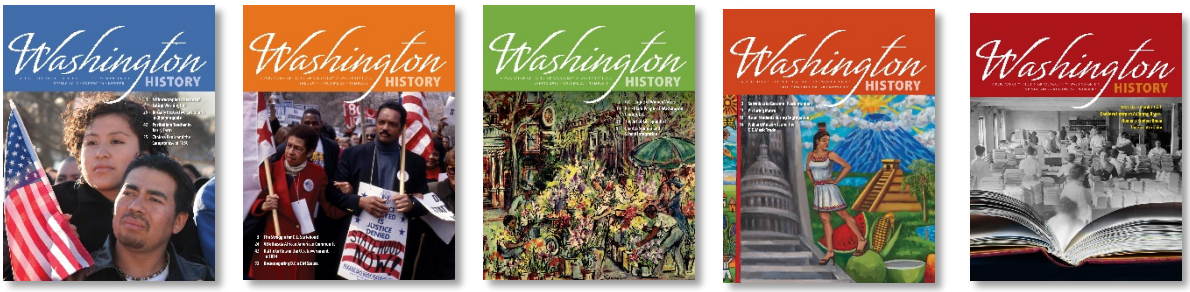
Washington History in the Classroom

 It has been chosen to complement the DC Public Schools curriculum during this time of sheltering at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



"***Washington History*** magazine is an essential teaching tool," says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. "In the 19 years I've been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They've grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**"

Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society's Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation's capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society,* first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. ***Washington History*** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It's easy to set up a personal JSTOR account, which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the Membership Plus level for unlimited free access to our publications.

"Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution"

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Legacy of Activism in Washington, D.C.

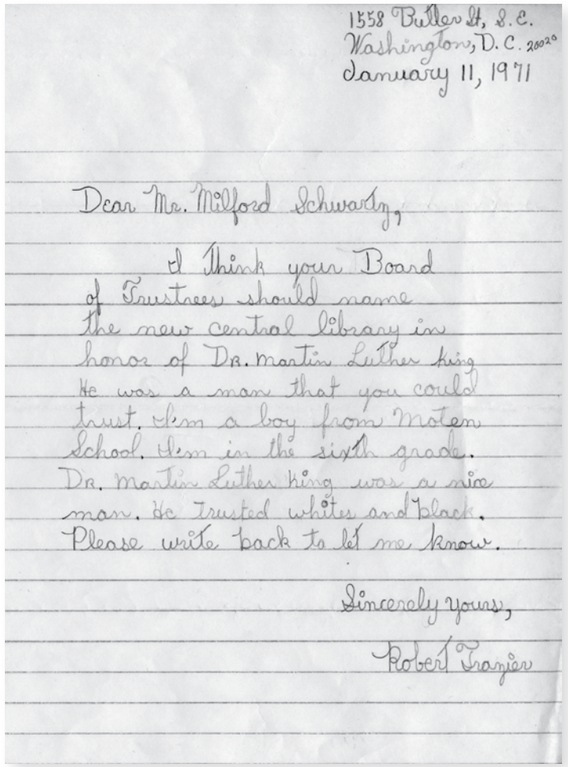
BY DEREK GRAY

On January 11, 1971, Robert Frazier, a sixth-grade student at Moten Elementary School in the Fort Stanton neighborhood of Southeast Washington, sat down and wrote an important letter to Milford Schwartz, president of the DC Public Library's Board of Trustees. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., young Robert wrote, "was a nice man that you could trust" and deserved to be honored by naming the city's forthcoming new library after him. Seven-year-old Regina Frazier (with some parental assistance) was more blunt, writing in a scolding tone: "I think it is a shame that Dr. King cannot have anything dedicated to him. He has been away for nearly two years now and you and your fellow bureaucrats still haven't done anything in memory of our friend, Dr. King."[1]

These letters were part of an energetic, passionate campaign organized by Washingtonians in 1970 to name the District's new central library in honor of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was murdered barely three months before the library's groundbreaking ceremony two years earlier. The ultimately successful campaign reflected the profound impact of King's civil rights work on the city. Washingtonians had long claimed King as a native son, and as early as May 1968, D.C. residents held sit-ins at the District Building to petition councilmembers to establish a city holiday honoring the slain leader.[2]

