

LEVELED Book • P

Martin Luther King Jr.



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Written by Bea Silverberg

Martin Luther King Jr.



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Each January,
Americans
celebrate Martin
Luther King Day.
We remember
a great African
American leader
who fought for
civil rights—
full freedom and
equality for all
people. Who was this man?



A girl marches in a Martin Luther King Day parade.

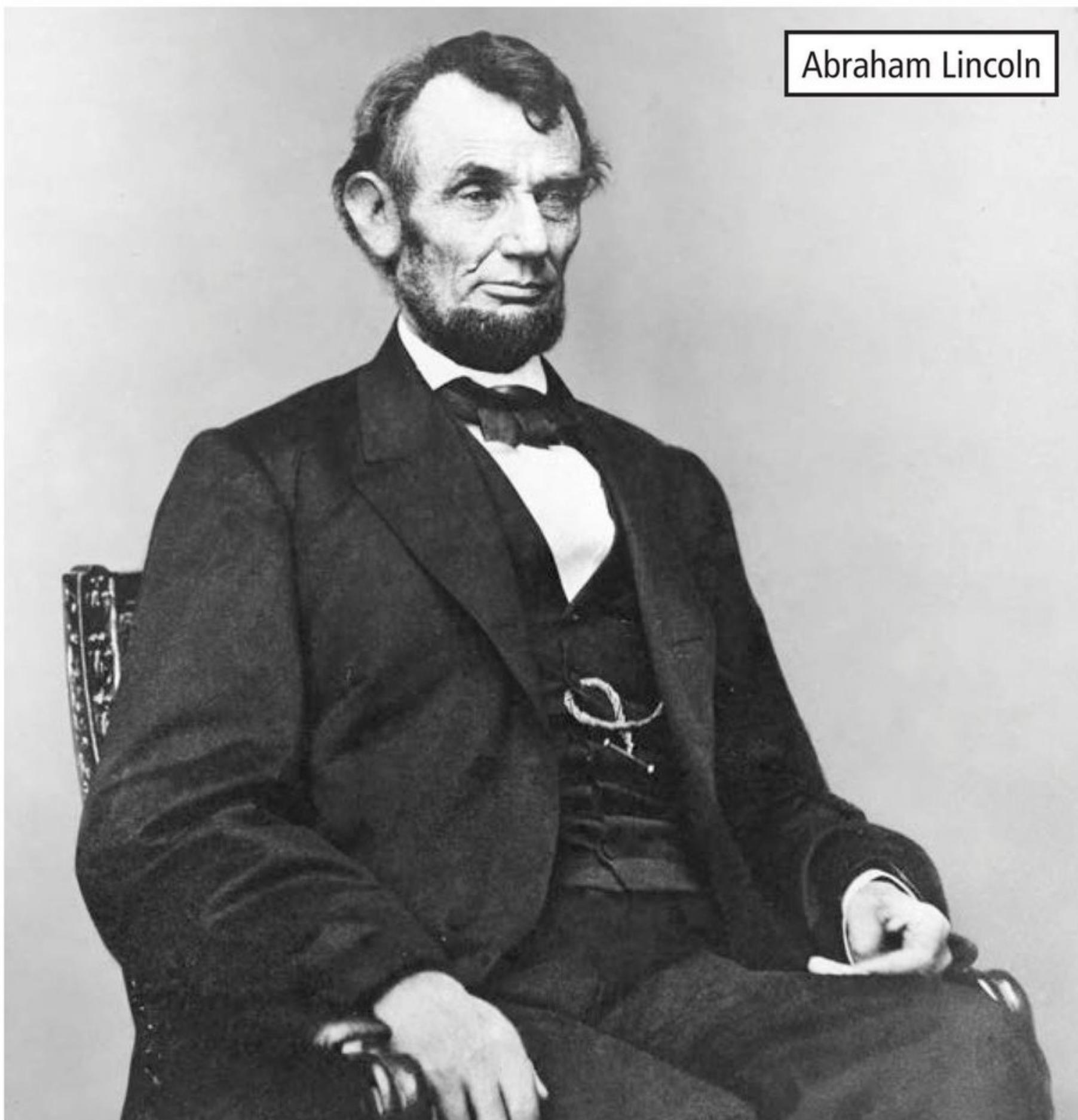


The childhood home of Martin Luther King Jr.

