



50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON & CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

On Aug. 28, 2013, President Barack Obama spoke to tens of thousands of Americans at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. — the same place where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his historic “I Have A Dream” speech — during the 50th anniversary of the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” Though the anniversary of the march would not attract as large a crowd as the original march in 1963, the diversity of the audience at the 2013 March on Washington reflected the vision that Dr. King spoke of five decades before. Speakers included former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, activist Myrlie Evers-Williams and the only living leader of the original march, U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.



In the largest demonstration ever seen in the nation’s capital, a peaceful crowd of 250,000 amassed on the National Mall during the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963.

President Obama remarked that the everyday people who journeyed to Washington 50 years ago were “seeking jobs and justice; not just the absence of oppression, but the presence of economic opportunity.”

In 1963, Illinois leaders and residents were eager to participate in the march, from recruiting participants to organizing food donations and raising funds for transportation. As the event expressed the need for legislation ensuring the rights of African-Americans and equal rights for all, Illinoisans were front and center in bringing the 1963 March on Washington and the subsequent Civil Rights Act of 1964 to fruition.

Racial Climate in the 1960s

In the 1960s, the United States was boiling over with racial tension and the Civil Rights Movement was well under way. The segregation of public facilities maintained a climate of deprivation and marginalization for African-Americans. Though the *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1954 had outlawed segregation in public schools, local law enforcement turned a blind eye as many institutions throughout the nation sustained illegal discriminatory practices.

Many states, particularly in the South, enforced segregation through “Jim Crow” laws, pardoned widespread acts of race-based violence, and used tactics like poll taxes and literacy tests to discourage African-Americans from exercising their right to vote. Many endured hiring discrimination and were largely confined to low-wage, hard-labor jobs. Affordable, quality housing options were also hard to come by.

As one of the most racially segregated cities in the country, Chicago served as a microcosm of the struggle for equal access and opportunity in the nation. In the mid-20th century, African-Americans from the southern states seeking economic opportunities streamed into northern cities, especially Chicago. Between 1940 and 1960, the African-American population in Chicago increased from about 278,000 to 813,000.

While African-American Chicagoans did not face legalized segregation as seen in the South, segregated spaces were more “understood” than labeled. African-American residents were relegated to neighborhoods known as the “Black Belt” and encountered the same hostility as Southerners in public venues and discriminatory practices when seeking jobs or housing outside of areas to which they were restricted. When African-American residents attempted to live beyond the borders of overcrowded areas, they faced violence, threats and homeowners who refused them. One area, coined Bronzeville, featured many single-family houses that were broken up into “kitchenettes,” with entire families occupying one room each and exhausting the plumbing facilities to the point of dilapidation.

Chicago Activists Demand Change

During the early 1960s, housing and public school issues came to a head with the Chicago Freedom Movement. Led by public school teacher Albert A. Raby, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations combined numerous community groups to stage a series of boycotts to demand desegregation and the improvement of overcrowded schools.



Photo courtesy Chicago Public Library

Timuel Black, Jr. (far left), a Hyde Park high school teacher and civil rights activist, was instrumental in organizing the Chicago contingent for the 1963 March on Washington.

With the exception of Hyde Park, Kenwood and Farragut high schools, few schools in Chicago were actually integrated at the time, as was the case in most cities across the nation. Timuel Black, Jr., president of the Negro American Labor Council’s (NALC) Chicago chapter and a Hyde Park High School teacher, recalled that overcapacity forced African-American students to attend school in shifts — one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The fight for open housing, labor rights and school desegregation would later draw the leadership and temporary residency of Dr. King to Chicago in 1965.

As numerous peaceful demonstrations ended in bloody violence across the states, Congress wrestled with an impending civil rights bill that President John F. Kennedy had proposed. During his national address on June 11, Kennedy asked for the passage of civil rights legislation “giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public — hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores and similar establishments” and for “greater protection for the right to vote.”

National Civil Rights Leaders’ Call to Action

A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had originally called for a march of 50,000 Americans on Washington in 1941. Instead of the march, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed banning discriminatory employment practices in the national defense and government, and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate racial discrimination charges.

At the 1963 national meeting for the NALC, Randolph declared that the time had come to march. The civil rights bill was stalling and many felt a large demonstration was necessary to add pressure on Congress. Randolph telegraphed Dr. King, then president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, to inform him that the NALC had begun planning for a march “for Negro job rights” and requested his immediate response.

The headlining organizers, known as the “Big Six,” included Randolph; Dr. King; John Lewis, national chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Whitney Young, Jr., executive director of the National Urban League; Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and James Farmer, national director of the Congress on Racial Equality.

Once the group notified President Kennedy, they settled on the date of Aug. 28, 1963, to stage the march. The goals of the protest were to secure passage of “a comprehensive civil rights bill” that would eliminate segregated public accommodations; protect all citizens’ right to vote; enforce consequences for violations of constitutional rights; desegregate all public schools; fund training and placement programs for unemployed workers; and ban discrimination in all employment.

