

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Speech in Rocky Mount, N.C., November 1962 ^[1]

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By Michael Hill, Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2006; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, July 2023

<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[2]

In his speech, Nov. 27, 1962, in a gym at Atlantic Avenue and Spruce Street in Rocky Mount, NC, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a speech with the refrain "I have a dream," used in his Lincoln Memorial address in 1963.

A speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. in Rocky Mount on November 27, 1962, has drawn much attention. In that address, before 1,800 in the gymnasium at Booker T. Washington High School (that building presently is a city recreation center gym), Dr. King used a number of expressions that made their way into the landmark speech at the Lincoln Memorial, part of the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. In Rocky Mount, Dr. King began by noting that he had been in North Carolina "many, many times" but that this was his "first time in this section." (He paid multiple visits to Durham and Raleigh.)

Near the close he built toward these lines: "I have a dream that one day right here in Rocky Mount, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will meet at the table of brotherhood, knowing that one God brought man to the face of the Earth. I have a dream tonight that one day my little daughter and my two sons will grow up in a world not conscious of the color of their skin, but only conscious of the fact that they are members of the human race. . . ."

Some have asserted that this marked the first use of the "I have a dream" phrase. Clayborne Carson, King Papers editor at Stanford University, has examined the address and declines to say that this was the first such use but states that it "appears to be an important new rhetorical formulation." Attorney Drew Hansen in 2003 published *The Dream*, a book-length account of the landmark speech. He indicates that the words were used in Albany, Georgia, prior to their use in Rocky Mount. Near the end of his life, in an interview, Dr. King recalled that the tired Georgia audience failed to be moved by the words. By the spring and summer of 1963 the words were among the most frequent of his set pieces.

[NC State CHASS](#) ^[3] - [Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s November 1962 speech in Rocky Mount, North Carolina](#) ^[4]

Update from N.C. Government & Heritage Library staff:

An original tape recording of the Rocky Mount speech was discovered September of 1999 when journalist David Blount was at an event and spoke to someone about a recording of the speech. Mary Wilkins made the original reel-to-reel recording and sent a copy of it to Blount. The recording was then apparently misfiled, possibly due to hurricane flooding that occurred in September and October of 1999. The recording was rediscovered in the collection of the Braswell Memorial Library in Rocky Mount by N.C. State University English professor Jason Miller. Miller was working on research for his book "Langston Hughes and American Lynching culture" (2011, University Press of Florida). In his research, Miller observed direct connections between Hughes' poetry on dreams and King's speeches. He also observed that King used passages from these poems in his oratory. The damaged audio tape was restored and digitized, and an excerpt can be heard via WUNC radio.

References:

Blount, David. "Dream Starter." Rocky Mount Telegram, September 5, 1999. Accessed July 26, 2023 at <https://www.newspapers.com/article/rocky-mount-telegram/25367802/>. ^[5]

Hansen, Drew. *The Dream: MLK Jr. and the Speech That Inspired a Nation*(2003)

Transcript of November 27, 1962, speech taken from audiotape, copy of transcript in marker files, Research Branch, North Carolina Office of Archives and History

Rocky Mount Telegram, November 28, 1962 and January 14, 2001
(Raleigh) *The Carolinian*, December 8, 1962

E-mail from Clayborne Carson, Director, King Papers, to Pete Armstrong, September 27, 2005, copy in marker files,

Crow, Jeffrey; Paul D. Escott; and Flora J. Hatley, eds., *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (2002)

Additional Resources:

Kulikowski, Mick. "MLK's First Dream". NC State News, August 11, 2015. <https://news.ncsu.edu/2015/08/mlks-first-dream/> [6]

Shelton, Charles. "Listen to the First Recording of MLK's 'I Have a Dream' In Rocky Mount in 1962." August 11, 2015. WUNC91.5. <https://www.wunc.org/arts-culture/2015-08-11/listen-to-the-first-record...> [7]

Miller, W. Jason. 2011. *Langston Hughes and American lynching culture*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

ABC11. "Never Before Heard Recording of MLK's 'I Have a Dream' Speech in North Carolina Revealed." August 11, 2015. <https://abc11.com/mlk-i-have-a-dream-speech-high-school-gymnasium-rocky-...> [8]

Subjects:

Black and African American People [9]

Civil Rights [10]

Segregation [11]

Origin - location:

Nash County [12]

Rocky Mount [13]

From:

Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History. [14]

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Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/martin-luther-king-jr-speech-rocky-mount-1962> [2] <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> [3] <https://soundcloud.com/nc-state-chass> [4] <https://soundcloud.com/nc-state-chass/excerpt-from-martin-luther-king-jrs-november-1962-speech-in-rocky-mount-north-carolina> [5] <https://www.newspapers.com/article/rocky-mount-telegram/25367802/> [6] <https://news.ncsu.edu/2015/08/mlks-first-dream/> [7] <https://www.wunc.org/arts-culture/2015-08-11/listen-to-the-first-recording-of-mlks-i-have-a-dream-in-rocky-mount-in-1962-audio#stream/0> [8] <https://abc11.com/mlk-i-have-a-dream-speech-high-school-gymnasium-rocky-mount/921154/> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/african-americans> [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/civil-rights> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/segregation> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-19> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/rocky-0> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/research-bran>