Life in the South

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929. His father was a minister and his mother was a teacher. Martin and his sister and brother grew up in a busy, loving family. Martin did his homework, took music lessons, and played sports. When he was nineteen, he decided to become a minister like his father. After he married, he took his first job at a church in the state of Alabama.

Alabama is in the South, where African Americans lived under unfair laws for many years. Before the Civil War, most blacks had been slaves to white owners. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln gave the slaves their freedom. But Southern states then passed new laws to keep blacks apart, or **segregated**, from whites.



These unfair laws robbed blacks of many rights. Black children had to attend 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 and whites used separate drinking fountains and restrooms with signs that read “For Colored Only” or “For Whites Only.”



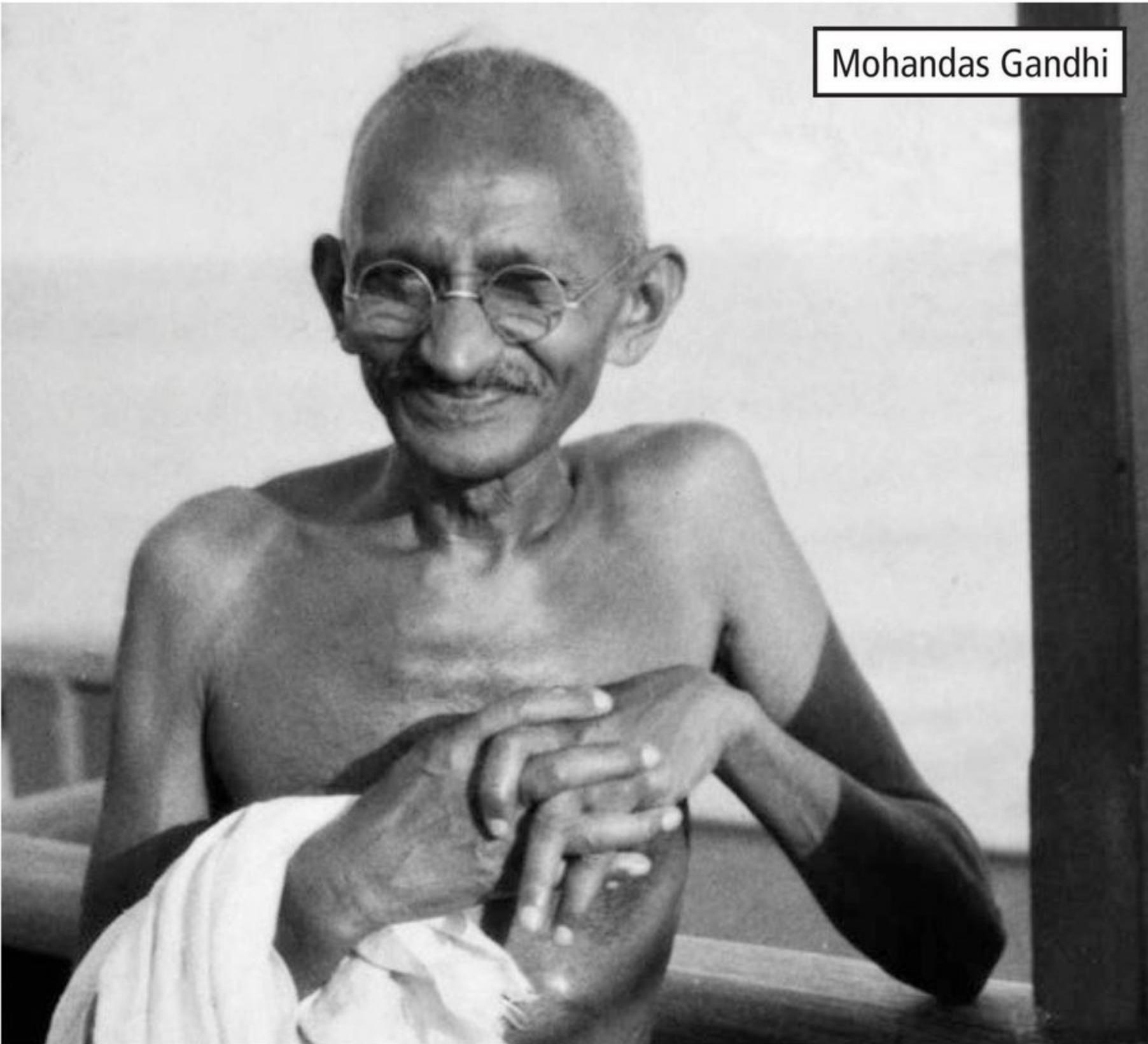
Children at an integrated school in Washington, D.C., in 1954