Randolph served as the director of the march with longtime associate and strategist Bayard Rustin as his chief deputy. Together they generated a plan of action to organize a march that would draw a crowd of 100,000 in the nation’s capital to spotlight the great need for human rights and economic equality. Rustin reached out to Chicago activists, including Timuel Black, Jr. and Al Raby; the Rev. Addie L. Wyatt with the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) and the NALC; political strategist Don Rose; Edwin “Bill” C. Berry, executive secretary of the Chicago Urban League; and Lawrence Landry of the



Photo courtesy Cecil Strongton/John F. Kennedy Library & Museum

Leaders of the March on Washington met with President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson at the White House following the march. Left to right are: Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, Mathew Ahmann, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, Rev. Eugene Carson Blake, A. Philip Randolph, Kennedy, Johnson, Walter Ruether, Whitney Young and Floyd McKissick.

Chicago Area Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to activate the Chicago contingent. When the time came for the March on Washington, Illinois organizers were more than ready to take their struggles to the nation's capital.

A Pledge to American Women

As a member of the NALC and leader of the UPWA, the Rev. Addie Wyatt was among the leaders who assembled approximately 20,000 Illinoisans to take part in the March, with local organizations pooling their resources to pay train fare for students. Wyatt had been appointed by Eleanor Roosevelt to the Labor Legislation Committee of the U.S. Commission on the Status of Women during the early 1960s. During the late 1950s, she worked with Dr. King and the Montgomery Improvement Association. Rev. Wyatt was an essential and vocal leader within the Chicago contingent.

Anna Arnold Hedgeman of the National Council of Churches and the only woman on the march's executive committee, and Dr. Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women and one of the chief advisors of the march, insisted on the inclusion of female leaders in the official program. Initially, the only women participants were all singers: Odetta Holmes, Marian Anderson, Joan Baez and Chicago resident Mahalia Jackson.

As a result, a "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom" was added to the program. The tribute listed the names of civil rights activists, including Daisy Bates, former head of the Arkansas NAACP; Diane Nash Bevel, co-founder of the SNCC; Rosa Parks of the Montgomery NAACP; Gloria Richardson of the Cambridge Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and two widows of slain activists: Myrlie Evers, wife of Medgar Evers, and Prince Lee, wife of Herbert Lee. In an act of solidarity, women leaders including Dr. Height, Daisy Bates, Rosa Parks and performers Josephine Baker and Lena Horne led a procession of marchers down Independence Avenue as the male leaders marched down Constitution Avenue.

After much protest, few women served as speakers at the event. During the pre-ceremony, Baker and actress Ruby Dee spoke. Myrlie Evers was the only woman speaker on the official program, but she missed her flight. Speaking in her place, Daisy Bates, who led the Little Rock Nine in the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, pledged the unanimous commitment of the civil rights movement to the rights and struggles of American women. Gloria Richardson, who co-founded ACT with Chicago's Lawrence Landry, also was chosen to address the crowd. Some considered her too militant, and when she was brought up to the podium, she only managed to say "Hello" before the microphone was taken away.

Despite restrictions placed on them, women were instrumental in the planning and implementation of the march. As Dr. Height would later note, even though women pioneers did not receive the recognition of their male counterparts, they were proud to serve and actively effect social change in the country.



Photo courtesy Chicago Public Library

Chicago labor and civil rights activist and march organizer the Rev. Addie L. Wyatt stands on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

A Triumphant March on Washington

Organizers of the march worried about two things: low attendance and violence. However, people came from all over the nation — in approximately 1,514 buses, 21 special and 16 regular trains and a few on airplanes.

To prevent any incidences, organizers recruited 5,900 police officers, 2,000 National Guardsmen, 4,000 federal soldiers and 15,000 paratroopers for security and law enforcement. Rustin enlisted the services of 4,000 volunteer fire marshalls to employ nonviolent mediation in the event of any disturbances, most of them African-American NYPD officers



Photo courtesy Peoria Journal Star

John Gwynn, Jr. (far right), president of the local NAACP, gives instructions to the 41 people from the Peoria area who boarded a bus to Washington, D.C., for the march.

working as liaisons to the D.C. police. Liquor stores in the area were closed for the first time since Prohibition, and the city relocated all prisoners in lieu of mass arrests. Ultimately however, no arrests were recorded that day and the march remained peaceful throughout.

Dr. King's monumental speech served as the climax of the ceremony. With just seven minutes allotted to speak, Dr. King adlibbed most of his "I Have A Dream" speech. Though his aides discouraged him from using his "dream" as a theme, Mahalia Jackson inspired him during the speech when she shouted, "Tell them about the

dream, Martin!" Dr. King moved the massive crowd with his vision of an integrated nation in a future where racial harmony presided and all were free to live as citizens of their home country.

