

# ***Coretta Scott King, a Civil Rights Icon, Dies at 78***

By [Peter Applebome](#), Feb. 1, 2006

Coretta Scott King, known first as the wife of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., then as his widow, then as an avid proselytizer for his vision of racial peace and nonviolent social change, died Monday at a hospital in Mexico. She was 78.

The primary cause of death was "insufficient cardio-respiratory," which simply means her heart and breathing stopped, said Dr. Carlos Guerrero Tejada, who certified her death. The underlying causes were cerebral vascular disease and ovarian cancer, according to the death certificate.

Mrs. King died at Hospital Santa Mónica in Rosarito, Mexico, about 16 miles south of San Diego. She was admitted to the hospital last Thursday, said her sister, Edythe Scott Bagley. Mrs. Bagley said Mrs. King's body would be returned to her home, Atlanta, for entombment next to her husband, whose crypt is at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center there.

Mrs. King had been in failing health after a stroke and a heart attack last August. She appeared at a dinner honoring her husband on Jan. 14 but did not speak.

Andrew Young, a former United Nations ambassador and longtime family friend, said at a news conference yesterday morning that Mrs. King died in her sleep.

"She was a woman born to struggle," Mr. Young said, "and she has struggled and she has overcome." Mrs. King rose from rural poverty in Heiberger, Ala., and became an international symbol of the civil rights movement of the 1960's. She was an advocate for women's rights, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and other social and political issues.

In 1952, she was studying music at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston when she met a young graduate student in philosophy, who, on their first date, told her: "The four things that I look for in a wife are character, personality, intelligence and beauty. And you have them all." A year later she and Dr. King, then a young minister from a prominent Atlanta family, were married, beginning a remarkable partnership that ended with Dr. King's assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Mrs. King did not hesitate to pick up his mantle, marching before her husband was even buried at the head of the striking garbage workers he had gone to Memphis to champion. She went on to lead the effort for a national holiday in his honor and to found the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta, dedicated both to scholarship and to activism.

In addition to dealing with her husband's death, which left her with four young children, Mrs. King faced other trials and controversies. She was at times viewed as chilly and aloof by others in the civil rights movement. The King Center was criticized as competing for funds and siphoning energy from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King had helped found. In recent years, the center had been widely viewed as adrift, characterized by squabbling within the family and a focus more on Dr. King's legacy than on continuing his work. Many allies were baffled and hurt by her campaign to exonerate James Earl Ray, who in 1969 pleaded guilty to her husband's murder, and her contention that Ray did not commit the crime.

More often, however, Mrs. King has been seen as an inspirational figure, a woman of enormous spiritual depth who came to personify the ideals Dr. King fought for.

"She'll be remembered as a strong woman whose grace and dignity held up the image of her husband as a man of peace, of racial justice, of fairness," said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr. King and then served as its president for 20 years. "I don't know that she was a civil rights leader in the truest sense, but she became a civil rights figure and a civil rights icon because of what she came to represent."

Coretta Scott was born April 27, 1927, the second of three children born to Obadiah and Bernice Scott. She grew up in a two-room house that her father had built on land that had been owned by the family for three generations.

The family was poor, and she grew up picking cotton in the hot fields of the segregated South or doing housework. But Mr. Scott hauled timber, owned a country store and worked as a barber. His wife drove a school bus, and the whole family helped raise hogs, cows, chickens and vegetables. So, by the standards of blacks in Alabama at the time, the family had both resources and ambitions beyond the reach of most others.

Some of Coretta Scott's earliest insights into the injustice of segregation came as she walked to her one-room schoolhouse each day, watching buses of white children stir up dust as they passed. She got her first sense of the world beyond rural Alabama when she attended the Lincoln School, a private missionary institution in nearby Marion, where she studied piano and voice and had her first encounters with college-educated teachers, and where she resolved to flee to a world far beyond rural, segregated Alabama.

She graduated first in her high school class of 17 in 1945 and attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where, two years earlier, her older sister, Edythe, had been the first black to enroll. She studied education and music, and went on to the New England Conservatory of Music, hoping to become a classical singer. She worked as a mail order clerk and cleaned houses to augment a fellowship that barely paid her tuition.

### A First Encounter

Her first encounter with the man who would become her husband did not begin auspiciously, as recounted in "Parting the Waters," by Taylor Branch. Dr. King, in the

market for a wife, called her after getting her name from a friend and announced: "You know every Napoleon has his Waterloo. I'm like Napoleon. I'm at my Waterloo, and I'm on my knees."

Ms. Scott, two years his elder, replied: "That's absurd. You don't even know me."

Still, she agreed to meet for lunch the next day, only to be put off initially that he was not taller. But she was impressed by his erudition and confidence, and he saw in her the refined, intelligent woman he was looking for to be the wife of a preacher from one of Atlanta's most prominent ministerial families.

When he proposed, she deliberated for six months before saying yes, and they were married in the garden of her parents' house on June 18, 1953. The 350 guests, big-city folks from Atlanta and rural neighbors from Alabama, made it the biggest wedding, white or black, the area had ever seen.

Even before the wedding she made it clear she intended to remain her own woman. She stunned Dr. King's father, who presided over the wedding, by demanding that the promise to obey her husband be removed from the wedding vows. Reluctantly, he went along. After the wedding, the bridegroom fell asleep in the car while the new Mrs. King drove back to Atlanta.

