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A Home for a Dream: The Freedom Hall Complex

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Thirteen years after the violent death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a new complex bearing his name has risen on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta. Coretta Scott King, the widow of the late human rights leader, is quick to point out that the new Freedom Hall Complex, which houses the various components of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, is a living, working memorial and not merely a cold monument to the memory of the man.

After his death, Mrs. King vowed that she would carry on her husband's dream. For the first few years she struggled to support a small staff working in the basement of her home. As the number of programs increased, the Center rented space from a nearby theological seminary, and ultimately expanded into a renovated Victorian house next door to the home where Dr. King had been born. In 1974, in spite of the great difficulty she knew she would face in raising the money, Mrs. King and other members of the King family met with a New York architectural firm, Bond/Ryder Associates, to discuss the design of a permanent home for the burgeoning King Center programs.

The site itself presented an enormous challenge, for it lay in the heart of the Sweet Auburn Historic District, a deteriorating area which had been a mecca for black businesses in the first half of the twentieth century. "Sweet Auburn" includes the offices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the home where Dr. King was born, his burial place, and Ebenezer Baptist Church where he and his father preached.
Even greater than the geographical consideration was the challenge of capturing architecturally the spirit of the man whose life so profoundly and intimately affected the very structure of American life. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a simple man, one who did not care for material affluence. The challenge to the architect was to design an edifice which would be compatible aesthetically with King's spirit of selfless commitment and which would itself facilitate the nonviolence which was at the core of King's philosophy. The notes of the first building committee meeting reflect the desire to emphasize life and nature by utilizing the building materials which would evoke the basic elements of nature--fire, water, and earth--and the basic forms of design such as the circle.¹

The city of Atlanta has also been involved in developing the Auburn Avenue district, and in 1976 completed construction of a multi-purpose community center named in Dr. King's honor, directly across the street from the entombment. Since that time, the city has also opened an indoor swimming pool adjacent to the center. Under the leadership of Maynard Jackson, mayor of Atlanta, both local and federal government agencies have cooperated with the King Center on a number of neighborhood revitalization projects designed to improve the quality of life in the area and to preserve the integrity of the historic district. The home where Dr. King was born, which is one block from the crypt site, was the first birth home of a black American to be listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. The house next door, which was renovated with community development funds from the city, now serves as offices for several of the Center programs. Its exterior has been preserved as a fine example of a Victorian residence.

A major accomplishment of the preservation/revitalization effort was realized a year ago, when
Congress passed legislation to create a National Park Service unit around the intersection of Auburn Avenue and Boulevard. Encompassing twenty-three and one-half acres, the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site and Preservation District includes the birthplace, boyhood home, church, and gravesite of the civil rights leader, as well as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

In the midst of the preservation/revitalization efforts, Mrs. King convinced Henry Ford II, chairman of the board of the Ford Motor Company, to lead a corporate campaign to raise the estimated eight and one-half million dollars needed to complete the construction of the Freedom Hall Complex: the international conference center and the archives and administration building. Groundbreaking occurred on October 18, 1979, and with pledges still to be secured, construction began shortly thereafter. Just two years later, on October 19, 1981, the final two buildings completed their first full day of operation.

At the very heart of the King Center's strength is the King Library and Archives. In his last book, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?, the human rights leader urged "that the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict, by no means excluding the relations between the nations." His words were also echoed by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which was appointed in the wake of the turmoil occurring after King's assassination. The commission recognized the importance of research as essential to its ability to accomplish the task of analyzing the many facets of violence in America. The commission was later to find that few significant works on violence in America—or comparative works on violence in other countries—existed. In the case of nonviolence, the case is
even more acute.

