



COMMEMORATING KING

a Decatur story

Photo: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. leaves Judge Oscar Mitchell's courtroom in the DeKalb Building in Decatur, Georgia, on Oct. 25, 1960.

The Project

Decatur High School students have been working for a year now on a campaign to erect a Georgia Historical Society marker at the spot in Decatur where Martin Luther King Jr. was illegally sentenced to a chain gang in a misdemeanor traffic case 60 years ago. That event proved pivotal to the civil rights movement and presidential politics, as John F. Kennedy intervened to free King from prison, and black voters switched parties to elect him. It also inspired people to push for changes in our community, in rarely acknowledged ways that have shaped what the City of Decatur is today.

The Commemorating King group has learned many details about the events that unfolded in the DeKalb Building that once stood next to the high school ...

We're doing research in Atlanta-area archives, to better understand the story's context and legacy. To continue our research we recorded oral history interviews with four eyewitnesses and participants: Atlanta Student Movement co-founder **Charles Black**; **Roslyn Pope**, who wrote "An Appeal for Human Rights;" Judge **Clarence Seeliger**, who defeated Judge Oscar Mitchell and then initiated the integration of the DeKalb court system; and **Elizabeth Wilson**, Decatur's first African American mayor. We compiled the evidence from the eyewitnesses and historical documents from research trips into [a research paper](#) which will be submitted to the Georgia Historical Society.



Back row: Genesis Reddicks, Emma Callicutt, Daxton Pettus, Adelaide Taylor, Liza Watson.
Seated: Clarence Seeliger, Charles Black, Elizabeth Wilson, Roslyn Pope.



**Adelaide Taylor & Halle Gordon
at the Dekalb History Center.
Map shows DeKalb Building at
what was then Herring Street,
now West Trinity Place, across
from Decatur City Hall.**





The front and back view of the former DeKalb Building. The marker will commemorate events that happened here, changing our community and country.



For the marker's approval we need to raise \$2,500 and we need two additional sponsors to be featured on the marker. We would appreciate if Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and the City Commission were to be sponsors with us.

The Georgia Historical Society is expected to vote on our application this October, on the 60th anniversary of King's sentencing.

If approved, the marker would stand at the corner of McDonough Street and West Trinity Place, where it would become part of the Civil Rights Trail.



Liza Watson is a Decatur High School senior. She is also the co-president of the DHS Black Student Union.

“Our country likes to acknowledge a kind of formulaic definition of what is black history. It is usually begun with a discussion of slavery and concluded with this simplified version of what the civil rights movement was. But as we all know, there is no box in which black history can be confined. In itself, the civil rights movement had no single event that changed the course of history, no single person who achieved change. It was a nationwide effort that involved people from every walk of life. Our own town of Decatur had a pivotal role in this story that has long remained hidden in our history. As students of Decatur High School and Decatur citizens, we have dedicated the past year to uncovering and sharing that story. Today we share it with you in hopes that you can share it with others in your lives. This morning you will get to meet the people who helped transform the very nature of our city and open the doors in all our futures. Up until now, we have not told many of you what event exactly took place in our city. The story which brought us to this moment begins in 1960, when Decatur was known as Klan Country.”

— *Liza Watson*
The introduction of the assembly

“At the corner of McDonough and Trinity Avenues in Decatur, right there where they’re building the new apartment building, just across the street from Chick-fil-A, it used to be the DeKalb Building, which had courts and a small jail. And there, Martin Luther King Jr. was illegally sentenced to four months of hard labor in prison for protesting...”

— *Adelaide Taylor*
From her assembly presentation



Adelaide Taylor is a Decatur High School senior. She is a student activist and journalist, as one of the head editors of the DHS magazine, Carpe Diem.



Martin Luther King Jr. escorted by police after being arrested at Rich's Department Store on Oct. 19, 1960. Credit: Associated Press Archives.

“This trial became a massive turning point in civil rights movement, as the Kennedys intervened on King's behalf and empowered black voters in the South who shifted a presidential election and changed the U.S. forever.”