Although it is difficult to document King's first appearance in the nation's capital, his activism dates back at least to May 17, 1957, when his Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People brought an estimated 12,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial for the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. The event marked the third anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision with songs, prayers, and speeches aimed at challenging the federal government to support civil rights. U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell, a fiery Democrat from New York, attacked the "basic dishonesty and increasing hypocrisy of our two political parties," and claimed that they met at the Lincoln Memorial "because we are getting more from a dead Republican than we are getting from live Democrats and live Republicans."[3]

Theresa and James Gordon of Kentucky present a wreath at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. This event, led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Roy Wilkins, may have been King's first appearance in the nation's capital as a civil rights activist. As Washington marks the 50th anniversary of King's assassination, archivist Derek Gray has compiled an album of the civil rights leader's many appearances in D.C. *All images appear courtesy of DC Public Library Special Collections.*



1558 Butler St., S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20020
January 11, 1971

Dear Mr. Milford Schwartz,

I think your Board of Trustees should name the new central library in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King. He was a man that you could trust. I'm a boy from Moten School. I'm in the sixth grade. Dr. Martin Luther King was a nice man. He trusted whites and black. Please write back to let me know.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Frazier

Sixth-grader Robert Frazier joined hundreds asking the DC Public Library Board of Trustees to name the new Central Library in honor of King.

King, who was co-chairman of the Prayer Pilgrimage, concluded the program with a rousing address equal to Powell's in its passion, but devoid of its abrasiveness. In a call-and-response fashion, King demanded, "Give us the ballot!" with the crowd chanting the phrase in return. His presence on the stage in front of the "Great Emancipator" (an affectionate term used by generations of African Americans to describe Lincoln) was the first time many in the crowd had seen him. Observers hailed the moment as a significant turning point for King. The young minister, wrote the editors of the *New York Amsterdam News*, had emerged as "the number one leader of sixteen million Negroes in the United States. At this point, in his career, the people will follow him anywhere."[4]

King returned to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial six years later, at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. He delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech to a crowd of 250,000. The Washington Committee on the March, a coalition of pastors and presidents of the D.C. chapters of national civil rights organizations, assumed responsibility for organizing D.C. residents and ensuring the safety of the marchers. One of King's protégés, Reverend Walter E. Fauntroy, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's regional representative and pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church, served as co-chair of the Washington Committee alongside Reverend Edward A. Hailes, executive secretary of the District's NAACP chapter. The Washington Committee's hard work and diligent coordination with local organizations, volunteers, Metropolitan Police Department officers, and transportation planners ensured that the successful march went off without any sign of violence. One letter to the editor of the *Washington Post* proudly asserted, "The Americans who came here will feel more than ever, we hope, that this is their city. The Americans who live here can feel renewed and redoubled pride in their own hometown."[5]

Despite its immediate success, the march neglected two key civil rights issues that were particularly important to Washingtonians: home rule and full voting rights in Congress. Two years later King corrected the oversight by voicing his support for a home rule bill being considered in Congress. The bill would have given residents control over the city's affairs by establishing an elected city government and a formula for federal payments to the city. On August 5, 1965, King joined Reverends Walter E. Fauntroy and Paul H. Moore, Jr., co-chairmen of the D.C. Coalition of Conscience, in Lafayette Park for a vigil and march to garner support for home rule and commend President Lyndon B. Johnson for his strong endorsement of the home rule bill. Although the bill failed, Johnson did not give up, and in 1967 he re-organized the city government with an appointed mayor and councilmembers in a first step towards electing these officials.[6]

On March 12, 1967, King returned to the District to support Fauntroy's Model Inner City Community Organization, which channeled civil rights activism into neighborhood development and urban renewal projects. Both King and Fauntroy saw D.C.'s Shaw neighborhood as a potential "laboratory" for President Johnson's Model Cities program, and the city's Redevelopment Land Agency had awarded MICCO a $151,000 grant only a month earlier to organize local residents to develop an urban renewal project there. Before a crowd of 3,800 cheering spectators at Cardozo High School's athletic stadium, King said the Shaw

King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, 1957.

