

# Memorializing Martin: The Living Dream of Martin Luther King Jr. in Junction City, Kansas

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## **Introduction**

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. finished his “I Have a Dream” speech and stepped down from the podium at the base of the Lincoln Memorial, he had no way of knowing the impact he would have on innumerable communities, large and small, across the United States, nor the legacy he would leave behind. One of those smaller communities was Junction City, Kansas, which to this day continues to preserve the ideals and memory of Dr. King. Most attention to the memorialization of Dr. King – including substantial work by Dr. Derek Alderman, a geography professor from the University of Knoxville – has been directed towards the Deep South and other cities throughout the nation that have very large African American populations. These cities include Washington D.C., New York City, and Chicago. Very few have looked into King’s living memory in Kansas, and none in rural Kansas. In undertaking this study, I found it vitally important to view King’s legacy both holistically, as well as within the often overlooked settings of the Civil Rights Movement. In reading through newspaper articles and books graciously made available by the Geary County Historical Society and with the support of Geary County appraiser, Ossie McCarter, research conducted by individuals at Geary County Historical Society and Dorothy Bramlage Public Library, as well as personally exploring the area, I found that in Junction City, the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. is immortalized by the long lasting grassroots efforts of not only certain individuals, but the community as a whole, dedicated to keeping King’s dream alive. It is from these grassroots organizations that political

and social ideologies form, important not only on a regional level, but a national and international level as well.

### **Building the Dream: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.**

In 1954, Martin Luther King Jr. began his career as a Baptist minister in Montgomery, Georgia, and quickly became a well-recognized rhetorician and civil rights activist, promoting non-violent protest for African American social, political, and economic equality. After he was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King's most widely praised speeches include his iconic 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. This speech is the most recognized of King's career, outlining his dream for a future where all would be "judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."<sup>1</sup> King's idealism and appeal to all Americans made him a fundamental part of America's cultural identity and collective memory. Though King consistently argued for non-violence throughout his career, he did become much more radical as time went on and was especially focused on economic discrimination.<sup>2</sup> The closest Martin Luther King Jr. ever came to Junction City, Kansas, was when he visited Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, approximately twenty miles away, to speak January 19, 1968. In his speech, Dr. King focused on issues including the Vietnam War, and even more specific to the Manhattan, integration, and discrimination in housing ordinances.<sup>3</sup> Less than three months later, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Though he never visited Junction City, King's life left a lasting impact on many in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" (speech, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963), American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm> (accessed May 13, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Fredrik Sunnemark, *Ring Out Freedom! : The Voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Future of Integration," (speech, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, January 19, 1968), ed. William W. Boyer and Kansas State Convocation Committee, The King Center, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-william-w-boyer-mlk> (accessed May 14, 2014).

## **Holding onto the Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and Junction City**

Junction City had long been home to an ethnically diverse community when the traditional Civil Rights Movement began. The town's connection to the military base, Fort Riley, played a large role in the relative racial integration of Junction City, as well as the residence of many different ethnic groups. Part of Junction City's proud heritage included the stationing of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry regiments (better known as the "Buffalo Soldiers") out of Fort Riley from as early as 1866 through nearly the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> Junction City also attracted African Americans outside of the military during the 1879 Kansas Fever Exodus in which mass migrations of African Americans from the South took place. However, the town did not experience as much of a population increase as other Kansas towns. Upon settlement in Junction City, African Americans were generally forced to reside outside of the city center in a "doughnut" like arrangement, apparent by the early 1900s. As prejudice was a factor in acquiring jobs, African Americans were only able to maintain "menial" labor occupations and could thus not afford homes in town.<sup>5</sup> Though Junction City's schools were integrated long before many others in Kansas and in a few parts of the community, black and white citizens lived side-by-side, discrimination was still incredibly prevalent in the town from early settlement onward.<sup>6</sup> For example, Arthur Fletcher, an African American student at Junction City's combined junior and senior high school in 1943, staged his first of many later Civil Rights

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<sup>4</sup> George E. Knapp and Studies Institute Combat, *Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Leavenworth in the 1930s and Early 1940s* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> James R Shortridge, *Our Town on the Plains: J.J. Pennell's Photographs of Junction City, Kansas, 1893-1922*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Lloyd Franzen, *Behind the Facade of Fort Riley's Hometown: The Inside Story of Junction City, Kansas: Including a Supplement Honoring the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments* (Ames, Iowa: Pivot Press, 1998).

protests because his photograph, along with photographs of his black classmates, were to appear in the back of the yearbook and not integrated with the rest of their white classmates.<sup>7</sup>