Feb. 1, 1960

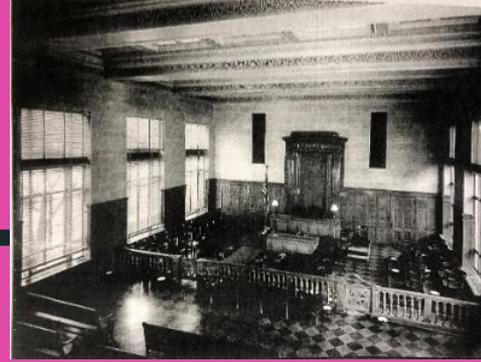
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. moves from Montgomery, Alabama, to Atlanta



May 4, 1960

MLK jr. is pulled over on Clifton Road in DeKalb County while driving writer Lillian Smith to Emory University Hospital for her cancer treatments. He's issued a ticket for an expired tag and having no Georgia driver's license (he carried an Alabama license good until 1962) and is given a summons to appear in court in Decatur.

MLK jr. appears before DeKalb Judge J. Oscar Mitchell, pays a \$25 fine for driving without a "correct" license. Mitchell also imposes probation, declaring that King "shall not violate any federal or state penal statutes, same to be judged by the court."



Sept. 23, 1960

Oct. 19, 1960

MLK Jr. joins the Atlanta Student Movement's campaign to desegregate Atlanta's whites-only lunchrooms, and participates in a sit-in at Rich's Department Store. He and the students are taken to the Fulton County jail on trespassing charges.

All the other sit-in participants are released after Atlanta Mayor William Hartsfield negotiates a deal to end the student boycott, drop the charges and desegregate the stores. But King is taken to Decatur in handcuffs to appear before Mitchell. The judge dismisses the arguments of King's attorney Donald Hollowell, and tells the packed courtroom that he's sentencing King to four months on the "public works," otherwise known as a chain gang.

Oct. 25, 1960

King is taken from his cell in the DeKalb Building to Reidsville State Prison, Robert F. Kennedy calls Mitchell, arguing that bail can't be denied to defendants appealing misdemeanor sentences. Hollowell returns before Mitchell and asks for \$1,000 bail. Mitchell doubles it to \$2,000. King walks free the next day.

Oct. 26, 1960

Black History Month

School Assembly



And The Panelists

Roslyn Pope

In her interview with DHS junior **Genesis Reddicks**, **Roslyn Pope** described what led to her writing “An Appeal for Human Rights,” as a Spelman College senior. The “Appeal” laid out the reasons why Atlanta’s black college students would be boycotting white-owned stores and sitting in at whites-only lunch counters to protest segregation in 1960.

Reddicks asked Pope how it affected her psychologically, to live as a black woman in a society where race laws dictated every aspect of public life.

“It was a very disturbing existence, because you grew up in a church and in schools and with parents and relatives and friends who were normal, wonderful, educated people. But then the rest of the people were shut off from you,” Pope recalled. “Rich’s department store, for example, which turned out to be a very important place in the integration of Atlanta, even if we went there, we could buy clothes and shoes, but we couldn’t try them on.”

“It was an existence that I’m sure caused a great deal of harm to our psyches, but we had no choice but to overcome them. And we finally realized we have to change this. We cannot, you know, go through life being segregated and made to feel inferior.”

Pope said she did the writing and future lawmaker and NAACP chairman Julian Bond did the typing, pulling an all-nighter to write what would become a civil rights movement manifesto.

“I had come up with the title because I had realized that it was not about civil rights as much as it was human rights. It was our humanity that had been challenged and undermined,” Pope explained. “And of course, it sent shockwaves through the community.”



Credit: Atlanta Journal-Constitution

President John F. Kennedy “would not have been in office had it not been for this event that took place in downtown Decatur,” said **Charles Black**, who was interviewed by **Daxton Pettus**, co-president of the Black Students Union at Decatur High School.