Therefore one of the very earliest Center programs, begun in 1968, was the Library Documentation Program (LOP), the forerunner of the King Library and Archives. Under an initial grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the LOP staff scoured the country gathering the records created by the major civil rights organizations during the 1950s and 1960s. The decrease in some of the groups after 1970 made it imperative to collect as many of these materials as soon as possible before they became lost or destroyed. Their own success in implementing nonviolent techniques, internal problems, the changing mood of the country, and a host of other factors had resulted in the total collapse of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), for example. Yet, thanks to the Library Documentation Project, the records of these and other organizations survived and are now available for scholarly study.

In addition to the manuscript collecting program, the LDP began an oral history program and interviewed many of Dr. King's closest associates. As a result, the King Library and Archives has a unique oral history collection on the civil rights movement, including, for example, a series of interviews with four of the organizers of the first successful bus boycott, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1953. This boycott, which preceded the more widely-known Montgomery bus boycott, has received very little publicity in academic literature. However, the nonviolent campaign in Baton Rouge laid the foundation for the Montgomery effort led by Dr. King a short time later. Without the preservation and study of resource materials such as these oral histories, which illuminate the strategies and philosophies which were employed by the civil rights organizations, it would be impossible to put the resulting events into their proper historical
The two manuscript collections in the archives which are most closely associated with Dr. King are the records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Dr. King's own papers, 1956-1968. After the success of the bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955 and 1956, King recognized the need for a concerted, region-wide effort to end discrimination and segregation. Relying heavily upon his own knowledge of and experience in the black Southern Baptist church, he directed his recruiting efforts primarily toward black ministers, knowing that they were frequently community as well as spiritual leaders. In 1957, King called a meeting in Atlanta of the officers of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and sixty other ministers and laypersons from across the South. By the end of that year, the organization had adopted the SCLC name and had elected King as its president, a position which he held until his death in 1968.

The King and SCLC collections reflect his own and the organization's prominent role in the civil rights movement. As an organization dedicated to the abolition of social and economic injustice, the SCLC attacked the evils of racial discrimination in two diverse but effective ways: voter registration and political education, and direct action. Due to the crisis-oriented nature of the 1960s, when many decisions were handled by telephone, the SCLC collection documents the voter registration and political education efforts more thoroughly than it does the direct action campaigns of Birmingham, Selma, and Chicago. However, the King papers do shed some light on these areas and include, for example, an analysis of the Selma campaign written by King while incarcerated in Alabama.

The King papers include more than fourteen thousand pieces of substantive correspondence and
over five hundred of his speeches, sermons, statements, and articles. The correspondence includes letters among all the major civil rights organizations, as well as with government leaders and anti-Vietnam War groups. King's manuscripts chronicle his own personal development from the boycott in 1955, when he was only twenty-six years old, through the violence-torn campaigns of the early 1960s, and finally into the mid- and late-1960s when he became an outspoken critic of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was always slightly ahead of his own time, and his decision to speak out against the war in Vietnam preyed heavily on his mind. Even longtime supporters and civil rights leaders divided on this issue. The King papers provide a rare glimpse into the mind of a deeply moral man wrestling with his God and his own conscience in reaching a decision based upon his deep commitment to nonviolence, which he knew would be unpopular among even some of his closest associates and would result in a severe cut in financial support of the SCLC.

The papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) are also the product of fertile minds and deeply committed individuals. The SNCC had a turbulent ten-year history. It was founded in 1960 by a group of student leaders as a result of the student sit-in movement which had successfully desegregated lunch counters and restaurants in North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia. The SCLC assisted the students financially on several occasions, but from the very beginning the students of the SNCC stressed their independence of the other civil rights organizations, concentrating their efforts on voter registration in rural, poverty-stricken areas of the South.

The SNCC collection deals primarily with the
years between 1961 and 1965, but other personal collections in the archives from some of the members of the SNCC illuminate the later 1960s, when the organization became increasingly militant and was most closely associated with the black power movement. The black panther which later became the symbol for the Black Panther Party was in fact first used by the SNCC as a symbol for the alternative election process it created in Mississippi in 1964.