Participants in the March on Washington find information on the event. The Washington Committee on the March, a coalition of local pastors and activists, handled local arrangements.

renewal project presented the ideal opportunity to "revive a dream" that he had spoken about in August 1963. "I stood in this city nearly four years ago and told many of you at the historic march that I have a dream. Since that hot August day, I have seen that dream almost turn into a nightmare." Racial harmony, he ruefully observed, was looking unattainable in Mississippi, Alabama, Los Angeles, and the Chicago urban ghettoes. In D.C., however, he was optimistic: "I believe that you on these 675 acres called Shaw can point the way for the nation out of her most serious domestic dilemma—the decay of the city."[7]

King's strategy was two-fold: inform residents of the local and federal governments' plans and emphasize that their participation was essential to ensure success. Churches, businesses, and everyday people should, he said, "prepare to participate" in the renewal effort. The MICCO plan was detailed, ambitious, and long-term. During the next 18 months, Fauntroy's group organized community rallies and meetings, while a task force of federal labor, housing, education, and welfare experts worked with residents to develop a plan for the neighborhood. A meeting to push for a new Shaw Junior High School was scheduled for March 28, just two weeks after King's appearance energized the project.[8]

Although the purpose of the visit was serious—the tone of King's speech was solemn, and the backdrop of dilapidated buildings and crumbling streets was depressing—the chilly day was jovial, akin to a music concert with King as the star attraction. Before his speech, King sat in a convertible with his nine-year-old son, Martin Luther King III, and Fauntroy as they led a parade to Cardozo High School that stretched 16 blocks along N Street NW. Some 10,000 enthusiastic spectators cheered the parade's 300 cars, 1,000 marchers, 7 bands, and 12 floats. Commentators called it the biggest local civic demonstration since the March on Washington.[9]

During the last two years of his life King shifted away from more traditional civil rights issues such as racial segregation and discrimination toward the broader injustices of war and poverty, particularly the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. By 1967 the Johnson Administration had significantly escalated the war, and King, who was present when Johnson signed significant civil rights bills into law, became a vocal critic. While visiting Washington in February 1968 for an SCLC board meeting, he met with the Clergymen and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam—a coalition of religious leaders and officials united against the war and its ramifications at home—and joined them for a protest in the form of a public prayer vigil at Arlington National Cemetery.[10]

Rev. Walter Fauntroy reaches over Martin Luther King III to adjust Dr. King's MICCO button during the parade to Cardozo High School. At the school's stadium, King addressed the crowd to promote participation in the Shaw renewal project, 1967.

This was not the original plan. CALCAV had requested permission to hold a memorial service in the cemetery's amphitheater, but the Department of the Army rejected its application. The group then sought approval in the U.S. District Court, which upheld the Army's ruling, and then the U.S. Court of Appeals, which upheld the District Court's ruling. They decided to hold a vigil instead.[11]

King and other clergy, carrying a Torah and crucifix, walked from Arlington Ridge Road to the steps of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier a half mile away. Marchers followed suit carrying small American flags. Upon arrival, King delivered a speech, "A Proper Sense of Priorities," in which he paid homage to the fallen and accused the country's leaders of making the United States the world's greatest purveyor of violence: "The dead

will not be honored if we swell their ranks. They will be honored only if we pledge, with the fervor the dead can demand of the living, that there shall be no need for fresh-dug graves at Arlington. In this period of absolute silence, let us pray."[12]

King also sought to bring national attention and resources to the issue of poverty. During his February visit to D.C., he held a two-hour meeting with Black Power Movement leaders H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael at the Pitts Motel, 1451 Belmont Street NW, to discuss a Poor People's Campaign that he was considering for the spring. The motel became a landmark in the history of 1968 activism as an official headquarters of the Poor People's Campaign that housed many of its planners.[13]

King gave two more high-profile addresses in the District before his assassination. On February 7, 1968, some 600 people heard him deliver "In Search of a Sense of Direction," in which he presented his plans for the upcoming Poor People's Campaign, drew attention to the injustice of poverty, and accused the Johnson Administration of failing to aid the poor. "When we come here, we will not come to beg, but to demand that the nation grant us what is truly ours." President Johnson's focus, he charged, "is not in this country. It is in Vietnam."[14]

Less than a week before his assassination, King spoke to 3,000 Washingtonians one last time at the National Cathedral, delivering his "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" sermon.