Despite numerous conflicts and setbacks, the March on Washington succeeded as one of the largest peaceful demonstrations the country has ever seen. After the march, several of the leaders met with President Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House. Kennedy released a statement on how pleased he was with the march, commending the leaders and the more than 250,000 attendees for demonstrating their faith in the justice system by advancing the "cause of 20 million Negroes" with a "deep fervor and quiet dignity."

As a student at Alabama State College from 1952 to 1957, I attended Dexter Baptist Church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister. One of the most extraordinary experiences of my life was working with Dr. King and Rosa Parks during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. And when I saw the March on Washington, I thought it was wonderful that they were able to get that many people of diverse ethnic backgrounds to band together to push for equality in housing, employment and educational opportunities. Much of the person I am today, I owe to my relationship with Dr. King.

— Jesse White, Illinois Secretary of State

Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

After the Civil War, three key pieces of legislation — known as the Reconstruction Amendments — addressed the plight of African-Americans in the United States. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865; the 14th Amendment recognized former slaves as citizens in 1868; and the 15th Amendment granted all men the right to vote in 1869. Nearly a century had passed before the country would see significant change with regard to civil rights and race relations.

In the months following the March on Washington, Congress and the public continued to clash over the civil rights legislation that President Kennedy had proposed in June. The House Judiciary Committee, chaired by U.S. Rep. Emmanuel Celler, D-N.Y., strengthened the administration's bill and reported it out of committee with added provisions. In late October, the President called leaders in Congress to secure the votes necessary to pass the bill in the House. However, the bill was stalled in the Rules Committee as committee chair Rep. Howard Smith, D-Va., an avid segregationist, vowed to stall it indefinitely.

Less than a month later on Nov. 22, 1963, President Kennedy was fatally shot in Dallas, Texas. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination, the political climate shifted in favor of the civil rights bill. On November 27, President Johnson declared his support of the bill in his first address to Congress stating, "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." On Feb. 10, 1964, the bill passed the House by a vote of 290 to 130.

Once again, due to strong opposition from a Senate Judiciary Committee chair, the bill was stalled. In a political maneuver, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, D-Mt., gave the bill a second reading, thereby advancing it past the Judiciary Committee onto the Senate floor. On March 30 when it reached the floor, 18 Democrats and one Republican — known as the "Southern Bloc" — employed the filibuster, the use of unlimited debate, to postpone and prevent passage of the bill.

Senator Dirksen Pushes Bill Through Congress

Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, R-Ill., of Pekin became the driving force behind passage of the civil rights bill. For more than two decades he had introduced bills

to prohibit discrimination in employment, punish the crime of lynching, protect persons from mob violence and outlaw the poll tax that disenfranchised voters.

Dirksen played a pivotal role in delivering the Republican votes necessary for cloture — the only procedure that can end a filibuster. He appeased conservative colleagues by altering the language of the bill to require enforcement of anti-discrimination laws at



Photo courtesy Cecil Stroughton/John F. Kennedy Library & Museum

U.S. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (center) from Illinois witnesses the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2, 1964.

the local or state level before federal intervention could take place.

After 54 days of filibuster, Senator Dirksen, along with Senators Mansfield, Thomas Kuchel, R-Calif., and Hubert Humphrey, D-Minn., introduced an amended bill they hoped would attract enough swing votes to end the filibuster. On June 10, the 83rd day of the filibuster, Congress convened to finally end the debate. Dirksen addressed the Senate, quoting Victor Hugo: “Stronger than all the armies is an idea whose time has come. ... The time has come for equality in sharing government, in education and in employment. It will not be stayed or denied. It is here!”

With two-thirds of the chamber voting “aye,” the cloture ended the longest filibuster in Senate history. With that, the civil rights bill cleared the Senate by a vote of 71 to 29. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into effect on July 2, 1964, in front of a televised audience with Dr. King among those in attendance. President Johnson declared, “Let this session of Congress be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined.”

The Legacy of the March on Washington

The landmark civil rights legislation was groundbreaking in disrupting the institutionalized racism African-American citizens had endured since slavery ended with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 eliminated the legality of “Jim Crow” laws and the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling, which upheld that “separate but equal” racial segregation was constitutional. Though it would not completely eradicate widespread racism, the law provided the impetus for future legislation improving the quality of life for all citizens, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Illinoisans were proud to be an instrumental part of this critical turning point in American history. And though institutionalized segregation is a thing of the past, the themes of the speeches given on the day of the march reflected the need for continued change in the hearts of Americans. Viewed as a significant moment in the struggle for civil rights, the enduring effects of the 1963 March on Washington



Photo courtesy Pete Souza/White House

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama wave to the crowd at the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 2013.

for Jobs and Freedom are still seen today. As President Obama remarked at the 50th Anniversary March on Washington on Aug. 28, 2013: “To dismiss that little has changed dishonors the courage and sacrifice for those who paid the price of freedom. But, it would also be a dishonor to suggest that the work of this nation is complete.”

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