

# THE REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. IN DECATUR



AP Photo

**Illegally sentenced in a DeKalb County court to four months of hard labor on a false traffic charge, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put systemic injustice on trial in the court of public opinion.**

## Putting systemic injustice on trial:

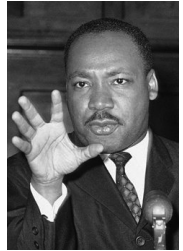
# How Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s DeKalb Traffic Stop Changed History

**The corner of McDonough Street and West Trinity Place in Decatur is the former site of DeKalb County's Civil and Criminal Court and Jail,** where in

October 1960 the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was sentenced, jailed and driven off in chains to serve a sentence of four months of hard labor for violating probation in a misdemeanor traffic case. Segregationists were hoping to send a message that would stifle the civil rights movement. Instead, the illegal sentence prompted Senator John F. Kennedy to intercede with Southern politicians on King's behalf with only days to go before the presidential election, accelerating the civil rights movement and revealing the power of Black voters to bring change.

Months after Georgia's segregationist Gov. Ernest Vandiver vowed to keep Martin Luther King Jr. "under surveillance at all times," a DeKalb County officer pulled King over on Clifton Road. It was May 4, 1960, and King was driving a white woman, writer Lillian Smith, to Emory Hospital, where

she was receiving cancer treatments. She had come for dinner at the home of Martin and Coretta Scott King, who had moved to Atlanta from Montgomery, Alabama, that February. King was driving a vehicle, borrowed from an Ebenezer Baptist Church parishioner, whose tag had expired. Smith insisted they were pulled over because she,



AP Photo

*The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

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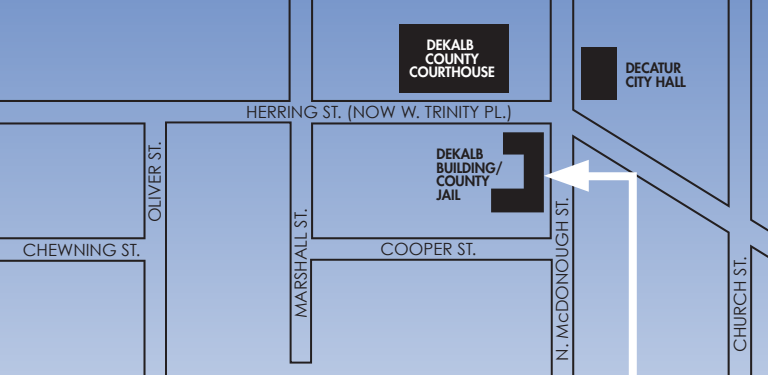


*Lillian Smith*

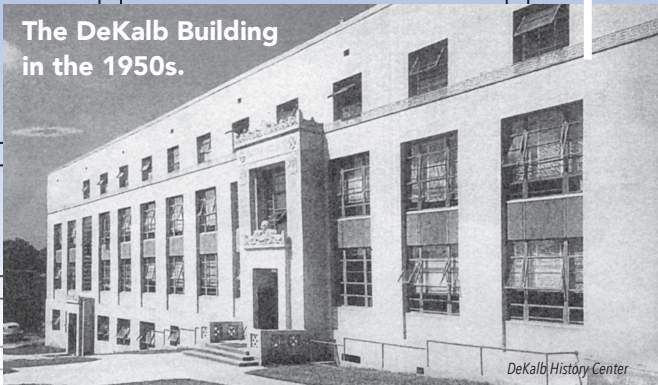
## Timeline

Feb. 1, 1960

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. moves to Atlanta from Montgomery, Alabama.



**The DeKalb Building  
in the 1950s.**



as a white woman, was sharing a car with a Black man.

King quietly answered his traffic summons on Sept. 23, 1960, appearing before Judge J. Oscar Mitchell in Decatur. The expired tag charge was dropped after King showed that a renewal application had already been submitted. But Mitchell convicted King of the misdemeanor offense of “driving without a license,” based on King’s continued use of his Alabama driver’s license more than 90 days after moving to Georgia, and gave him a suspended sentence of 12 months “on the public works camp,” otherwise known as a chain gang. King paid a \$25 fine to resolve the misdemeanor conviction and his lawyer agreed in court to Mitchell’s probation terms, which were to avoid violating the law in any respect.

