

The King Holiday: A Chronology

April 8, 1968 – Four days after Dr. King is assassinated, Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) introduces first legislation providing for a Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday.

June 26, 1968 – The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center is founded in Atlanta. The mission is to establish a living memorial to Dr. King, to preserve his papers and promote his teachings. Shortly after, King Center Founder Coretta Scott King, directs the small staff to being planning for the first annual observance of Dr. King's birthday.

January 15, 1969 – The King Center sponsors the first annual observance of Dr. King's birthday with an ecumenical service and other events and calls for nation-wide commemorations of Dr. King's birthday. This observance becomes the model for subsequent annual commemorations of Dr. King's birthday nation-wide, setting the tone of celebration of Dr. King's life, education in his teachings and nonviolent action to carry forward his unfinished work.

April, 1971 – Petitions gathered by SCLC bearing 3 million signatures in support of King Holiday are presented to Congress. But Congress takes no action to move holiday legislation forward.

1973 – First state King Holiday bill (sponsored by then Assemblyman Harold Washington) signed into law in Illinois.

1974 – Massachusetts, Connecticut enact statewide King Holidays.

1975 – New Jersey State Supreme Court rules that state must provide a paid holiday in honor of Dr. King in accordance with the state government's labor contract with the New Jersey State Employees Association.

November 4, 1978 – National Council of Churches calls on Congress to pass King Holiday.

February 19, 1979 – Coretta Scott King testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in behalf of the King holiday. She urges Rep. Conyers to bring the holiday bill up for a floor vote in the House of Representatives.

March 27, 1979 – Mrs. King testifies before Joint Hearings of Congress in support of King Holiday bill.

1979 – Mrs. King directs King Center staff to begin intensive organizing of a nation-wide citizens lobby for a national Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. King Center launches new nation-wide King Holiday petition campaign, which is signed by more than 300,000 before end of year. President Carter calls on Congress to pass national King Holiday. The King Holiday bill finally begins to move through Congressional committees.

November, 1979 – The Conyers King Holiday bill is defeated in floor vote in U.S. House of Representatives by just 5 votes.

1980 – Stevie Wonder releases “Happy Birthday,” a song celebrating Dr. King and urging a holiday in his honor. It becomes a hit and a rallying cry for the holiday.

May 2, 1980 - Coretta Scott King testifies in U.S. House of Representative in support of establishing a National Historic Site in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

September 11, 1980 – Mrs. King testifies in U.S. Senate in support of establishing a National Historic Site in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

1981 – King Center President Coretta Scott King writes to governors, mayors, chairpersons of city council across the U.S., requesting them to pass resolutions and proclamations commemorating the Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday and send them to The King Center’s Archives. She asks them to organize celebrations and programs of observance.

February 23, 1982 – Mrs. King testifies in support of the Holiday before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service.

1982 – The King Center calls for and mobilizes a conference to commemorate and serve as cosponsors of the 19th anniversary of the March on Washington. More than 100 organizations participated. King Center mobilizes coalition to lobby for the holiday. Stevie Wonder funds holiday lobbying office and staff based in Washington, D.C.

1982 – Mrs. King and Stevie Wonder present King Center petitions bearing more than 6 million signatures in support of King holiday to Tip O’Neil, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

June, 1983 – Mrs. King testifies before Congress in behalf of The King Holiday bill again.

August, 1983 – The House of Representatives passes King Holiday Bill, providing for the King Holiday to be observed on the third Monday in January. The bill, which is sponsored by Reps. Katie Hall (D.-IN) and Jack Kemp (R-NY), passes by a vote of 338 to 90.

August 27, 1983 – King Center convenes the “20th Anniversary March on Washington,” supported by more than 750 organizations. More than 500,000 people attend the March at the Lincoln Memorial, and all of the speakers call on the U.S. Senate and President Reagan to pass the King Holiday.

October 19, 1983 - Holiday Bill sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy (D.-Mass.) passes U.S. Senate by a vote of 78-22.

November 3, 1983 - President Reagan signs bill establishing the 3rd Monday of every January as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday, beginning in 1986.

April-May, 1984 – King Center develops legislative proposal to establish the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. Mrs. King meets with leadership of the House and Senate and appeals to Congress to legislate the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. The legislation passes Congress by a voice vote.

August 27, 1984 – President Reagan signs legislation providing for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, to last for a term of five years, with an option to renew for another 5 years.

November, 1984 – First meeting of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission. Coretta Scott King is unanimously elected Chairperson

January 20, 1986 - First national King Holiday Observed. By this time 17 states had official King holidays. The King Holiday Commissioners are sworn in by federal district Judge Horace Ward.

January 16, 1989 – As a result of leadership of the King Holiday Commission, the number of states which enacted a MLK holiday grows to 44.

1990 – The United Auto Workers negotiate contracts with the big three auto companies requiring a paid holiday for all their employees.

January 15, 1990 – *The Wall St. Journal* Reports that only 18 % of 317 corporate employers surveyed by the Bureau of National Affairs provide a paid King holiday.

November 3, 1992 – After a coalition of citizens for an Arizona King Holiday launches successful protest and boycott campaigns, the people of Arizona pass referendum establishing Martin Luther King, Jr. state holiday.

January, 1993 – Arizona observes first statewide King holiday, leaving only New Hampshire without a state holiday in honor of Dr. King.

1994 – Citing Dr. King's statement that "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve," Coretta Scott King testifies before congress in support of making the King Holiday an official national day of humanitarian service.

August 23, 1994 – President Clinton signs the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday and Service Act, expanding the mission of the holiday as a day of community service, interracial cooperation and youth anti-violence initiatives.

1996 – Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission concludes mission, transfers responsibility for coordinating nationwide holiday programs and activities to The King Center

1998 – A Bureau of National Affairs survey of 458 employers found that 26 percent provide a paid holiday for their workers on the King Holiday. The survey found that 33 percent of firms with union contracts provided the paid King Holiday, compared to 22 percent of nonunion shops.

June 7, 1999 – Governor Jean Shaheen of New Hampshire signs the King Holiday legislation into law, completing enactment of holiday in all states.

October 29, 1999 – U.S. Senate unanimously passes legislation requiring federal institutions to fly the U.S. flag on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday.

Today – The King holiday is celebrated in U.S. installations and is observed by local groups in more than 100 other nations. Trinidad and other nations have also established a holiday in honor of Dr. King.