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court decided that schools could not be segregated by race. The Court ordered schools to allow both black and white students to attend. This decision made some white people angry, including a group called the *Ku Klux Klan*, or KKK.

Members of the KKK wore white robes and hoods to hide their faces. They tried to keep black people from working for equality by scaring and hurting them. Yet many other whites around the country wanted equality for blacks. Some worked along with blacks to gain civil rights.



Hooded and robed KKK members burn a cross at a meeting.



Mohandas Gandhi

Starting His Work

Martin had read about Mohandas Gandhi (mo-HAWN-dus GAWN-dee), the great leader from India. Gandhi calmly refused to obey unfair laws. Martin decided that he, too, would calmly refuse to obey unfair laws—in this case, the laws of segregation. If enough people refused to be segregated, Martin believed they could win civil rights for everyone.

In 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man. After she was arrested, Martin and other blacks began a **boycott**. Instead of riding buses, they walked or carpooled. They hoped their boycott would force the city to end segregation on city buses.



A police officer takes Rosa Parks's fingerprints in Montgomery, Alabama.

The boycott went on for nearly a year. Many whites were angry with Martin. Someone even bombed his family's house. But the boycott ended in victory for African Americans. Soon after, the Supreme Court decided that Alabama buses could not be segregated.

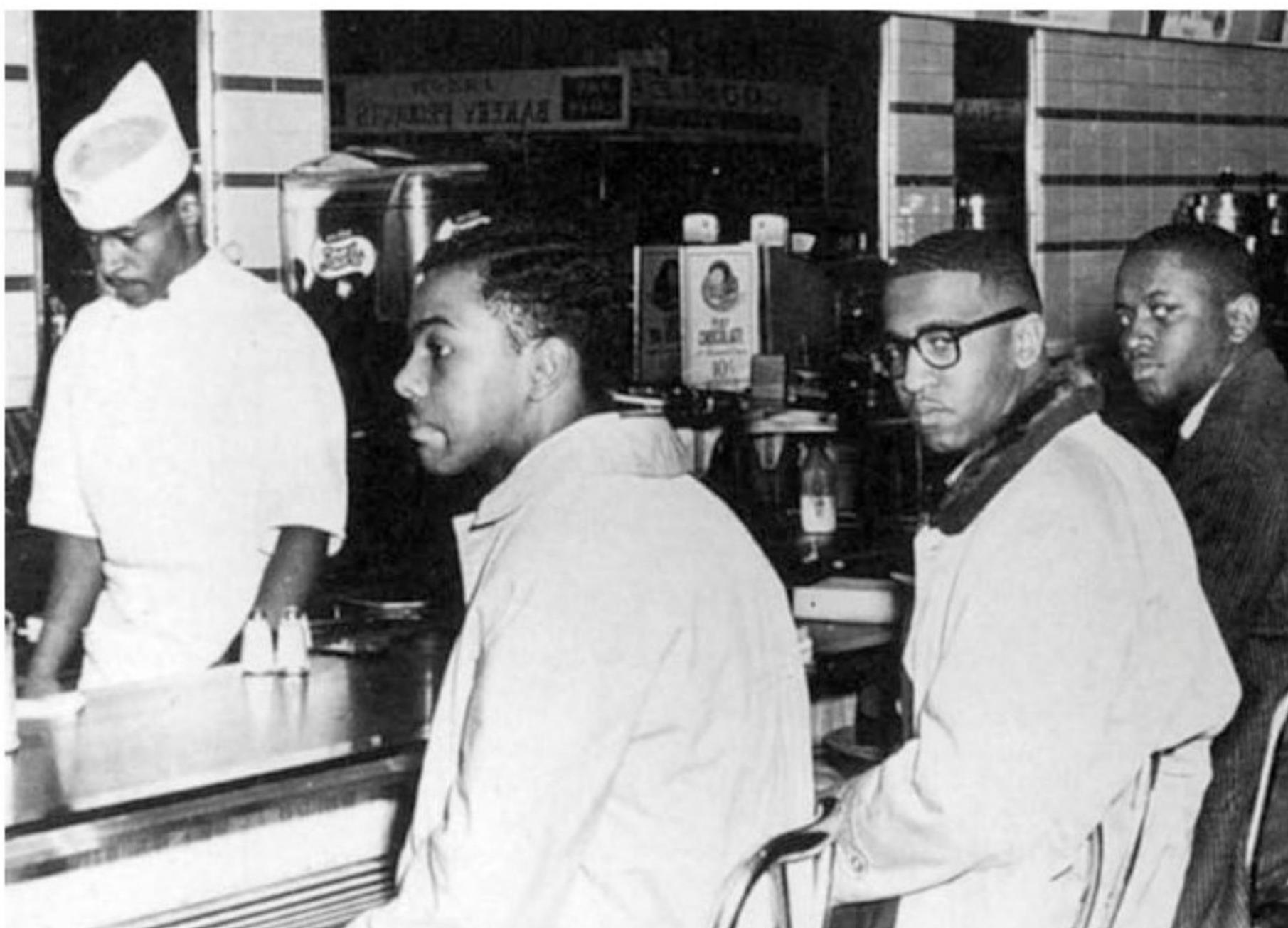


A church-operated station wagon provided transportation to blacks during the Montgomery bus boycott.

Marches and Battles

Still, **violence** against blacks continued in the South. Several black churches in Alabama were burned. Martin spoke out, saying, “We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws.” Brave Americans kept working together to change those laws and win civil rights for everyone.

In 1960, small groups, often students, began sit-ins at lunch counters where only white people could be served. (A sit-in is a form of **protest** in which people sit somewhere and calmly refuse to move.) While the blacks sat in their seats, angry white people often pushed or beat them. But the protest was successful. By the end of the year, more than a hundred Southern towns had begun to serve blacks at their lunch counters.



