Martin Luther King Jr. was born on Tuesday, January 15, 1929 at the family home in Atlanta. He was the first son born to the Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. and Alberta Williams King. At birth, he was given the name Michael, like his father, but both names were soon changed to Martin Luther. Martin Luther Jr. had an older sister, Christine, and a younger brother, Alfred Daniel.  
  
M.L., as he was called, lived near the Ebenezer Baptist Church where his father was the minister. His mother was a schoolteacher.  
  
Martin Luther King Jr. began school at the age of five, one year before reaching the legal age of six. When his age was discovered, he was not allowed to stay in school and did not restart until the next year when he turned six. He did very well in school and skipped both the ninth and twelfth grades. He had excellent scores on the college entrance exams in his junior year of high school, and went on to Morehouse, an all-black college, without even graduating from high school. He was only 15 when he began college.  
  
Throughout his childhood, Martin Luther King Jr. was very aware of the differences between blacks and whites. The two groups were unable to attend the same schools, play together, or eat in the same restaurants. Martin Luther King's mother and father fought for African-American rights and taught him something that would become an important part of his life - to treat all people with respect.

Martin Luther King Jr. was in Boston working on a Ph.D. in Divinity when he met Coretta Scott. She was studying to be a singer at the New England Conservatory of Music. They were married in 1953.   
  
After King completed his studies in 1954, he had job offers from colleges and churches in the North, but he felt that his place was in the South, where he could do more for his people.   
  
Coretta gave up her singing career and the couple moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Here he helped lead the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott that Rosa Parks set in motion when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus. It was as the leader of that boycott that Martin Luther King Jr. first became famous for his philosophy of nonviolent protest.  
  
Coretta and Martin Luther Jr. had four children: Yolanda (1955), Martin Luther III (1957), Dexter (1961), and Bernice Albertine (1963). All four children followed in their parents footsteps and became civil rights activists. As of January, 2015, all were still alive except for Yolanda who passed away in 2007.  
  
Coretta Scott King was always a great support for Martin Luther Jr., and after his death in 1964 she became a national leader, carrying on his work. Coretta died in January, 2006.

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the leaders of the so-called "Big Six" civil rights groups who organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which took place on August 28, 1963.  
  
At first President Kennedy opposed the March because he thought it might turn some politicians against the passage of civil rights laws. The organizers insisted that the March go on, and Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the people who talked with the group leaders and the politicians to make the March happen.  
  
Despite the initial disagreements, the March was a huge success. More than a quarter million people of different backgrounds attended the event. It was the largest gathering of protesters in Washington's history.  
  
From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The crowd was electrified. This speech is regarded as one of the finest speeches in history.  
  
The March on Washington, and especially King's speech, helped put civil rights at the top of the political agenda in the United States. In the following year, 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed.

As reported in the New York Times, October 15, 1964:  
  
Oslo, Norway, Oct. 14 -- The Nobel Peace prize for 1964 was awarded today to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
  
The 35-year-old civil rights leader is the youngest winner of the prize that Dr. Alfred Nobel instituted since the first was awarded in 1901.  
  
The prize honors acts "for the furtherance of brotherhood among men and to the abolishment or reduction of standing armies and for the extension of these purposes."  
  
The Norwegian state radio changed its program schedule tonight to broadcast a 30-minute program in honor of Dr. King. In a broadcast from Atlanta, Ga., Dr. King said that he was deeply moved by the honor.  
  
Dr. King said that "every penny" of the prize money, which amounts to about $54,000, would be given to the civil rights movement.  
  
"I am glad people of other nations are concerned with our problems here," he said. He added that he regarded the prize as a sign that world public opinion was on the side of those struggling for freedom and dignity.  
  
The award to Dr. King will be made in Oslo Dec. 10.

At 6:00 p.m. on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was standing on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee. One minute later he was shot. He was rushed to hospital and the doctors tried emergency surgery. The wound was too serious and Martin Luther King, Jr. was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m. He was 39 years old.  
  
Two months later, on June 10th, James Earl Ray was arrested and charged with murder. In March 1969, Ray pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in the Tennessee state penitentiary.  
  
Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis the day before he was assassinated. His flight was delayed because of a bomb threat. That evening, King delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech to a small crowd that had braved the bad weather to hear him speak.  
  
In the speech, King spoke about civil rights, nonviolent social action, and his own life and death. He discussed the earlier bomb threat, the time he had been stabbed, and concluded the speech with the words above that many feel "foreshadowed" his death the next day.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a United States federal holiday marking the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It is observed on the third Monday of January each year, which is around the time of King's birthday, January 15.  
  
Martin Luther King Jr. was an important spokesman for nonviolent protest in the civil rights movement. The campaign for a national holiday in King's honor began soon after his assassination in 1968.  
  
After years of public pressure, a bill was introduced in 1983 to create a federal holiday. A few Senators opposed the bill and questioned whether King was important enough to receive such an honor. They submitted a 300-page report to the Senate criticizing King's opposition to the Vietnam War and wrote that King had worked with Communists. New York Senator Moynihan declared the document a "packet of filth", threw it on the Senate floor and stomped on it.  
  
President Reagan passed the holiday into law in late 1983, and people began observing it in 1986. At first, some states resisted the holiday. By 2000, it was officially observed in all 50 states.  
  
In 1994, the holiday was changed by Congress into Martin Luther King Day of Service, a national day of community service. In honor of MLK, volunteers across the country are asked to donate their time to make a difference on this day.  
  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" Americans across the country are asked to answer that question by coming together on Martin Luther King Day to serve their neighbors and communities.