## Atlanta’s Students Begin to Move

The civil rights movement was heating up in 1960, threatening efforts by Mayor William B. Hartsfield to promote Atlanta as a business-friendly standout in the Jim Crow South. But the demands of Black people to be treated equally went large-

**March 9, 1960**

“An Appeal for Human Rights” calls for the abolition of laws denying Black people equal access to education, jobs, housing, voting, hospitals, theaters and restaurants as well as fair treatment by police.



**Presidential candidates Kennedy and Nixon at their September 1960 debate**

ly unacknowledged by the presidential candidates, Republican Richard M. Nixon and Democrat John F. Kennedy, whose campaign advisors figured they couldn't win the South by challenging segregation.

This dynamic changed after Black college students at the six Atlanta University Center schools, inspired by the sit-ins in Greensboro, N.C., formed the Atlanta Student Movement and defied the go-slow advice of their elders by organizing boycotts and sit-ins. Roslyn Pope, then a senior at Spelman College, led the writing of "An Appeal for Human Rights," which made the case for ending racial inequality in all areas of public life. The students' manifesto appeared as an advertisement in Atlanta newspapers on March 9, 1960, was read into the Congressional Record, and was republished in its entirety in *The New York Times*. Vandiver, who had won election promising to keep the races separate, denounced the appeal as a communist effort to sow hatred and discord, which couldn't possibly have been written by students. The students launched boycotts and sit-ins involving waves of arrests, hoping to pressure store owners to desegregate. But as spring stretched into summer, their movement was losing steam.

King, at that point, had yet to spend a night in jail. Many white Americans knew him only as the leader of the successful Montgomery bus boycott. Segregationists were holding firm; despite the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declaring "separate but equal" doctrines to be unconstitutional, public schools and many facilities remained

## March 15, 1960

The Atlanta Student Movement launches its sit-in campaign as more than two hundred college students ask to be served in segregated restaurants in Atlanta.

*. . . the demands of Black people to be treated equally went largely unacknowledged by the presidential candidates, Republican Richard M. Nixon and Democrat John F. Kennedy, whose advisors figured they couldn't win the South by challenging segregation.*

racially divided across the South. Meanwhile, the NAACP discouraged the civil disobedience tactics of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Even Martin Luther King Sr., nationally influential as senior pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, urged his son to stay out of the sit-ins.

## **A 'Betrayal' Sends King to 'Klan Country'**

The fears of these older African Americans were well-founded, shaped by the experience of living under systems of oppression designed after the Civil War to keep supplying cheap or no-cost labor across the South and to terrorize Black people into accepting the idea of white superiority. An omnipresent fear was being sent to "public works camps," the successor to the post-Reconstruction convict leasing system in which legal authorities sold the rights to the labor of people convicted on trivial charges.

AP Photo



**MLK and student protesters following their arrest at the Rich's lunch counter in downtown Atlanta.**

**May 4, 1960**

DeKalb police stop King on Clifton Road while driving writer Lillian Smith to Emory Hospital for cancer treatments. He's cited for an expired tag and having no Georgia driver's license (his Alabama license was valid until 1962).

**MLK is led in handcuffs, after his release from Atlanta, about to be transported to DeKalb County to face charges that he violated his parole.**



AP Photo

But the students' leader, Lonnie King, reminded Martin Luther King of his father's sermon, that "you can't lead from the back," and persuaded him to join their effort to desegregate Atlanta's public facilities. On Oct. 19, 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. asked to be served in the whites-only dining room of Rich's department store, and was among dozens arrested that day for trespassing in segregated stores across Atlanta. He was handcuffed after politely pointing out that he had spent some \$2,000 at the store that year, yet was denied a meal solely because of the color of his skin.

The students were taken to the Fulton County Jail, and with King among them, their treatment became national news. Hartsfield began negotiating, describing Atlanta as "a city too busy . . . to hate," which would become the city's enduring motto. Eager to end the Black community's boycott of the segregated stores and keep the sit-ins from escalating, Hartsfield brokered a deal: The department store owners would drop the charges and promise to eventually desegregate lunch counters in exchange for a temporary moratorium on the sit-ins. But cries of betrayal rang out when the activists realized that King remained in jail after everyone else was released. Unknown to others in the movement, King's arrest had violated the probation terms set by Judge Mitchell. DeKalb Solicitor Jack Smith ordered King to appear in Mitchell's courtroom, terrifying civil rights leaders who were convinced

**Sept. 23, 1960**

King pays a \$25 fine for driving without a "correct" license, and promises DeKalb Judge J. Oscar Mitchell he "shall not violate any federal or state penal statutes," or face up to a year in prison for the misdemeanor.

the law wouldn't protect him. Coretta Scott King feared for his life, saying DeKalb was "Klan Country."