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

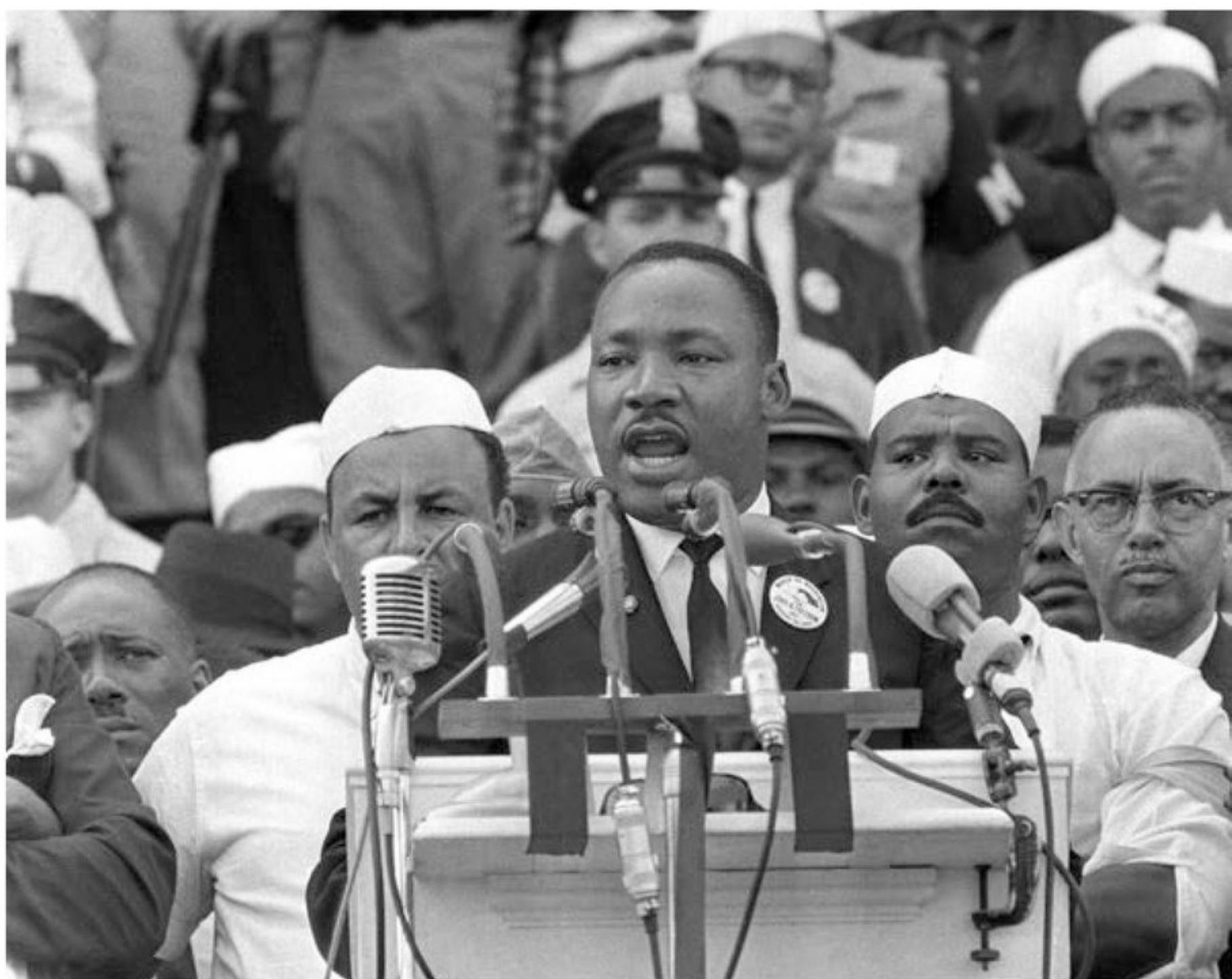


Black marchers run for safety as they are sprayed with fire hoses during the Birmingham March.

Martin hoped to stop segregation in Birmingham, an Alabama city known for its violence against African Americans. In 1963, Martin helped lead protests and marches in Birmingham. Many of those who marched were children. Police officers sprayed them with powerful fire hoses, and police dogs attacked them. Some children were badly hurt, and many were arrested. After five days, more than 2,000 children filled the jails.

“I Have a Dream”

Sitting at home watching the news, shocked Americans saw the violence in Birmingham. More and more people understood the terrible ways in which blacks were being treated. More and more people wanted equal rights for everyone. When Martin asked people to march on Washington, D.C., more than 250,000 black and white Americans marched with him.



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

They marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. They marched for freedom, rights, and respect for all people. The cheering crowd heard Martin give his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. He shared his dream that one day, the color of their skin wouldn’t matter. All people would be “free at last.” The Civil Rights Act, which ended segregation in all public buildings, became a law the next year.



President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, making it a law.

One Last March

The struggle for equality wasn't over, though. Many blacks were still poor. Their lives were still hard. Martin kept working for better homes, schools, and jobs for them. In the spring of 1968, he went to help out on a strike held by some garbage workers. (During a strike, workers refuse to work until they win better pay or working conditions.) While there, Martin was shot by a white man. He died at age thirty-nine.

People around the world felt shocked and sad about his death. Martin Luther

King Jr. is remembered as a man of peace and a champion of rights and freedom for people of every color. This great man made his dream a reality.



Glossary

boycott (<i>n.</i>)	a refusal to buy or take part in something in order to force a change (p. 9)
civil rights (<i>n.</i>)	legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 3)
equality (<i>n.</i>)	the condition in which everyone has the same rights (p. 3)
protest (<i>n.</i>)	an action to express strong disagreement or disapproval (p. 11)
segregated (<i>adj.</i>)	kept apart based on group differences, often race (p. 5)
violence (<i>n.</i>)	force that hurts or destroys (p. 10)

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