



Oberlin Monuments and Outdoor Sculpture: The Martin Luther King Jr. Monument



Location: Martin Luther King Jr. Park
(NW corner of Vine & Pleasant Sts.)
Built: 1987
Dedicated: July 19, 1987

Current day photograph of the Martin Luther King Jr. Monument
(*Courtesy of Oberlin Heritage Center*)

Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Oberlin is home to sculptures and monuments that honor those who stood up against injustice and broke down racial barriers, from the 1850s to today. The Martin Luther King Jr. Monument itself not only honors its namesake's legacy, but also commemorates the reception of his Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Oberlin College. Dr. King made several trips to Oberlin during his lifetime, even speaking at Oberlin College's 1965 Commencement when he was awarded his honorary degree. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy of protesting racist policies is remembered both in the park and monument dedicated in his name.

King's Legacy and Visits to Oberlin

Dr. King became world famous for his efforts during the Civil Rights Era and his part in the crusade for racial justice and equality in the United States. King was born January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1954, at the age of 25, King became the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The following year King became nationally recognized for his leadership role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a protest led by King that was a direct result of the arrest of Rosa Parks, an African American woman who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. The boycott lasted 385 days, resulting in the desegregation of public busses. King felt that peaceful and organized protests, such as boycotts or sit-ins, were the most effective way to bring about change. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Civil Rights and Social Justice.¹ Dr. King was recognized internationally for his tireless contributions to the Civil Rights movement in America.

Martin Luther King Jr. made several trips to Oberlin during his lifetime. Following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was invited to Oberlin to speak for the first time in 1957.² A few years later in 1963, King returned to Oberlin, though he was suffering from a flu at the time and his speech was cut short.³ King visited Oberlin again a year later in 1964, making his second public appearance after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize where he gave a speech titled "The Future of Integration".⁴ His final visit to Oberlin happened the following year in 1965, when he was invited to speak at Oberlin College's Commencement and awarded his Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters.⁵ In his commencement speech at Oberlin College, titled

¹ "The Nobel Peace Prize 1964." NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB, accessed November 7, 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/summary/>.

² "The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. at Oberlin." Electronic Oberlin Group. Accessed November 7, 2020. <https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/MLKmainpage.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

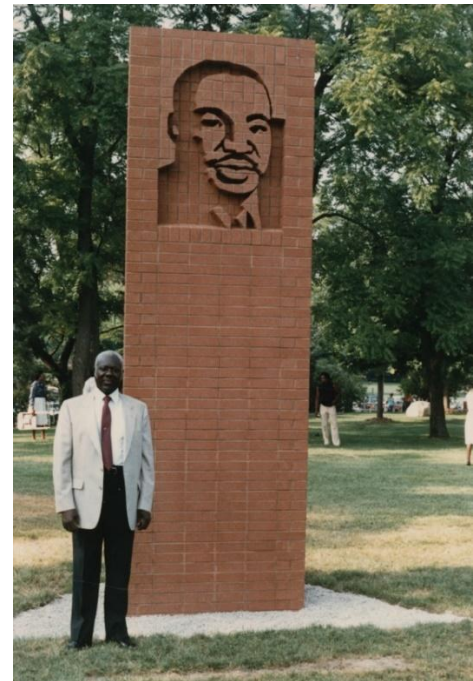
⁵ Ibid.

“Remaining Awake Through a Revolution,” Dr. King posed the idea of how active participation was key in enacting social change. King pointed out in his speech that progress is not inevitable, but instead requires constant action.⁶ In the opening of his speech, he recognized Oberlin’s contributions to political, social, and cultural improvements.

The Monument

The Martin Luther King Jr. Monument was designed by Paul Arnold, a retired studio art professor from Oberlin College. Arnold designed two other monuments in Oberlin: the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument, also located in MLK Jr. Park, and the John Frederick Oberlin Memorial on the College’s campus. Arnold was approached by Robert Thomas, the African American Chair of Oberlin City Council, in 1986 about the possibility of erecting a monument of Martin Luther King Jr. in what was then known as Vine Street Park.⁷

In 1987, Vine Street Park was re-named to Martin Luther King Jr. Park in conjunction with the dedication of the Monument. The Oberlin Chapter of the NAACP, Oberlin City Council, and citizens of Oberlin worked together to officially change the name of the park to honor Martin Luther King Jr. On July 19, 1987 the Martin Luther King Jr. Monument was unveiled and dedicated as a part of that year’s Oberlin Heritage Days celebration.⁸



Henry Young, the project bricklayer, posing with the nearly finished monument
(Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives)

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. “Remaining Awake During A Revolution.” 1965 Commencement Address, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, June 14, 1965.

⁷ Paul Arnold “Remarks on the Monument Construction” (Presentation, Addition to “Freedom’s Friends” PowerPoint Presentation of the Oberlin Heritage Center, Oberlin, OH, February 23, 2010).

⁸ Amy Hansen “Martin Luther King Jr. Monument Dedicated,” *Oberlin Free Press* (Oberlin, OH), Jul. 29, 1987.

The MLK monument is a triangular monolith made of brick. The front of the memorial features a carved bust-length relief portrait of Dr. King. A bronze plaque beneath the portrait of King reads:

*“This Park is Dedicated to the Memory of
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drum Major For Justice and Peace
Recipient of the Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters Degree from Oberlin College in 1965”*

To construct the monument, Arnold and his teammates contracted the Belden Brick Company to manufacture custom sized bricks, some of which had to be triangular to form the corners.⁹ The relief portrait was done by carving semi-hardened bricks with kitchen knives to obtain the appropriate shapes that, once put together, would form the relief of Dr. King.