## 'This is the cross we must bear.'

On Oct. 25, 1960, presiding over a crowded DeKalb County courtroom, Mitchell dismissed King's testimony, the arguments of King's lawyer Donald Hollowell and statements by Atlanta's college presidents about King's good character. He pounded his gavel and declared King in violation of his probation, sentencing him to four months' hard labor. Hollowell immediately asked for King's release on bond pending appeal, but Mitchell denied that, too, and sent King upstairs to the county jail.



Judge Oscar Mitchell

Before dawn the next day, King was transferred to Reidsville State Prison, where he wrote a letter to his wife, saying "This is the cross we must bear for the freedom of our people." Worried King would be killed, his supporters appealed to Nixon and Kennedy to take public stands only days before the presidential election. The Republicans remained silent. Despite his reluctance to lose support among white Southern Democrats, John Kennedy called Coretta Scott King to express his concern, and his soon-to-be attorney general Robert Kennedy called Mitchell asking for King's release pending his appeal. With the Kennedys now publicly taking responsibility

“ I watched in horror as Martin was immediately taken from the courtroom, his hands in metal cuffs behind his back ... Martin later told me that the terrors of southern justice, wherein scores of Black men were plucked from their cells and never seen again, ran through his mind.”

— Coretta Scott King

Oct. 19, 1960

King joins the Atlanta Student Movement's sit-ins and is charged with trespassing after asking to be served lunch at Rich's Department Store.



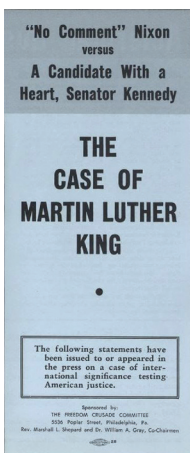
**The DeKalb County courtroom where King was sentenced to four months on the chain gang.**

for the political consequences, Mitchell reversed himself on Oct. 26, setting bond at \$2,000.

On Oct. 27, King was released from prison. He thanked the Kennedys for their intervention, and then returned on a charter flight to a jubilant crowd at Peachtree DeKalb airport.

## The Blue Bomb

King's father, who had endorsed Nixon only days earlier, led the celebration at Ebenezer Baptist Church that night, urging Black voters to switch their allegiances. Martin Luther King Sr.'s endorsement was reprinted in the "blue bomb," a pamphlet mass-produced by Kennedy aides and Black church workers. More than a million copies praising the Kennedys' intervention appeared in Black churches around the nation on the Sunday before the election. Republican Black voters in key states turned out for the Democrat



*Below: DeKalb County's 1960 Jail Docket notes King's arrest for violation of parole.*

527	Williams, Rev. Sam. W.	48	m	B
528	King, Martin L. Jr.	31	m	B
529	Zancy, J. D.	48	m	W
		43	m	W

**Oct. 25, 1960**

Charges against the protesters are dropped in a deal to eventually end segregation in Atlanta, but DeKalb Solicitor Jack Smith summons King to Decatur. Mitchell sentences him to four months on the "public works" – a chain gang.





instead in huge numbers, providing the margin that enabled Kennedy to narrowly win the presidency and forever reshaping American politics.

A Georgia appeals court would rule in 1961 that Mitchell's sentence was illegal. By then, this pivotal episode had already marked a turning point. Locally, it inspired transformative changes in DeKalb County and Decatur. Nationally, it elevated King's stature, energized the civil rights movement and by showing the power of Black voters to decide elections, revealed how the political system can work for all Americans.

Georgia - 1960 - 100 00  
 Interfering with duties  
 Viol. of Prob.  
 Bench War. 100 00  
 Ind. Exp. 200 00

OCT 25 1960  
 OCT 25 1960  
 OCT 25 1960  
 OCT 25 1960

King supporters and aides to John F. Kennedy persuade the Democratic presidential candidate to call Coretta Scott King expressing sympathy and support. She leaks word of the call, giving Georgia's segregationist Democrats political cover to intervene.

# The Commemorating King Campaign

## Decatur High School Students Advocate for Georgia Historical Marker

The Georgia Historical Society marker at the site where King was sentenced resulted from the efforts of a group of Decatur High School students who conducted research to better understand this episode's context and legacy and then worked to share the story across our community.