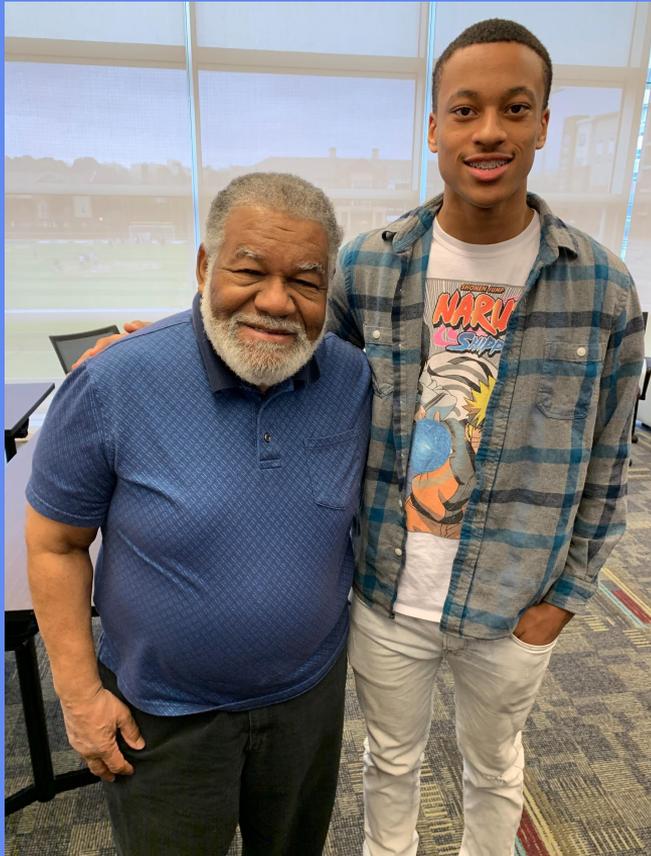
Charles Black

King’s traffic citation proved to be a turning point in the civil rights movement and in American history, because the students’ boycott campaign had gone on for months and was losing steam before they persuaded King to join their sit-ins, Black explained: “When King was arrested, you know, this gave new life to our efforts because people were ready to give up, and decided they could hang in there. And that made all the difference.”

But almost no one knew at the time that King could be called back before Judge Mitchell and sentenced to prison if he committed an act of civil disobedience, Black said.

“I was at that hearing,” Black said. “The judge sat sideways at the bench while the defense was presenting the case. The attorney was Donald Hollowell, and he wasn’t listening to anything he said. He had a comic book, as a matter of fact. Thumbing through this comic book while King’s defense was being presented. And when Hollowell had finished, he turned to him and said, ‘Are you through?’ Boom, ‘four months!’”

King was put in the DeKalb Building’s jail, and then “he was immediately sent in the dead of night to regional prison in the back of a paddy wagon with the loose German shepherd dog in there. And then King was quoted as saying later that that’s the most afraid he’d ever been,” Black explained.



Dax Pettus interviewed Charles Black about his work as an activist and what he witnessed in the courtroom of King’s Trial.
Photo credit: Michael Warren



**From left to right:
Dax Pettus,
Charles Black,
Roslyn Pope and
Genesis Reddicks**



DeKalb County Judge **Clarence Seeliger** was interviewed in his courtroom by **Halle Gordon**, a DHS junior. She asked him to describe what the climate was like at the time King was brought before his predecessor, Judge J. Oscar Mitchell.

“I’m an old guy now, and I’m 79 years old, but a lot of what happened in the 1960s is kind of a fairy tale. It doesn’t seem to be alive for people in your generation. They don’t remember how bad it could be, how we were a segregated society. Separate water fountains, waiting rooms and bus stations, separate toilets, everything. And that was the world that Dr. King was trying to change,” Seeliger said.