Burrell Scott: A Quiet Activist

Arnold did not work alone on this project—his vision could only be realized with the help and expertise of Burrell Scott, a local mason who owned his own company, B. L. Scott Masonry and Construction Co., headquartered in Elyria, Ohio. Scott also employed the help of Henry Young, the oldest African American bricklayer in Lorain County at the time.¹⁰

*Photograph of Burrell Scott.
(Courtesy of Stephanie McMillian and
Angèle Peterson)*

⁹ Arnold, “Remarks on the Monument Construction”.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Burrell Scott liked to call himself a “quiet activist” and answered King’s call to remain awake during a revolution.¹¹ Scott’s first act of quiet activism occurred in 1962 when his daughter Erica faced discrimination after applying to Mount Vernon Academy. Even though the Seventh Day Adventist Church had 50,000 African Americans in its national congregation, many of its schools across the country were still segregated. Burrell and his wife Bonnie traveled to San Francisco to raise the segregation issue at the World Conference for the Seventh Day Adventist Church.¹² Following their trip to the conference, and the protest that took place, Mount Vernon Academy announced that Erica would be accepted to the school should she choose to enroll.¹³



*Burrell Scott (far left) with the “Carpenters for Christmas”
(Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives)*

In 1964, Scott was approached by a group of students from Oberlin College in need of help. The students, calling themselves “Carpenters for Christmas,” had heard of Antioch Baptist Church in Ripley, Mississippi which was burned down not long after a civil rights meeting was held there.¹⁴ Knowing nothing about construction, the students hoped that Scott would join them and share his

knowledge. Despite his initial reservations, Scott agreed to join the students and traveled to Mississippi to rebuild the church during the Christmas holiday. Scott and the students were able to finish their work unscathed but did face some local resistance. People would drive by the church during the day and shout nasty things at them. Two Oberlin students claim that they were shot at

¹¹ Bob Cotleur, “Meet Burrell Scott of Oberlin: A Quiet Activist,” *Lorain Journal* (Lorain, OH), Apr. 5, 1970.

¹² “Adventists Involved in Racial Controversy,” *News-Journal* (Mansfield, OH), Jul. 29, 1962.

¹³ “Negro Girl is OKd By Ohio Academy,” *Circleville Herald* (Circleville, OH), Aug. 25, 1962.

¹⁴ “Ohio Collegians Help Build Negro Church,” *Circleville Herald* (Circleville, OH), Dec. 21, 1964.

one night while staying with an African American resident of the town;¹⁵ however, the local Sherriff believed it to be the work of pranksters with firecrackers and claimed the students did not produce any bullet holes.¹⁶ According to Scott, shopkeepers in the area were threatened by local groups to not sell supplies to Scott and his crew.¹⁷ One shopkeeper ignored the threats, sold materials to Scott and the students, and was shot to death a few weeks after the Carpenters for Christmas completed their project.¹⁸ In 2015 a marker on the Mississippi Freedom Trail was placed outside Antioch Baptist Church to commemorate the work the Carpenters for Christmas did in 1964.¹⁹ The marker was funded by Oberlin College Alumni and some of the former students who worked on the project returned to Mississippi and attended the unveiling event that happened on January 17, 2015.²⁰

MLK Park and its Monuments

The land that Martin Luther King Jr. Park occupies was not always dedicated for use as a park. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the land was used for residential homes. John Scott, an African American and one of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers, lived and worked at 38 E. Vine Street, roughly where the park is located today. By the 1940s and 50s land on E. Vine Street along Plum Creek was purchased and would be repurposed as a part of a public park system. In 1971, after being “rediscovered”, the Harpers Ferry Memorial originally located in Westwood Cemetery was moved to what is known today as Martin Luther King Jr. Park.

¹⁵ Associated Press, “COFO Says Shots Fired into House,” *Hattiesburg American* (Hattiesburg, MS), Dec. 26, 1964.

¹⁶ Associated Press, “Ready New Ripley Church for a Civil Rights Rally,” *Hattiesburg American* (Hattiesburg, MS), Dec. 30, 1964.

¹⁷ Cotleur, “Meet Burrell Scott”.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Antioch Missionary Baptist Church to Receive Marker,” *Hattiesburg American* (Hattiesburg, MS), Jan. 14, 2015. <https://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/story/news/local/2015/01/14/antioch-to-receive-marker/21769693/>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Following the dedication of the monument and park several monuments and memorials that celebrate Oberlin's history of activism were added. The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument remembers the townspeople who risked federal prosecution to ensure the freedom of John Price. The Harpers Ferry Monument immortalizes John A. Copeland Jr., Lewis Sheridan Leary, and Shields Green, three African Americans who joined John Brown on his crusade to end the institution of slavery. The Tuskegee Airmen of Oberlin Monument honors African American pilots from World War II who broke down racial barriers and pushed for greater integration in the United States Armed Forces. Rather than sleeping through the revolutions that were occurring, Oberlin was awake, and set the example for others to follow.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Monument celebrates the legacy of the Civil Rights leader and others who worked to achieve racial justice in the United States. The park and its monuments remind visitors that political and social change does not happen on its own, but rather, requires action from willing and engaged individuals.

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