On Sunday March 31st, King visited the National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue NW for what would be his final speech in the city and one of the last of his life. He delivered the sermon, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" from an ornate lectern high above the 3,000 parishioners assembled in the sanctuary. In it he sought to explain why SCLC was planning the Poor People's Campaign. "Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses," he said. "We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. If a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."[15]

King's assassination less than a week later traumatized the nation and resulted in a vivid display of anger, sadness, and confusion in D.C. In the decades since, Washingtonians have made numerous efforts to honor, commemorate, and memorialize King and connect him to their city and themselves. That campaign began in May 1968 when D.C. residents called for local officials to honor King with a city holiday. It continued with public school students' yearly school remembrances through art, music, and poetry. It continued with the opening of the Martin Luther King Center at 1326 Florida Avenue NE in 1969 and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in 1972. It continued with the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1983. And as a grandiose and imposing King emerges from a "Stone of Hope" in the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial that opened in 2011, it continues today as the tumultuous times of 2018 strongly parallel those of 1968.

The photographs that follow are drawn from the Washington Star Photograph Collection *of the Washingtoniana Collection of the DC Public Library. The letters are drawn from the DC Public Library Archives (Collection #40). The photographs appear courtesy of the DC Public Library, © Washington Post.*

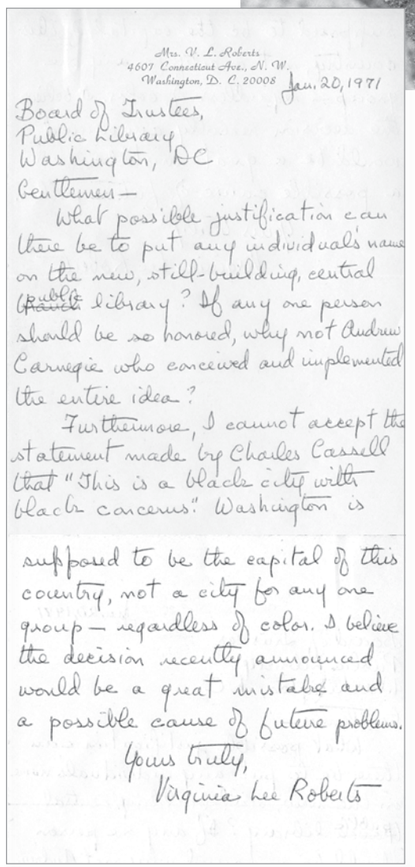
Derek Gray is an Archivist at the DC Public Library. For more images documenting 1968 and Dr. King's activism in the District, please visit the Library's online exhibit, "Evolutions and Legacies: Martin Luther King, Jr. and DC, 1957–1972," at www.dclibrary.org/1968.

Above: King joined *[from left]* Revs. Paul Moore, Walter Fauntroy, and Ralph Abernathy to acknowledge President Johnson's support for D.C. Home Rule and to pressure the reluctant Congress to pass Johnson's plan, 1965.

Bishop James Shannon, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Revs. King and Abernathy, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, and Rabbi Everett Gendler took a multi-denominational stand against the Vietnam War, 1968.

The Brightwood Elementary School choir sings to honor King in 1969, one year after his assassination. Washingtonians of all ages were early proponents of memorials to King.

Malcolm X Park (also known as Meridian Hill Park) honors Malcolm X and became a locus for Pan-African organizing, including African Liberation Day and the Sunday "drum circle." Here, drummers lead the crowd in a celebration of Dr. King on the second anniversary of his death.



