Selma to Montgomery March

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.12.17
Word Count **718**

American civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King Jr. (front, fifth from right) and his wife, Coretta Scott King, lead a black voting rights march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery on March 30, 1965. Photo: William Lovelace/Express/Getty Images

In 1965, Martin Luther King led a group of protesters from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery. They were fighting for the rights of black people to vote in the South. Southern states had laws that kept black people from voting. The protesters were attacked by police for the first two times they tried to march. Then, in late March, they finally achieved their goal. Protected by U.S. soldiers, they walked for three days. The historic march helped the country understand how difficult it was for blacks to vote in the South. The federal Voting Rights Act was passed later that year.

States tried to stop blacks from voting

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 said a person could not be kept from voting because of his or her race. However, southern states often tried to stop blacks from voting, anyway. These states were segregated. Blacks and whites went to different schools, ate at different restaurants and even drank from separate drinking fountains.

In early 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. and his civil rights group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), decided to register blacks to vote in Selma. A citizen must register, or sign up, to vote. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, did not want segregation to end. Officials in Alabama blocked black voters from registering to vote. In Selma, only about 300 out of 15,000 eligible African-Americans had been allowed to register.

His fame brought attention to Selma

King had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He was very famous across the country. His fame brought attention to Selma. On February 18, 1965, white people who supported segregation attacked a group of peaceful protesters near Selma. Police shot a young African-American man. His name was Jimmie Lee Jackson.

In response to Jackson's death, King and the SCLC planned a protest march from Selma to Montgomery. The march would be 54 miles long. A group of 600 people set out on March 7. They didn't get far before Alabama state troopers attacked the group with whips and clubs. The brutal scene was captured on television. Many Americans were extremely angry at the violence they saw. They knew it was not fair or right for African-Americans to be treated this way. Civil rights supporters went to Selma to join the marchers. So did many religious leaders.

Protected by soldiers

King himself led another march on March 9. Police again blocked the road, and King turned the marchers back. Wallace and state officials tried to stop the march from beginning again, but a judge ordered them to leave the marchers alone. President Lyndon Johnson also backed the marchers. He went on television to pledge his support to them. On March 21, about 2,000 people set out from Selma. They were protected by U.S. soldiers. They walked about 12 hours a day and slept in fields along the way. On March 25, they reached Montgomery, the state capital.

Nearly 50,000 people met the marchers in Montgomery. They gathered in front of the state capitol building. King and other speakers spoke to the crowd, which included both black and white people. "No tide of racism can stop us," King said from the building's steps. Around the world, people watched the historic moment on television.

New voting laws were necessary

On March 17, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson spoke to Congress. He told lawmakers that new voting laws were necessary to protect African-Americans' right to vote. That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. The law guaranteed the right to vote to all African-Americans. This right was given by the 15th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Specifically, the act said that people cannot be forced to take literacy tests in order to vote.

It said that the federal government would oversee voter registration in areas that had required these reading tests in the past. It also made the U.S. attorney general, the government's top lawyer, responsible for challenging poll taxes for state and local elections. Throughout the South, black people had been forced to pay a special tax in order to vote.

The Voting Rights Act was one of the most important civil rights laws in American history. It made the number of blacks and whites who voted more equal. It also cleared the way for many more African-Americans to become elected officials.