

Atlanta, Georgia: 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr made one of the most famous speeches of the 20th century. Polly Evans visits his birthplace in Atlanta to see what remains of this vision.

August 27, 2013

By: Polly Evans

This is the town where Coca-Cola was first sold. CNN comes from here, too. But Atlanta's most famous son brought greater change to America than either of those two giants. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC and told the world he had a dream. Five decades later, I'm travelling to the city where the dream was born to see whether it's yet come true.



In 2013, Atlanta is the booming hub of America's Deep South. The city's Hartsfield-Jackson airport is the busiest in the world.

Downtown, cranes spot the skyline and cement dust specks the air: this is a city in a construction frenzy.

Atlanta's new trams, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, the Porsche Cars North American headquarters, with its "drive experience" for

visitors, and the College Football Hall of Fame all arrive in 2014. Meanwhile, Ponce City Market is rising from the dust of an old Sears, Roebuck & Co building to provide restaurants, shops, offices and homes, and Atlanta's green BeltLine is being constructed on the old railroad that rings the city to create a 22-mile loop of recreational space.

Beyond the high-rises of Downtown, the roads shake off their grid just as the people lose their suits and the Tarmac meanders through the greenery of the "neighbourhoods". Each has its own personality. Little Five Points is young and funky, with tattoo parlours, vintage-clothing stores and wig shops. Virginia-Highland is a little more lofty, with indie boutiques, restaurants and pavement cafés, while Inman Park parades grand clapboard houses whose porch swings make one yearn for indolent afternoons.

Then there's Sweet Auburn. This is the neighbourhood where Martin Luther King grew up. The area around his home – a yellow-painted house on the main street – has been declared a National Historic Site.



Martin Luther King Jr. sits on a couch and speaks on the telephone after encountering a white mob protesting against the Freedom Riders in Montgomery, Alabama in 1961

I take a tour with a group of teachers – there are 10,000 of them in town for a conference. The house is now managed by the National Park Service and a ranger shows us the dinner table laid with the best china, where ML – as his family called him – listened to debates about civil rights from early childhood.

The King family was middle class and educated, and Auburn Avenue was the heart of the African-American business district. We see the room where he was born – his father refused to let his wife give birth in the sub-standard “colored” hospital – and the bedroom he shared with his brother.

More moving still is the exhibition at the King Center over the street, which explains the civil-rights struggle. In 1963, Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation hit its 100th anniversary, yet the South’s “Jim Crow” laws ensured blacks and whites were forbidden from marrying each other, had separate schools, and ate in different rooms in restaurants.

I go on to visit the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where both King and his father served as pastors. King’s sister, Christine, is still an active member of the church. Behind it lies Martin Luther King Jr’s crypt, a block of white Georgia marble surrounded by a shallow pool and engraved with words adapted from the speech he gave that memorable day in Washington: “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I’m free at last.”



Civil rights protestors marching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, where the March on Washington climaxed in Martin Luther King's 'I Have A Dream' speech

So what of King's dream for freedom, 50 years on? I go to see Doug Shipman, the chief executive of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. He thinks that King's legacy – in particular his insistence on non-violence – is in large part responsible for Atlanta's present-day prosperity.

"King's movement allowed Atlanta to become the regional hub because there was a peaceful integration," Shipman says. Atlanta had for generations been home to an affluent black middle class. Its Morehouse and Spelman Colleges had drawn African-Americans seeking university education since the 1870s. "King unleashed all of that talent."

Since the 1960s, Atlanta has broadened its ethnic mix with an influx of South Asians, Vietnamese and Latinos. To a British visitor, the city's integration seems unremarkable. To Americans, whose cities are often more segregated, this is something special. "Atlanta drew a huge number of college-educated graduates in the last 10 or 15 years," Shipman says. "Part of the reason that they came, and a lot of the reason they stayed, is because they wanted that kind of diversity."

King's legacy gave Atlanta this reputation for diversity, which attracted the Olympics in 1996. In turn, the Games reinforced Atlanta's image as an international city with a population that has grown from one million in the 1960s to six million today as global companies have created bases in the city.



Memories of a March and a Dream: Martin Luther King during the March on Washington, on 28 August 1963

The population spike means that most people here are from somewhere else. This includes the city's restaurateurs, who create an array of American and international cuisine that alone makes the city a worthwhile stop on a visitor's agenda. Yes, you can have your grits and fried green tomatoes, but there's also a raft of high-quality Mexican and Japanese eateries, which arrive full circle with the "modern Southern" movement, whose chefs transform traditional tastes for the cosmopolitan palate.

Take Hugh Acheson's Empire State South, for example, with its menu's use of local heirloom tomatoes with shoyu sauce and rice puffs, or Ford Fry's JCT Kitchen's contemporary take on the Southern "Sunday supper".

Then there's Sweet Auburn Curb Market, where you can buy a whole pig if you wish before tucking in to Southern barbecue – or a Venezuelan corn patty, or a plate of Caribbean stewed goat – at one of those old-fashioned lunch counters where segregation once caused such a stir.

Martin Luther King's mother would have shopped here. So would his grandmother. What would they have made of me in 2013, a white British woman eating shoulder to shoulder with people of every shade? More importantly, what would they have made of an America which has elected a black President, not once but twice?

"I have a dream," said Martin Luther King on 28 August 1963, "that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character." I suppose his mother and grandmother would have concluded,

as I did, that America may still have issues with race but, step by tiny step, the colours are running together.



Height, far right, listens to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in Washington in 1963 Height, far right, listens to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in Washington in 1963.