**see full marker text on back cover**

## More to Learn

*The Georgia Historical Society, in approving the marker at the corner of West Trinity Place and North McDonough Street, raised some important questions about the context, impact and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s treatment in Decatur in 1960. Here is a brief attempt to address them:*

### **How was King's experience in Decatur an example of systemic racism in civic institutions?**

King's harsh punishment for such a trivial offense exposed systemic American racial injustice. His stature and sacrifice brought national attention to the acts of civil disobedience already being committed by hundreds of students in dozens of Southern cities in 1960, and compelled John F. Kennedy to engage on civil rights.

Georgia's segregationist leaders were hoping to smother this movement by showing Black people that the criminal justice system would humiliate even their most prominent representatives. Movement leaders, meanwhile, were determined to put the entire system on trial in the court of public opinion, making King a martyr to mobilize mass resistance and hopefully force the federal government to end legalized

**Oct. 26, 1960**

At 4 a.m., before King's attorney Donald Hollowell can file an appeal, King is taken from the DeKalb County Jail and driven to Reidsville State Prison.

racial discrimination once and for all.

When Georgia Gov. Ernest Vandiver's top aide, Peter Zack Geer, declared at King's sentencing that the chain gang "might make a law-abiding citizen out of him and teach him to respect the law of Georgia," he was referring to a system of legal oppression maintained to ensure white supremacy and effectively re-enslave African Americans across the South after the Civil War, so that white people could justify benefiting from the labor of Black people at little or no cost. After the 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude "except as a punishment for crime," states used the law to convict Black people of trivial offenses and provide a steady supply of forced labor.

How trivial? Vagrancy laws in 48 states were enforced nearly exclusively against people of color. Some literally made it a crime to walk while Black, criminalizing "strolling about from place to place without any lawful purpose." If a Negro worker or tenant farmer deviated from a labor contract, it was considered fraud, punishable by debt slavery, prison or the convict work gang.

"The system could not function without the overt collaboration and covert sanction of government at all levels — local, state and national," wrote Stetson Kennedy, who documented abuses in forced-labor camps around the South.

Covert sanctions of government, meanwhile, extended to lynchings and other extra-judicial acts of terror as systemic racial oppression expanded beyond the economic sphere, becoming omnipresent and seemingly unstoppable, governing every interaction between Blacks and whites in America, even if its most egregious abuses were most evident in the South.

As Isabel Wilkerson writes in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, "The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined."

More than just legalized racial discrimination, Wilkerson calls it a "caste system, based upon what people looked like, an internalized ranking, unspoken, unnamed, unacknowledged by everyday citizens even as they go about their lives

Robert F. Kennedy calls Mitchell, urging the judge to follow the law and free King pending his appeal. Attorney Donald Hollowell appears again before Mitchell, who reverses himself and sets King's bond at \$2,000.

adhering to it and acting upon it subconsciously to this day. . . . Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity.”

Atlanta’s college students — the pride of the Black middle class — sought to make the system visible by publishing “An Appeal for Human Rights” and then getting arrested in segregated spaces. But they struggled to sustain attention and support for their cause. It was King’s punishment in Decatur that fully exposed the systemic racism and proved that it could be defeated.

### **How did King’s notoriety bring attention to the ongoing, systemic efforts by local officials to suppress the movement?**

The Atlanta Student Movement’s campaign of boycotts and sit-ins had been weakening after months of effort and hundreds of arrests. King put them back in the national news, despite Atlanta’s effort to show a gentle hand. While Atlanta Police Capt. R.E. Little escorted King, movement co-founder Lonnie King and Spelman students Blondean Orbert and Marilyn Pryce to jail without handcuffs through Rich’s front doors, most of the other 47 student protesters arrested at Rich’s that morning were handcuffed and stuffed into paddy wagons out back, beyond the view of the press.

“Public relations is a very necessary part of any protest of civil disobedience,” King wrote later. “The main objective is to bring moral pressure to bear upon an unjust system or a particularly unjust law . . . in the absence of justice in the established courts of the region, nonviolent protesters are asking for a hearing in the court of world opinion.”

King’s sentence was condemned around the world. The local *DeKalb News* reported that “King immediately became a martyr for his people and his cause,” and that Hartsfield insisted that reporters note that Atlanta had nothing to do with King’s mistreatment. “One thing is for sure. Regardless of the legal aspects, it didn’t do ‘Decatur, Georgia,’ and DeKalb County any good,” the story concluded.

