

## BACKGROUND

# Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day

***“Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.”***

- Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963

A New Hampshire state holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. was first proposed in 1979 by Senator Jim Splaine. At that time, it was observed in only 17 states. Splaine’s bill was defeated. Similar bills were defeated in 1981 in the House and Senate.

In 1983, the U.S. Congress approved legislation making Martin Luther King Jr. Day a federal holiday, to be observed on the third Monday in January, starting in 1986. The bill was signed into law by President Reagan.

A 1985 bill to create Martin Luther King Day was withdrawn by its sponsor after he received threats. Martin Luther King Day bills were proposed and defeated in 1987 and 1989. The 1987 and 1989 bills also would have eliminated Fast Day, an April holiday commemorating an event from the colonial era.

In 1991, the Senate passed a bill to eliminate Fast Day and create a holiday known as Martin Luther King Human Rights Day, to be observed on the third Monday in January. The House considered a bill to create a holiday known as Civil Rights Day, to be observed in April in place of Fast Day. After an amendment changing the day of observance from April to the third Monday in January and deletion of references to the Civil War as the nation’s greatest struggle for freedom, the Civil Rights Day bill was passed by the House. (A third bill, proposed by Gov. Judd Gregg, which would have created Martin Luther King Day on the Sunday before the third Monday in January, was defeated.) After several rounds of maneuvers between House and Senate, the House version was accepted and signed into law by Gov. Gregg.

In 1993, Gov. Steve Merrill, as one of his first acts after taking office, issued a proclamation declaring January 18, 1993 to be Martin Luther King Civil Rights Day, and indicated he would sign legislation to change the holiday’s name. The Senate passed such a bill to change the holiday’s name permanently to Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. But the House again refused to accept a holiday that gave explicit honor to Martin Luther

King, Jr., and defeated the Senate bill by a vote of 199 to 163.

**By 1993, New Hampshire was the only state without a holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Several other states have holidays with hybrid names, such as Martin Luther King / Human Rights Day (Utah), Martin Luther King, Jr. Wyoming Equality Day (Wyoming), Martin Luther King, Robert E Lee, Stonewall Jackson Day (Virginia), and Martin Luther King, Jr. -Civil Rights Day (Arizona). In Louisiana, the holiday is declared annually by Executive Order, in accord with legislation that specifically names Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as an approved state holiday.**

In 1994, Gov. Merrill again issued a proclamation declaring Jan. 17 to be Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. The proclamation invoked the memory of US Senator John P. Hale, who argued for abolition of slavery in 1860 and said, “In my own State, so far as I know, there is no distinction with regard to personal or political rights growing out of a man’s complexion, and there never was.” Merrill said Hales’ words “best summed up” his feelings on the issue. He said he would sign a bill to change the name of the holiday, but also said “I simply feel that a Civil Rights Day does in fact meet the legitimate needs of New Hampshire and the concern of those on both sides of the issue.” Gov. Merrill issued nearly identical proclamations declaring the third Monday in January as Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day in 1995, and 1996.

On Feb. 16, 1994, by voice vote, the Senate adopted SB 595, changing Civil Rights Day to Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. But on March 10, the House, by 183 to 164, refused to consider the bill.

In the 1995 legislative session, HB 256, to add Dr. King’s name to Civil Rights Day, was opposed 13 to 7 by the Executive Departments and Administration Committee, and defeated by the House March 15, 1995 by a 214 to 144 roll call vote.

No legislation was proposed in 1996. A white supremacist group, based in Mississippi, held a State House rally endorsing New Hampshire’s stance against MLK Day, while celebrations of the holiday took place throughout the state.

The King Day issue was raised often during the 1996 gubernatorial campaign. Jeanne Shaheen, who supported the King proposal during her years in the State Senate, was victorious, and took office

in January, 1997. Like Merrill, Shaheen issued a proclamation in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. The proclamation referred to Dr. King as “the pre-eminent leader of the civil rights movement,” and linked his beliefs and steadfastness to New Hampshire’s “Live Free or Die” spirit.

Identical bills, SB 157 and HB 660, were introduced with bi-partisan support in the 1997 legislative session to establish Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day. The Senate adopted SB 157 by voice vote on February 13, a week after a hearing in which 39 supporters testified, in comparison to only 1 opponent. The House hearing on the two bills, March 10, drew supportive testimony from 28 speakers, and opposition from only 3. Over the next few days, some legislators began to explore the possibility of adding to the holiday, with King, the name of Jonathan Daniels, a white seminarian and civil rights worker from Keene who was murdered in Alabama in 1965.

Despite the support for a King Civil Rights Day, the Executive Departments and Administration Committee approved an alternative, which would maintain the Civil Rights Day name, and specify that the holiday be observed “to honor Martin Luther King, Jr., Jonathan M. Daniels, and all individuals who have worked for civil rights in the nation.”

In a complex series of parliamentary maneuvers on March 18, 1997, the House took three votes. First, the Committee’s position was defeated, 188 to 165. Then, a new version, which would name the day “Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day,” but specify that it would honor Daniels “and all other individuals...,” was defeated 191 to 162. With both alternatives out of the way, the House took up the original proposal, which failed by a single vote, 178 to 177.

Under the rules of the House of Representatives, a bill defeated in the first year of a two-year session cannot be re-introduced in the second year. King Day legislation was not introduced in 1998.

The 1998 elections returned Gov. Shaheen to office. In her inaugural speech, she said, “We must not end this century without Marking Martin Luther King Day part of the heritage we leave to our children.” Observers believed turnover in the House and Senate meant both bodies would be more sympathetic to the King holiday than their predecessors.

As in 1997, identical bills adding King’s name to Civil Rights Day were proposed in the House and Senate. Also as in previous years, testimony given

in separate House and Senate hearings was overwhelmingly favorable. SB 80, the Senate version, passed by a 19 to 5 margin April 8.

The House vote, on a first time ever “ought to pass” recommendation from the Exec. Departments Committee, came May 25. After an hour-and-a-half debate, the House passed HB 68 by a 212 to 148. Supporters on the House floor and in the gallery broke into sustained applause, followed by an impromptu rally on the State House steps. House members later approved the Senate version of the King Day bill, and Senate members approved the House version, so that both bodies and all the co-sponsors would share in the victory.

Gov. Shaheen signed the bill into law at a festive ceremony June 7. Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Day in New Hampshire was first observed January 17, 2000.

Support for a state holiday named for Martin Luther King, Jr. united diverse New Hampshireites. For example, the King holiday drew support from both the AFL-CIO and the Business and Industry Association; from the Christian Coalition and the Citizens Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Rights; from former Senators Gordon Humphrey and Susan McLane. Support was expressed through marches and rallies at the State House, several of which were organized by high school students, as well as in petition drives, religious services, letters to local newspapers, food drives, and contacts with elected officials. Because there is something about Martin Luther King, Jr. that speaks to hopes for overcoming racism, for justice, for peace, and for a society that respects the dignity of all people, there was never any doubt that the movement for a state holiday named for Dr. King would continue until it succeeded.

***“I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.***

***“How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.***

***“How long? Not long, because you will reap what you sow.***

***How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”***

Martin Luther King, Jr., March 25, 1965

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