Many locations in Junction City were still segregated by the rise of the 1950s Civil Rights Movement and discrimination was far from eradicated. Segregated locations included the Colonial Theater, a movie house which seated black movie goers in the back rows and balconies, as well as the swimming pool. “We (blacks only) could go to the swimming pool on Monday and they cleaned it on Tuesday,” remarked long time local, Lois Grimes. “If we went on Monday we were enjoying the dirt from Wednesday, Thursday, Friday... there was always five days of infection in the swimming pool!”<sup>8</sup> Additional segregated locations included the skating rink and pool halls.<sup>9</sup>

By 1960, approximately 13percent of Junction City was populated by African Americans.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the very active local NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) also brought attention to the racially discriminatory housing ordinances that did exist in many areas of Junction City. This issue was especially relevant in early 1968, around the same time as Martin Luther King Jr’s call for fair housing at nearby Kansas State University, the last university speech he made before his assassination.<sup>11</sup>

The assassination of Dr. King in 1968 had a profound impact on members of the Junction City community, including Kevin Willmott, who became a local teacher, playwright, and activist in the 1980s. “I remember when I came home from kindergarten,” Willmott explained, “when Dr. King was shot, [my mother] went out on the porch and let out a scream. I’ll

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<sup>7</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, “Arthur Fletcher,” Kansas Historical Society, [http://www.kshs.org/portraits/fletcher\\_arthur.htm](http://www.kshs.org/portraits/fletcher_arthur.htm) , (accessed September 20, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> L’Tanya Pugh, “Grimes recalls experiences of being black, living in JC,” *The Daily Union* (1990).

<sup>9</sup> Franzen, *Behind the Facade*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Census of Population and Housing, 1960,” *Kansas General Population Characteristics Table 26*, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>, (accessed September 11, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “The Future of Integration.”

never forget that.”<sup>12</sup> Ruby Stevens, another active African American member of the Junction City community, used her passion for Dr. King’s message as the impetus for organizing community educational programs, including a display of collectable pieces of African American history. In 1982, she told an interviewer from *The Daily Union*, Junction City’s main newspaper,

Martin Luther King died trying to bring about a feeling of brotherhood. That was his whole thrust. He was a man of peace. Martin Luther King was one of those who overstepped the bounds of just being a race man, He loved his race. But he loved the human race as well.<sup>13</sup>

Stevens’ admiration for Dr. King’s legacy was strong and led her to organize the now annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day festival in Junction City.

### **Celebrating the Dream: Junction City’s Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration**

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a federal holiday and takes place on the third Monday of January each year. The first nationally observed and celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day took place on January 20, 1986, though individuals had been lobbying for a national holiday celebrating King for years prior.<sup>14</sup> This date was the same for the first annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration in Junction City. In the first year, the primary event was an interracial march past the Colonial Theater, one of the last places remaining segregated during the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> The organizer of the day’s festivities was Ruby Stevens, local activist and teacher of black literature at Junction City High School.<sup>16</sup> The march attracted hundreds in the area; of the event, Stevens wrote “the vigor and enthusiasm shown in this downtown march says more about the emotion of the marchers than words can express,” illuminating not only pride in how far their

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<sup>12</sup> Franzen, *Behind the Façade*, 158.

<sup>13</sup> "Stevens' Collection Traces Black History," *The Daily Union*, (1982).

<sup>14</sup> Amitai Etzioni and Jared Bloom, *We are What We Celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 178-190.

<sup>15</sup> Franzen, *Behind the Façade*, 139.

<sup>16</sup> ""Stevens' Collection Traces Black History," *The Daily Union*, (1982).

town had come in achieving King's dream of equality, but also an awareness of how more could be done.<sup>17</sup> In discussing the importance of organizing the events to remember Dr. King's legacy, Ruby Stevens also told *The Daily Union* that it allowed for individuals to "look back and think about who we were, where we came from, and where we have to go," in order to uphold Dr. King's famous dream.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1. A photograph of the first Dr. Martin Luther King celebration in Junction City Kansas, 1986. Source: Franzen, *Behind the Facade of Fort Riley's Hometown: The Inside Story of Junction City, Kansas*.

