.



A 1960 sit-in at a whites-only lunch counter

## Marches and Struggles

Still, violence against African Americans continued in the South. Several churches were firebombed in Montgomery. Martin spoke out, saying, “We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws.”

Courageous blacks started to test the unfair laws of segregation. In 1960, small groups, often students, began sit-ins at lunch counters where only white people could be served. (During a sit-in people sit somewhere and refuse to move as a form of peaceful protest.) While the blacks sat in their seats, angry whites often pushed or beat them. But in time, the sit-ins were successful. By the end of the year, more than a hundred Southern towns had integrated their lunch counters.



This Freedom Riders bus was firebombed in Alabama in 1961. Passengers escaped without serious injury.

The next year, a group of black and white Americans called the *Freedom Riders* rode together on buses through the Southern states. They wanted to test the new law banning segregation. When they got to Alabama, violent gangs of Southerners, including members of the KKK, burned the buses and attacked the riders. The local police didn't offer much protection, and many people were hurt. Finally, the federal government in Washington, D.C., sent in 500 U.S. troops to put a stop to the violence.

In April 1963, Martin helped organize protests and marches in Birmingham to stop segregation in the city. During one protest, the marchers were met by Police Chief "Bull" Connor and his men. Attack dogs were set loose on the marchers, even on children. The marchers were sprayed with high-pressure fire hoses. Many were seriously injured. More than 3,000 African Americans were arrested and jailed. President Kennedy sent U.S. troops to Birmingham to stop the violence. Finally, the city ended its segregation laws. Television and newspaper reports of the violence in Birmingham made more and more people aware of the unfair and harsh treatment of African Americans. It brought more attention to the need for equal rights for all people.



A group of marchers run for safety as they are sprayed with powerful fire hoses.



Martin Luther King Jr. gives his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

## **"I Have a Dream"**

President Kennedy spoke out in support of civil rights. He said it was time for all citizens to be free. Much encouraged, Martin called for a march on Washington, D.C., for August 28, 1963. More than 250,000 black and white Americans walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. They marched for freedom, rights, and dignity for all people. The cheering crowd heard Martin give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. He shared his dream that one day, people of all colors would live together peacefully and be "free at last" from judgment or mistreatment because of their skin color.

Sadly, three months later, President Kennedy was **assassinated**. But the Civil Rights Act, which he supported and which ended segregation in all public buildings, became law in 1964.



President Lyndon Johnson signs into law the Civil Rights Act.

The next struggle for blacks was for voting rights. In the South, some whites made it nearly impossible for many blacks to vote. In some places, they charged a special tax many poor people could not afford. Those who failed to pay the tax were not allowed to vote.



Civil rights supporters stage a peaceful demonstration for voting rights in Mississippi in 1964.



Following Alabama Governor George Wallace's orders, state troopers use tear gas on peaceful demonstrators.

In Selma, Alabama, Martin led long lines of African Americans to the registration offices. He was arrested for his action and later released. Then the marchers started marching on the road from Selma to Montgomery. They wanted to present a complaint to the governor of Alabama, George C. Wallace. But he ordered the march stopped. The marchers continued and were stopped by state troopers who used tear gas and clubs to stop the marchers. The day is remembered as Bloody Sunday. Later, on August 6, 1965, with the support of President Johnson, the Voting Rights Act was passed in Washington, D.C. It was a great victory for all people.



Martin Luther King Jr. participates in a civil rights march in Memphis days before his assassination.

## One Last March

In 1968, Martin planned a Poor People's Campaign. The goal was to get better homes, schools, and jobs for poor people of all races and backgrounds. That spring, he went to help out on a strike held by the garbage collectors in Memphis, Tennessee. (During a strike, workers refuse to work until they win better wages or working conditions.) While in Memphis, Martin was killed by an assassin's bullet. He died on April 4, 1968, at the age of thirty-nine.

The whole world mourned the death of this great man. Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered for making real the dream of equality. He is remembered as a man of peace and a champion of rights and freedom for people of every color.



## Glossary

**assassinated** (*v.*) killed by a surprise attack  
(p. 19)

**civil rights** (*n.*) legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens  
(p. 8)

**equality** (*n.*) the condition in which everyone has the same rights  
(p. 10)

**integrate** (*v.*) to bring different ideas or groups of people together  
(p. 11)

**nonviolent** (*adj.*) peaceful (p. 9)

**protest** (*v.*) to act in a way that expresses strong disagreement or disapproval (p. 13)

**race** (*n.*) a group of humans as defined by skin color and features or by genetics (p. 11)

**segregated** (*adj.*) kept apart on the basis of group differences, especially race (p. 6)

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