Atlanta tried hard to minimize King’s arrest, and with the presidential election looming, the media would have moved on if not for King’s mistreatment in Decatur, where some

**Oct. 27, 1960**

King leaves prison and rejoins family and friends at DeKalb Peachtree Airport on Clairmont Avenue. His father urges a jubilant crowd at Ebenezer Baptist Church to switch from Republican to Democrat and vote for Kennedy.



*King speaks with the press as he leaves Reidsville State Prison on Oct. 27, 1960. His attorney, Donald Hollowell, stands behind him.*

evidence suggests King knowingly risked his life in a high-stakes gamble, putting himself at the mercy of the hard-core segregationists running DeKalb County's criminal justice system so that he could expose the mercilessness of Southern justice toward all Black people.

This tactical maneuvering by King and the student leaders has been largely overlooked by historians. This may be in part because King told Mitchell at his Oct. 25 sentencing that he had been unaware of the probation terms his lawyer had agreed to in the traffic case only weeks earlier. King's testimony supported his image as an unwitting victim in contemporaneous news accounts. But other evidence indicates King knew he could be sentenced harshly if he joined the sit-ins, and decided to risk his freedom anyway.

King couldn't deny his signature on the plea document accepting the probation terms, which Mitchell forced him to acknowledge in court. And Lonnie King, who had lobbied for him to get arrested in the relative security of Fulton County, recalled years later that King had nearly backed out, citing his risk of violating parole. The court record and Lonnie King's first-person recollection suggest King chose to commit civil disobedience in Atlanta despite his risk in Decatur, and kept this risk secret, perhaps to maximize the shock thereafter.

"It was a deliberate stratagem to have him be arrested, which

**Nov. 6, 1960**

The "blue bomb" pamphlet praising Kennedy and noting Richard Nixon's refusal to intervene circulates in major African American churches, escaping media attention.



*King and other leaders of the March on Washington meet Kennedy at the White House on Aug. 28, 1963. (AP Photo)*

would violate his probation and bring national attention,” said Charles Black, co-founder of the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights. “The probation required that he keep his nose clean. . . . It wasn’t incidental or accidental at all.”

Coretta Scott King, for her part, wasn’t just the distraught pregnant wife of a martyr — she played a key role by revealing that John F. Kennedy had called her. This sign of federal support gave leverage to the movement and provided political cover for Georgia’s segregationist leaders. Gov. Ernest Vandiver then worked through middlemen to pressure Mitchell to reverse his ruling, leaning on his connections to set up Robert F. Kennedy’s phone call to the judge. As condemnation grew nationwide over King’s harsh sentence, the “Dixiecrats” took action to free him knowing that in Georgia at least, they could blame the Massachusetts Democrats for any fallout.

### **How did King’s treatment in Decatur affect state politics and the civil rights movement?**

It proved to be a turning point, showing white leaders that denying Black people the most basic equal treatment under law was no longer defensible in national politics. Real, lasting change would take much longer, but King’s victory showed segregationists they were on the losing side and would have to adapt.

**Nov. 8, 1960**

John F. Kennedy is elected president, his narrow victory margin secured in part by surging Black turnout in key states.

King's mistreatment showed potential white allies that if the legal system could treat the esteemed Martin Luther King Jr. this way, no Black person could be spared from dire punishment for the most trivial offense. And rather than humiliate King, it made him a kingmaker: The Pittsburgh Courier quoted an observer saying "These white folks have now made Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the biggest Negro in the United States."

The episode showed potential activists, meanwhile, that if King's arrest could put a president in the White House, then other direct actions also might produce tangible results.

Those results took years. The day after Kennedy was elected president, a manager at a segregated Nashville restaurant responded to John Lewis's sit-in by switching on a fumigation machine and locking him inside, literally treating him like an insect.

Kennedy didn't even mention segregation, civil rights or race in his inaugural address, and took no immediate action on King's repeated appeals for progress. The two men didn't meet formally until October 1961, when Kennedy rebuffed King's idea that the president could make a Second Emancipation Proclamation declaring all segregation in violation of the 14th Amendment. But the Atlanta students' campaign eventually converted enemies into allies. When Kennedy needed support for what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he turned to Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen. As Chamber of Commerce president in 1960, Allen negotiated with the students, complaining after King's arrest that "the national publicity was running us crazy" and harming Atlanta's reputation. Answering the president's call to testify before Congress in July 1963 — a month before the March on Washington and four months before Kennedy was assassinated — Allen broke ranks with every other elected southern official in calling for an end to segregation, which he called "slavery's stepchild," in testimony that was met with national acclaim.