The year 1964, which is heavily documented in the SNCC collection, saw the rise of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) which led to a challenge to the seating of the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic national convention, the murder of three young civil rights workers as only one of a series of violent incidents during the summer, and the beginnings of the black power movement which ultimately resulted in deep schisms among various civil rights organizations. The role of whites in the movement and the exclusive use of nonviolence had always evoked argument within the organization. In the minutes of staff meetings, field reports, and in correspondence, SNCC and MFDP staffers discuss these issues, which are central even today when America is torn asunder with violence and racism.

The papers of several less visible, but nevertheless effective organizations active in the civil rights movement document still other crucial components of the struggle: education, particularly preschool training, and relief in the form of food, clothing, and shelter for those in depressed areas of Mississippi. The Episcopal Society for Culture and Racial Unity (ESCRU) was an Atlanta-based organization founded in 1958 to facilitate racial integration in the Episcopal church. Later the organization extended its efforts to South Africa, where it campaigned for the withdrawal of Episcopal church funds from investments in that segregated country. Delta Ministry, another religious-based group, combined
relief to the disadvantaged in the Mississippi delta region with voter registration. The organization, which also created a housing program for displaced families, is one of the few organizations of its kind still active in Mississippi today. A third project, the Child Development Group of Mississippi, focused its efforts on education, creating the first head-start program in the state.

Other collections in the King Library and Archives processed with the assistance of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities include the records of the National Lawyers Guild, for years a target of the House Un-American Activities Committee; the records of the Congress of Racial Equality, a New York-based organization which sponsored the Freedom Rides in 1960 and 1961; and the papers of the Chicago Council of Community Organizations, which brought the SCLC into the urban ghetto for the first time. Numerous smaller collections which are also available for research include the papers of Fred Gray and Howard Moore, both civil rights attorneys; tape recordings of King's speeches and sermons as well as those made by James Forman, executive secretary of the SNCC; dissertations on King and the movement; and various little-circulated civil rights newspapers and newsletters.

The opening of the King Library and Archives was a significant milestone in the development of the King Center, but other tasks remain. It is the goal of the Center to become the finest research facility on the study of nonviolence in the world, and the staff of the archives has just begun a major acquisitions program to expand its holdings to include materials relating not only to the civil rights movement, but also to world-wide efforts in the struggle for human rights through nonviolent means.

The first major acquisition has been the papers of former Ambassador Andrew Young. An ordained
minister, Young began his career as youth director of the National Council of Churches (NCC). In 1961, the NCC sponsored a program for the SCLC to train rural black adults in the basic skills required to pass voter registration exams. Young was assigned to SCLC to head that program and ultimately became a staff member of SCLC, rising to the position of executive director. A strong advocate of the non-violent philosophy, Young was the first black elected to Congress from the deep South since Reconstruction. In January 1977, by appointment from President Jimmy Carter, he became the first black to serve as United States Ambassador to the United Nations. Young is particularly known for his efforts on behalf of Third World countries and the struggles for independence there. His papers, which are closed until processing is completed, range from his early years with SCLC, through his congressional tenure, and into his service at the United Nations.

It is difficult to capture the attention of a society in which the daily news reports are filled with violence, and there must be multi-faceted effort to publicize the tangible results of the nonviolent movement. Throughout the world today, there are groups and individuals using the techniques of non-violence successfully to bring about constructive social change. For a wide variety of reasons, these groups receive only limited publicity, and all too often they themselves are singularly uninformed about other, similar efforts. It is the goal of the King Library and Archives to bring together information about groups which are successfully employing non-violent techniques throughout the world and to create a network for the sharing of information about constructive, nonviolent social change. In cooperation with other components of the King Center, the knowledge stored in the Library and Archives will be spread throughout the network itself and also to the world at large through publications, seminars, and training programs. The message is a simple one—nonviolence works!
NOTES

1Bond/Ryder Associates, Minutes of Design Committee Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, May 4, 1970, p. 2.