In the photograph above of the march, Ms. Stevens is in the front row of marchers, fourth from the right. Ruby Stevens continued to play a significant role in organizing the town's Martin Luther King Jr. Day events for many years, though recently she has left more to an event committee of active locals due to her health and age.<sup>19</sup> Every year since 1986, the event has had a unique theme revolving around the continuance of King's legacy and inspiring community

<sup>17</sup> Ruby Stevens, "Black History: Made in America," *The Daily Union*, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Mike Heronemus, "Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Recalls 'Service,'" *The Daily Union*, (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Informal author field notes, March 29, 2014, Geary County Historical Society.

involvement and service. A few of the recent themes have included, “Remember, Celebrate, Act; a Day On, Not a Day Off” in 2009, “Still Marching” in 2013, and this year’s theme, “Reclaim the Dream... Move Forward!”<sup>20</sup> The celebration has also grown to incorporate unique events, including a keynote speaker and musical acts that perform gospel music tributes as part of the festivities. The events are free, though in 2014, free-will donations were gathered in order to establish a “Ruby Stevens Scholarship,” recognizing her personal service to the community and her dedication to promoting the Martin Luther King Jr. day activities.<sup>21</sup> The longevity of the celebration, approaching its 30<sup>th</sup> year in 2015, as well as the strong local support, indicates the nature of a community dedicated to promoting the diversity and equality that made up King’s dream.

### **Commemorating the Dream: Junction City’s Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park**

Junction City is also home to Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park which I was lucky to stumble across while lost on my way to the Geary County Historical Society. The park is located at the intersection of 12<sup>th</sup> and Franklin Streets, right in the center of a neighborhood and surrounded by homes.

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<sup>20</sup> "Speaker Named for Fort Riley MLK, Jr. Observance, "WIBW TV <http://www.wibw.com/home/headlines/37178189.html> (accessed May 13, 2014); Lindsey Rogers, "Junction City Honors Dr. King's Legacy during Annual Celebration," WIBW TV, <http://www.wibw.com/community/headlines>, (accessed May 13, 2014); Kevin Griffith, "29th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Observance Returns to Downtown Junction City," Junction City Post, <http://www.jcpost.com/2014/01/08/29th-annual-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-observance-returns-to-downtown-junction-city/> (accessed May 13, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther King Celebration Committee, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 29th Annual Junction City-Geary County Celebration: ‘RECLAIM THE DREAM...MOVE FORWARD!’,” *Signpost*, January 2014, 9, [www.junctioncitychamber.org/files/721.pdf](http://www.junctioncitychamber.org/files/721.pdf) (accessed May 13, 2014).

Comparing the locations of historical African American dwellings in 1909 to the current location of the park, as displayed in Figure 2 below, is significant, as it shows the park's position in the middle of a traditionally racially diverse neighborhood.

