A H I S T O R Y  G U I D E

Louis Armstrong and the Civil Rights Movement

Written by Anna Celenza
In the serialized story, *The Story of Louis Armstrong*, author Anna Celenza provides details about the Civil Rights Movement and the role Louis Armstrong played in it. In Chapter One, she writes of Storyville, the segregated neighborhood where Armstrong grew up. In Chapter Six, she explains that Armstrong appreciated Chicago for many reasons, but one important reason was the civil rights guaranteed in Illinois State Constitution. In Chapters Nine and Ten, she tells about Armstrong’s difficulties in finding places to stay while he was on the road with his bands. In Chapter Eleven, she cites critics who thought Armstrong’s movies promoted negative stereotypes of Blacks and his response to the criticism. The lyrics to the song quoted in Chapter Twelve express his feelings about discrimination. Chapter Thirteen tells about Louis Armstrong’s refusal to visit Russia as part of a cultural exchange program. He reasoned that he could account for segregation to people outside the United States. President Eisenhower listened to Armstrong. He called in troops to make sure black students were able to enter school in Arkansas. The story of the “Little Rock Nine” is explained below, along with other milestone events that are part of the Civil Rights Movement.

In this guide, you’ll find descriptions of other major events connected with the Civil Rights Movement that place Louis Armstrong’s contributions in historical context. You will find other music references and the text for Martin Luther King Jr’s speech, “I Have a Dream.” Music performed by Louis Armstrong and others involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the poetry of King added considerable power to the movement.

**Part 1: WHAT WAS THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?**

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

When Thomas Jefferson wrote these words in 1776 as part of the Declaration of Independence, he defined the promise of America—freedom and equality for all. These words had little meaning, however, for the millions of African Americans held in slavery prior to the Civil War and later denied political, economic, educational, and social equality by unjust segregation laws and social customs. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States was a political and social struggle aimed at establishing racial equality and giving African Americans full citizenship rights. Shortly after World War II, individuals and civil rights organizations across America challenged segregation laws and discrimination with a variety of activities, including protest marches, boycotts, and refusal to follow segregation laws. Some scholars believe that the Civil Rights Movement began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and ended with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but there is much debate about the movement’s true origins and whether it has ended yet. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once eloquently said: “The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.
Part 2: SOME MAJOR EVENTS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1954 Brown v. the Board of Education: On May 17, the Supreme Court ruled on the landmark case Brown v. the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, unanimously agreeing that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. This ruling paved the way for large-scale desegregation. This was a great victory for the NAACP and attorney Thurgood Marshall, who later returned to the Supreme Court as the United State’s first black justice.

1955 The Murder of Emmett Till: In August, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago named Emmett Till was visiting family in Mississippi when he was kidnapped, brutally beaten, shot, and dumped in the Tallahatchie River for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Two white men, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, were arrested for the murder but then acquitted by an all-white jury. The men later boasted about committing the murder in a Look magazine interview. The case became one of the major stories that fueled the Civil Rights Movement.

1955 The Montgomery Bus Boycott: On December 1, NAACP member Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man, and was subsequently arrested. In response to her arrest the African American community in Montgomery, Alabama began a bus boycott that did not end until the city buses were officially desegregated on December 21, 1956. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was instrumental in leading the boycott.

1957 The Little Rock Nine: In Little Rock, Arkansas, the formerly all-white Central High School discovered that integration is easier said than done. On the orders of Governor Orval E. Faubus, a self-proclaimed white supremacist, nine black students were blocked from entering the school. In response, President Eisenhower sent federal troops and the National Guard to intervene on behalf of the students, who became known as the “Little Rock Nine.”

1960 The Greensboro Sit-in: On February 1, four black students from North Carolina A&T College sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Woolworth’s Department Store. Although they were refused service, they remained at the counter. This event triggered many similar nonviolent protests throughout the South. Six months later the original four protesters were served lunch at the same Woolworth’s counter. Student sit-ins became effective throughout the Deep South in integrating parks, swimming pools, theaters, libraries, and other public facilities.

1961 The Freedom Riders: On May 4, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began sending student volunteers on bus trips to test the implementation of new laws prohibiting segregation. One of the first two groups of “freedom riders” as they were called encountered a problem two weeks later, when a mob in Alabama set the riders’ bus on fire. Still, the program continued, and by the end of the summer 1,000 volunteers, both black and white, had become active in the program.

1961 The Integration of the University of Mississippi: On October 4, James Meredith was the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Violence and riots surrounding the incident caused President Kennedy to send 5,000 federal troops to Mississippi.

1963 March on Washington: On August 28, about 200,000 people joined the March on Washington. Congregating at the Lincoln Memorial, participants listened as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.
“We Shall Overcome” became the anthem that set America marching toward racial equality in the twentieth century. Derived from Charles Tindley’s “I Will Overcome,” a spiritual that helped African Americans endure the long and brutal years of slavery, “We Shall Overcome” focused on racial unity and hope for the future:

1. We shall overcome
   We shall overcome
   We shall overcome some day

   Chorus:
   Oh deep in my heart
   I do believe
   We shall overcome some day

2. We’ll walk hand in hand
   We’ll walk hand in hand
   We’ll walk hand in hand some day

   Chorus…

3. We shall all be free
   We shall all be free
   We shall all be free some day

   Chorus…

4. We are not afraid
   We are not afraid
   We are not afraid today

   Chorus…

5. We are not alone
   We are not alone
   We are not alone today

   Chorus…

6. The whole wide world around
   The whole wide world around
   The whole wide world around some day

   Chorus…

7. We shall overcome
   We shall overcome
   We shall overcome some day

   Chorus.
**B)** “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written by James R. and James W. Johnson in 1899. Since then, it has become one of the most cherished songs in the African American community. Adopted by the NAACP as its official song in the 1920s, it was sung throughout the Civil Rights Movement and can still be heard today at gatherings across the country. The lyrics describe a history of struggle as well as optimism for the future:

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.
A History Guide: LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Part 3: SOME IMPORTANT SONGS AND SPEECHES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

C) One of the most memorable moments in the Civil Rights Movement occurred on August 28, 1963. On that day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his most eloquent and inspiring speech—“I Have a Dream”—to a crowd of eager listeners. As this speech reveals, Dr. King had great hope and faith in the success of the Civil Rights Movement. He used metaphors and poetry to get his message across clearly, and throughout the speech he stressed his mission: to use nonviolence as a method of protesting inequalities (“Soul force against militant force”) and to walk together as a unified group in search of freedom.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition. In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

So we have come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment and to underestimate the determination of the Negro. This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.

The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges. But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold that leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our
creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.

We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.” I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor’s lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with a new meaning, “My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.” And if America is to be a great nation, this must become...
true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops
of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty
mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the
heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom
ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let
freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!
But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone
Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout
Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every
hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every
mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from
every village and every hamlet, from every state and
every city, we will be able to speed up that day when
all of God’s children, black men and white men,
Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be
able to join hands and sing in the words of the old
Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God
Almighty, we are free at last!”