

Documenting History

Slavery and Civil Rights



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Orleans, March 24, 1840.

'We shall overcome'

After 1945 the southern United States were still troubled by the Jim Crow laws and lynch mobs. In 1955 Emmett Till, a black teenager visiting Mississippi whistled at a white woman and called her 'baby'. For this 'crime', he was kidnapped, tortured, shot dead and thrown in the river. When his murderers were put on trial, an all-white jury returned a verdict of 'Not Guilty'.

To oppose these racist actions, the NAACP, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) organized civil rights activities. The civil rights movement aimed to abolish racial discrimination in the USA. The organizations used non-violent direct action. One area of protest concerned public transport. In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a black woman called Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. She was arrested and fined. In protest, a bus boycott was started in the city. By the end of 1956 the US Supreme Court had ruled that segregation on the city's buses was illegal. To challenge segregation on inter-state buses, black and white protestors journeyed from Washington DC to New Orleans in 1961. These freedom riders were fire-bombed and beaten.

Education was another priority. School segregation had been made

SOURCE

SPEECH

'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.'

Dr Martin Luther King Jr, speaking at the 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom', 28 August 1963. The following year he became the youngest man ever to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He donated the money to the civil rights movement.

illegal in 1954, but the law was ignored. In 1957 there were riots in Little Rock, Arkansas, as crowds of whites tried to prevent black pupils entering a high school. Troops had to be called in. In 1962, 3,000 federal troops were deployed to allow just one black student, James Meredith, to enrol in class at the University of Mississippi.

The civil rights movement was growing fast. Protest songs, such as *'We shall overcome'*, became famous around the world. A campaign began to encourage African Americans to register for the vote. One of the activists was Medgar Evers of the NAACP. On 12 June 1963 he was shot dead in front of his home.

On 28 August 1963 the dynamic leader of the civil rights movement, a Baptist minister called Dr Martin

Luther King Jr, gave a moving speech to a crowd of 300,000 protestors in Washington DC. But stormy times lay ahead. On 22 November 1963 the US President, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Protest marches continued amidst ongoing violence. John F. Kennedy had supported civil rights in his campaign, and although proposals had not always been followed through with legislation, the perception was that a progressive and youthful president had been cut down in his prime.

In 1965 a new Voting Rights Acts was passed, designed to enforce at last the 15th Amendment to the US Constitution. In 1968, in a blow to the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King too was assassinated.

Dr Martin Luther King (1929–68) was a great public speaker and a tireless campaigner for civil rights.