Congress approved the Civil Rights Act a year later, after a months-long filibuster led by Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, with almost every Northerner in favor and every Southerner opposed.

**March 7, 1961**

Court of Appeals of Georgia rules in *King vs. State* that King's sentence was "illegal," and the terms of his probation were therefore void.

## Did this event impact tactics or strategies in other areas?

The outsized response to King's mistreatment in Decatur showed the Atlanta Student Movement how coordinated acts of civil disobedience and economic pressure could combine with court challenges to force change. As David Garrow put it in *Bearing the Cross*, the sit-ins and King's brief stay in Reidsville prison "had resolved the debate about civil rights methods in favor of direct action, and had thrust King to new prominence as the principal symbol of the southern movement."

Movement leaders leveraged King's notoriety — if he could endure prison, so could many more — to recruit people to take action in their own communities. And the fundraising that came with King's new national stature enabled the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to hire more staff and launch new initiatives, including voter registration efforts.

Hostile whites also pushed back. "Georgians Unwilling to Surrender," a group led by governor-elect Lester Maddox, staged counter-demonstrations at the students' picket lines, and Ku Klux Klan members paraded, while Atlanta's business leaders refused to meet with the students. It took waves of arrests by students insisting on "jail not bail" on the first anniversary of the sit-ins in March 1961, and a boycott during the busy Easter shopping season, to force the Chamber of Commerce to talks.

Atlanta's lunch counters weren't desegregated until days after nine Black students finally entered the city's all-white high schools, on Aug. 30, 1961. By then, seven years had passed since the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that public schools must desegregate nationwide with "all deliberate speed." It took yet another year before a federal judge struck down Atlanta's remaining segregation laws as unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment, and more sustained protests before Mayor Allen pushed to implement the court order.

But Charles Black said there was a before and after to King's experience in Decatur.

**Aug. 30, 1961**

Nine black students enter all-white high schools in Atlanta.



“Movements were inspired all across the country after that moment,” Black said. “Folks made the connection that King’s arrest made the difference in getting Kennedy elected. That’s a big deal. So clearly people were inspired across the country — if his arrest can have this impact on this nation, then hey, this is worth doing — let’s stay the course on non-violent civil disobedience. It can have results.”

## Eyewitnesses to History



Genesis Reddicks, Clarence Seeliger, Daxton Pettus, Charles Black, Emma Callicut, Liza Watson, Elizabeth Wilson, Adelaide Taylor, Katrina M. Walker, Roslyn Pope and Michael Warren.

The Commemorating King in Decatur team interviewed participants and observers of the events of 1960, and presented its findings to the Decatur City Commission and the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, winning unanimous support and inspiring community donations for the marker’s \$5,000 cost. These eyewitnesses to history included:

### Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson

Elizabeth Wilson, in an interview with Decatur High School students Adelaide Taylor and Liza Watson, drew a direct line between the “strength and determination” King showed in Decatur and key events in her life: her refusal to be intimidated when the Ku Klux Klan marched on the Decatur square; her willingness to challenge the Decatur-DeKalb Regional Library to give her the first library card issued to an African American; her persistence in demanding that Decatur High School accept Black students; and her ambition to run for public office. Then

### September 1961

Lunch counters are desegregated in Atlanta, the 104th city to do so since the sit-ins began in February 1960.



Elizabeth Wilson with Adelaide Taylor and Liza Watson

as mayor, she helped save the school system that defines the city we live in today.

“Dr. King’s being arrested, serving in jail, being in DeKalb County, that helped me to want to be in the position of making a difference,” Wilson said. **“That whole history of the Kennedys, politically, that is when I saw how the political system could really work,** because I guess if Daddy King and Coretta had never contacted the Kennedys about helping to get Martin out of Reidsville, I don’t know how long he would have been there.”

## Activist Charles Black

“I was at that hearing. The judge sat sideways at the bench while Donald Hollowell was presenting the case, and **he wasn’t listening to anything he said. He had a comic book, as a matter of fact** — thumbing through this comic book while King’s defense was being presented. And when Hollowell had finished, he turned to him and said, ‘Are you through?’ Boom, ‘four months!’”