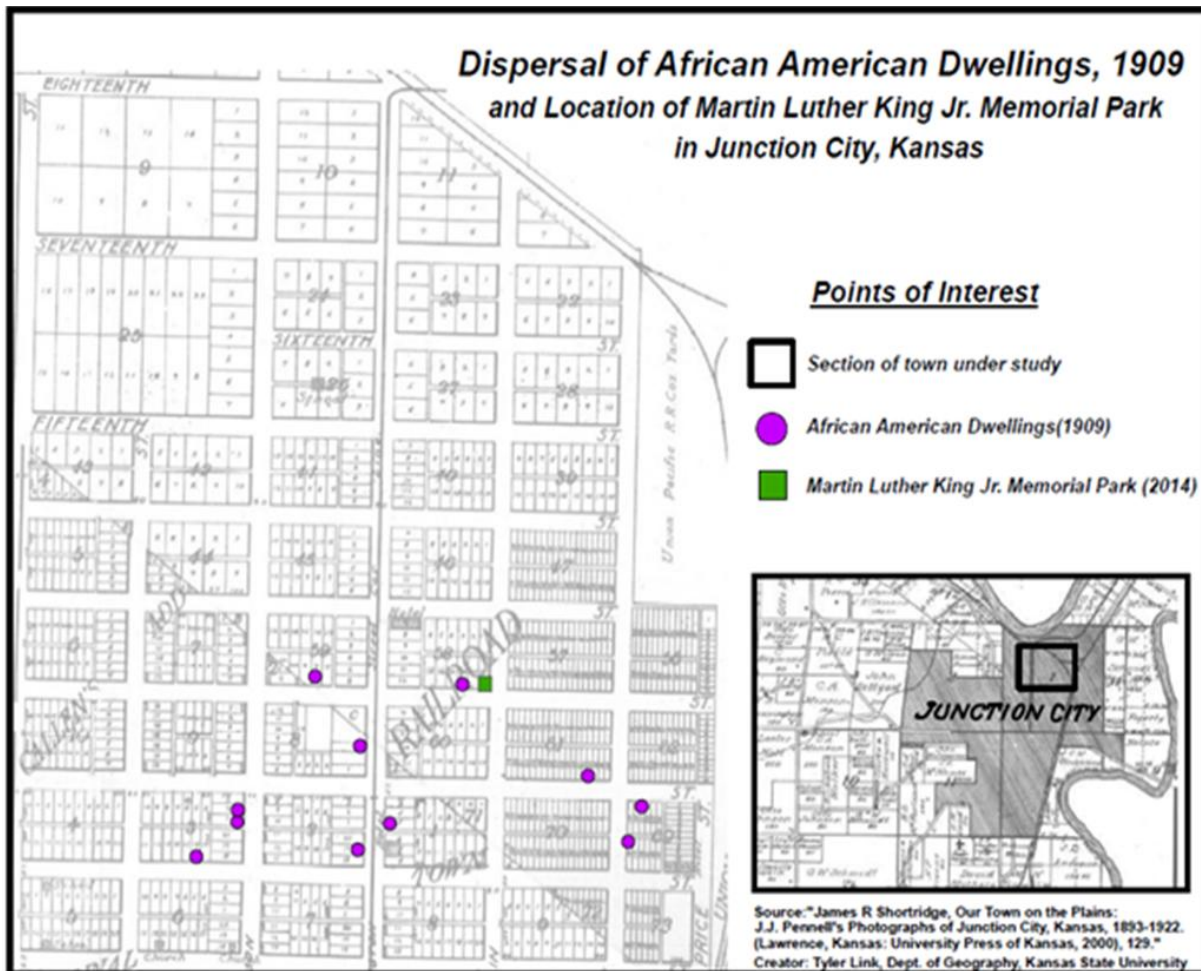


Figure 2. Map of Dispersal of African American Settlements, 1909 and Location of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park, 2014, in Junction City, Kansas.  
Map by Tyler Link, Department of Geography, Kansas State University.

The playground is fully functional and there were several children, a Spanish speaking brother and sister, a blonde Caucasian boy, all watched over by an African American teenaged girl, playing on the slides when I first arrived. This group appeared to be the epitome of King's dream for the future of harmony between various ethnic groups. The equipment was play worn



and slightly dated, but brightly colored and inviting. Not only did the park have a playground, but also included a shelter, several benches, and a half-basketball court.



Figure 3. A photograph of Junction City's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park. Source: Author Photograph, Junction City, Kansas, March 29, 2014.

By commemorating King with a park, as opposed to a stoic monumental statue or a dedicated street, the community is able to interact with the memory of King, as well as hold onto his dream for the improvement of future generations. The park is pictured in Figure 3, above.

Any details about the park beyond what I could see with my own eyes, however, were difficult to track down. The park seemed to come out of thin air sometime in the late 1990s, though the Junction City Parks and Recreation Department was unable to verify when the park was built and who was involved in the park's dedication to King. Knocking on doors of the neighborhood in which the park was so intimately ingrained also proved nearly fruitless, but led me to seek out the Geary County Appraiser's Office at the suggestion of an individual who lived near the park. At the office, Rural Appraiser Ossie McCarter offered a great amount of support,

eventually tracking down the date in which a building permit was approved to put in a roof, likely on the park's shelter house, in October of 1995. Prior to the roof being put in place, the lot belonging to the city appeared to be simply vacant. Despite much appreciated additional research by individuals at the Geary County Historical Society and the Dorothy Bramlage Public Library in Junction City, no more information about the park's mysterious origin was found.

The only scrap of recent news regarding the park came from an individual at the city's Parks and Recreation Department. During the summer months of 2014, they indicated, the city had plans to shut down the park due to budget constraints, as small area had received the lowest reservation number of the town's parks. However, local protest allegedly stopped these plans from reaching fruition and saved the park named in Martin Luther King Jr, further displaying the area's strong connection to the ideals of King's legacy.

## **Conclusion**

When visiting Junction City, Kansas, anyone can see and experience the remains of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous dream, which continues to move forward. More than just the memory of King as a man, but in addition his dream of hope and acceptance flows deep through the entire community. At first difficulty in finding information about the foundation of Junction City's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park at first discouraged me, though in the end proves the town's dedication to the universality of King's dream that much more. In my eyes and in what I was able to uncover, I found no verifiable information regarding the park's establishment. Dr. King had a dream for human equality, a universal dream that *anyone*, black or white, male or female, could enhance simply by taking the first steps of acceptance and change, whether they became recognized for them or not. Based on my investigation, any group, any party, or any

individual could have been the driving force for transforming a vacant lot into a park dedicated to one of the most iconic and inspirational Civil Rights leaders in American history, and that is really what living King's dream is all about. The continuance of the vibrant Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration and the maintenance of the King Memorial Park in Junction City demonstrate that through grassroots efforts, many of the town's citizens, including Ruby Stevens and countless unrecognized others, have taken many steps toward keeping King's dream alive and continue to do so, both visually and behind the scenes.

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