Clarence Seeliger

“Remember, there were laws on the books that said things had to be segregated. And so truly, in a very real sense, Dr. King was, in the best sense, an outlaw. He was challenging the laws that were being used to perpetrate these horrible conditions on a whole section of our population, our African-American citizens. ... What Judge Mitchell did was an outward manifestation of the oppression that all African-Americans faced, in that a prestigious man who was standing up for the rights of all of our citizens as well as African-Americans could be abused in such a manner, think, sent a message across the country.”

Gordon asked Seeliger to describe Judge Mitchell.

“Well, he was a racist first of all, and he didn’t mind saying so ... he could be very abusive toward African-Americans who appeared in his court,” Seeliger said. “He was an absolute dictator in the courtroom. There was no one to control him. They used to call it Judge Oscar’s Court.”

Decatur Mayor emerita **Elizabeth Wilson**, in her oral history interview with **Adelaide Taylor** and **Liza Watson**, drew a direct line between the “strength and determination” King showed in Decatur and her refusal to be intimidated when the Ku Klux Klan marched on Decatur Square; her willingness to challenge the Decatur/DeKalb library system to give her the first library card issued to an African-American; her persistence in demanding that Decatur High School accept black students; and her ambition to run for mayor.



Decatur Mayor emerita Elizabeth Wilson being interviewed by Adelaide Taylor and Liza Watson.



Credits: Michael Warren, Associated Press Archives

“Dr King’s being arrested, serving in jail, being in DeKalb County, that helped me to want to be in the position of making a difference,” Wilson said. “That whole history of the Kennedys, politically, that is when I saw how the political system could really work, because I guess if Daddy King and Coretta had never contacted the Kennedys about helping to get Martin out of Reidsville, I don’t know how long he would have been there.”

“I was there when King was arrested. I was here when they brought him from Reidsville. I was at the airport, I saw him get off the plane,” she said. “When the plane landed it was like the sea opened up and it was a world of people.”

Elizabeth Wilson

Martin Luther King Jr's trial and
sentencing in Decatur, GA



Liza Watson thanked the guests, saying “we really appreciate the panelists, you guys sharing your stories and really educating us on so much that's happened in our city and in Atlanta.” Turning to her fellow students, she said: “We just want to leave you guys with the message to always fight for what you believe in. And to always go through your lives, through your futures with love and understanding and always trying to be the best people that you can be.”



WHY THE MARKER?

“It would be marvelous to have a marker that pays homage to what took place here, because it is very significant. You know, this is a great place to let people know Decatur was a part of this, because we don't think of Decatur as being a part of that. ... I think the recognition of something momentous that happened right here should inspire people to say, well, what, we don't want this anymore. We don't want this to happen again.” -- **Roslyn Pope**, author of “An Appeal for Human Rights.”

“That marker has extreme historical significance, because when King was arrested and put in jail and the Kennedy campaign intervened to get him out. ... that then made the difference in the election of Kennedy over Nixon, and the course of history because of it.” -- Atlanta Student Movement co-founder **Charles Black**.

“I believe a monument to the jailing of Dr. King and what happened thereafter -- that is to say, how he got out after the imposition of the Kennedy presidential campaign that caused Dr. King to get free on bond, to be removed from Reidsville, and ultimately to have that conviction set aside by the Court of Appeals -- was an important issue across the board. Dr. King should be remembered for that, and sad to say, so should Judge Mitchell, because what he did, what he caused, and what he represented.” -- DeKalb County Judge **Clarence Seeliger**.

“I think your generation have no clue as to Dr. King ever doing anything in Decatur or Dekalb county. So I think the marker helps. ... I think it's not just going to be history for the black community, but it's going to be history for the whole community. And the whole community needs to know. -- Decatur Mayor emerita **Elizabeth Wilson**

If you're interested in more information, see our [research paper here](#). And if you'd like to support this campaign, contact Daxton Pettus at daxpettus@gmail.com, Genesis Reddicks 18generedd@csdecaturnet, DHS teacher Katrina Walker at kwalker@csdecaturnet, or advisor Michael Warren at mdwsfc64@gmail.com for more information.

COMMEMORATING KING: MARKER PROJECT TEAM