Mrs. King thought she was signing on for the ministry, not ground zero in the seismic cultural struggle that would soon shake the South. Her husband became minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in 1954, but about a year later, the Montgomery Bus Boycott brought Dr. King to national attention. Then, like riders on a runaway freight train, the minister and his young wife found themselves in the middle of a movement that would transform the South and ripple through the nation.

In 1960, the family moved back to Atlanta, where Dr. King shared the pulpit of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church with his father.

With four young children to raise -- Yolanda, born in 1955; Martin III, in 1957; Dexter, in 1961; and Bernice, in 1963 -- and a movement dominated by men, Mrs. King mostly remained away from the front lines of the movement. But the danger was always there, including a brush with death when Dr. King was stabbed while autographing books in Harlem in 1958.

### An Active Role

What role Mrs. King would play was a source of some tension. Wanting to be there for their children, she also wanted to be active in the movement. Dr. King was, she had said, traditional in his view of women and balked at the notion that she should be more conspicuous.

"Martin was a very strong person, and in many ways had very traditional ideas about women," she told *The New York Times Magazine* in 1972.

She added: "He'd say, 'I have no choice, I have to do this, but you haven't been called.' And I said, 'Can't you understand? You know I have an urge to serve just like you have.' "

Still, he always described her as a partner in his mission, not just a supportive spouse. "I wish I could say, to satisfy my masculine ego, that I led her down this path," he said in a 1967 interview. "But I must say we went down together, because she was as actively involved and concerned when we met as she is now."

She largely carved out her own niche, most prominently through more than 30 Freedom Concerts, at which she lectured, read poetry and sang to raise awareness of and money for the civil rights movement.

The division disappeared with Dr. King's assassination. Suddenly, she was not just a symbol of the nation's grief, but a woman devoted to carrying on her husband's work. How to do that was something that evolved over time.

Marching in Memphis was a dramatic statement, but Ralph Abernathy, one of Dr. King's lieutenants, was chosen to take over.

In stepping in for her husband after his death, Mrs. King at first used his own words as much as possible, as if her goal were simply to maintain his presence. But soon she developed her own language and her own causes. So, when she stood in for her husband at the Poor People's Campaign at the Lincoln Memorial on June 19, 1968, she spoke not just of his vision, but of hers, of gender as well as race. She called upon American women "to unite and form a solid block of women power to fight the three great evils of racism, poverty and war."

She joined the board of directors of the National Organization for Women and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and she became widely identified with a broad array of international human rights issues, rather than focusing primarily on race.

That broad view, she would argue, was completely in keeping with Dr. King's vision. To carry on that legacy, she focused on two tasks. The first was to have a national holiday established in Dr. King's honor, and the second was to build the center in Atlanta to honor his memory, continue his work and provide a research facility for scholars of his work and the civil rights era.

The first goal was achieved, despite much opposition, in 1983, when Congress approved a measure designating the third Monday in January as a federal holiday in honor of Dr. King, who was born in Atlanta on Jan. 15, 1929. President Ronald Reagan, who had long opposed the King Holiday as too expensive and inappropriate, signed the bill, but pointedly refrained from criticizing fellow Republicans like Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who had opposed Dr. King, saying he had consorted with Communists.

The holiday was first observed on Jan. 20, 1986.

The second goal, much more expensive, time consuming and elusive, remains a work in progress -- and a troubled one at that. When Mrs. King announced plans for a memorial in 1969, she envisioned a Lincolnesque tomb, an exhibition hall, the restoration of her husband's childhood home, institutes on nonviolent social change and Afro-American studies, a library building, an archives building and a museum of African-American life and culture. She envisioned a center that would be a haven for scholars and a training ground for advocates of nonviolent social change.

### An Ambitious Struggle

Even friends say it may have been too ambitious a goal. Building the center was a major achievement, but many of Dr. King's allies, particularly the leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said it was draining scarce resources.

The center also struggled to find its mission. Critics worried that it had become a family enterprise, Dexter and Martin III vying for leadership. The problems became particularly acute after Mrs. King suffered a stroke and heart attack in August 2005. The brothers struggled for control over the center while she was recuperating.

Many supporters were saddened and baffled by the family's campaign on behalf of Mr. Ray, who confessed to killing Dr. King and then recanted. Mr. Ray was seeking a new trial when he died in 1998.

After Mr. Ray's death, Mrs. King issued a statement calling his death a tragedy for his family and for the nation and saying that a trial would have "produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence."

Besides her four children and her sister, Edythe, of Cheyney, Pa., survivors include her brother, Obie Leonard Scott of Greensboro, Ala.

Mrs. King remained a beloved figure, often compared to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis as a woman who overcame tragedy, held her family together and became an inspirational presence around the world.

Admirers said she bore her special burden -- being expected to carry on her husband's work and teachings -- with a sense of spirit and purpose that made her more than a symbol.

If picking up Dr. King's mantle was an impossible task, the relationship she shared with him was truly a partnership. "I think on many points she educated me," Dr. King once said, and she never veered from the conviction, expressed throughout her life, that his dream was also hers.

"I didn't learn my commitment from Martin," she told an interviewer. "We just converged at a certain time.