Mrs. V. L. Roberts
4607 Connecticut Ave., N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20008 Jan. 20, 1971

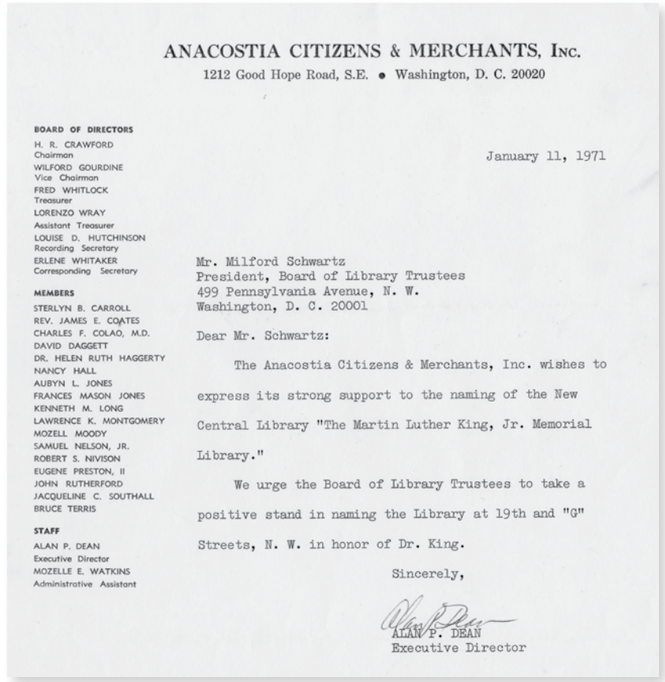
Board of Trustees,
Public Library
Washington, DC

Gentlemen—

What possible justification can there be to put any individuals name on the new, still-building, central ~~Public~~ library? If any one person should be so honored, why not Andrew Carnegie who conceived and implemented the entire idea?

Furthermore, I cannot accept the statement made by Charles Cassell that "This is a black city with black concerns." Washington is suppoud to be the capital of this country, not a city for any one group — regardless of color. I believe the decision recently announced would be a great mistake and a possible cause of future problems.

Yours truly,
Virginia Lee Roberts



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Administrative Assistant

January 11, 1971

Mr. Milford Schwartz
President, Board of Library Trustees
499 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20001

Dear Mr. Schwartz:

The Anacostia Citizens & Merchants, Inc. wishes to express its strong support to the naming of the New Central Library "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library."

We urge the Board of Library Trustees to take a positive stand in naming the Library at 19th and "G" Streets, N. W. in honor of Dr. King.

Sincerely,

ALAN P. DEAN
Executive Director

The campaign to name the library for King did not go unchallenged. In contrast to the letter, above, from the Anacostia Citizens & Merchants organization supporting the memorial, Virginia Lee Roberts of Connecticut Ave. NW vehemently objected.

Left: This program marked the 1972 dedication of the new Central Public Library as the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. Charles Cassell, school board member, echoed many when he said: "We are not asking politely. We are demanding that you name the library after Martin Luther King Jr."

NOTES

1. "MLKML—Original Letters re. Naming the New Downtown Library," January 1971, DC Public Library Archives (Collection 40); DC Public Library Special Collections.
2. Marya McQuirter, "Memorializing Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington, DC," *Black Perspectives,* April 2, 2018, aaihs.org/memorializing-martin-luther-king-jr-in-washington-dc.
3. "'Third Force' to Fight for Civil Rights Asked," *Evening Star,* May 17, 1957.
4. "Crowd Chants for the Ballot at Pilgrimage," *Washington Post,* May 18, 1957.
5. Derek Gray and Jennifer Krafchik, "'Its Fingers Were Crossed and Its Guard Was Up': Washington Prepares for the March for Jobs and Freedom," *Washington History* 25 (summer 2013): 20–35.
6. "King Gives Warning on DC Home Rule," *Evening Star,* Aug. 6, 1965.
7. "Dr. King Rallies Shaw Renewal Forces to 'Revive a Dream,'" *Evening Star,* Mar. 13, 1967.
8. Ibid.
9. "Dr. King Pushes Shaw-Area Renewal," *Washington Post,* Mar. 13, 1967.
10. "Clerics Stage a Silent Vigil for Peace," *Washington Post,* Feb. 7, 1968.
11. Ibid.
12. "2,000 War Foes Hold Arlington Prayer Vigil," *Evening Star,* Feb. 6, 1968.
13. "King Meets With Carmichael, Brown," *Evening Star,* Feb. 8, 1968.
14. Ibid.
15. "Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution," archive.org/details/Dr.MartinLutherKingJr.RemainingAwakeThroughAGreatRevolutionNationalCathedral33168OURWorldHiSTORY