But Black told DHS student Daxton Pettus that instead of humiliating King, Mitchell’s gavel marked a turning point in the civil rights movement.

**“It made the big difference in the country in that it led directly to the election of John F. Kennedy over Nixon in 1960,”** Black said. “The votes among Black people in the major cities across the country switched from Republican to Democrat in that election. And Kennedy ended up winning by less than one vote per precinct nationwide as a result of that.”



## DeKalb County Judge Clarence Seeliger

Seeliger said Mitchell had been **“very abusive toward African Americans who appeared in his court.”** Seeliger sought to reverse that legacy, defeating Mitchell in a 1980 election, removing a Confederate flag from his courtroom and hiring a Black

bailliff, the first in a campaign to diversify the county's justice system.

“Remember, there were laws on the books that said things had to be segregated,” Seeliger told DHS student Halle Gordon. “And so, **in a very real sense, Dr. King was an outlaw.**

He was challenging the laws that were being used to perpetrate these horrible conditions on our African American citizens.”

**“All of a sudden the people of the country saw that the legal establishment — the police officers, the sheriffs, the judges and the like — were in the business of oppressing African American people.** And to have that so openly displayed, being seen by so many people, I think maybe made the impression it was time for a change in the South.

“That a prestigious man who was standing up for the rights of all of our citizens, as well as African Americans, could be abused in such a manner, I think, sent a message across the country,” he said. “Dr. King should be remembered for that, and sad to say so should Judge Mitchell, because of what he did, what he caused, and what he represented.”

## Dr. Roslyn Pope

The many injustices described in “An Appeal for Human Rights” caused “a great deal of harm to our psyches, but we had no choice but to overcome them. We finally realized we have to change

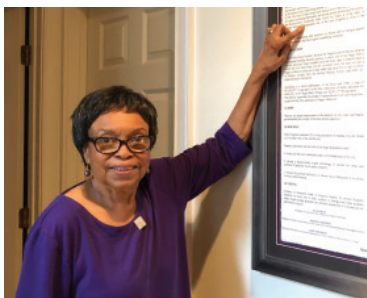
this,” she told DHS student Genesis Reddicks. **“We cannot go through life being segregated and made to feel inferior.”**

“We set a tone and made a huge change in the fabric of our communities. But changing people's hearts — that's a different matter. And the change is not complete. . . . There are a lot of things that people do to undermine people who are not white. There are still so many problems with education and with economics . . . the fight has to keep going. It was not just a one-time thing.”

As for the marker, Pope said “I think the recognition of something momentous that happened right here should inspire people to say ‘well, we don't want this anymore. We don't want this to happen again.’ You know, I think that would be an excellent move to make.”



M. Warren



M. Warren



## The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Decatur

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was sentenced here, at the site of the former DeKalb Building, on October 25, 1960, to four months of hard labor for protesting segregation with the Atlanta Student Movement at a Rich's Department Store dining room. His arrest violated parole conditions set by Judge J. Oscar Mitchell, who had convicted King of driving without a Georgia license, even though he carried a valid Alabama license. Mitchell's harsh sentencing of King's parole violation energized Civil Rights activists and amplified demands to end racist laws and policies. King's mistreatment focused national attention on the Civil Rights Movement when John and Robert Kennedy intervened to free King from prison. As a result, many Black voters switched parties to help elect John F. Kennedy president, setting the stage for major Civil Rights legislation.

Erected by the Georgia Historical Society, Students of Decatur High School,  
Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, and the City of Decatur

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In October 1960, in a long-gone building at the corner of North McDonough Street and Trinity Place, the segregationist South sought to make an example of the civil rights movement's brightest young star. What happened next had a profound impact on Decatur and the state of Georgia, shocking the conscience of many Americans and setting the Kennedy administration on a course to approve major civil rights legislation.

The Commemorating King team included Decatur High School students Liza Watson, Genesis Reddicks, Daxton Pettus, Adelaide Taylor, Emma Callicutt, Halle Gordon and Alonzo Labiosa; teachers Katrina M. Walker and Ben Skillman; and community mentor Michael Warren, who wrote this brochure with their support. The research for this project, including citations, is archived at the DeKalb History Center.

For citations and other information, see  
[dekalbhistory.org/dekalb-county-archives-research](http://dekalbhistory.org/dekalb-county-archives-research)  
and  
[georgiahistory.com/education-outreach/historical-markers](http://georgiahistory.com/education-outreach/historical-markers)



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