King in Charlottesville

March 25, 1963
Old Cabell Hall,
University
of Virginia

In one of several of visits to Virginia, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited the University of Virginia on March 25, 1963, to speak to nearly 900 students, faculty, and community members in Old Cabell Hall at the invitation of the university's student chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, chaired by then-student Wesley Harris.

In his speech, Dr. King emphasized the power of non-violence, the need to end segregation, and the value of taking part in the political process. He told the audience that, "If democracy is to live, segregation must die," and that, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

At the time of Dr. King's visit, Charlottesville had only recently begun the process of integrating its schools. Charlottesville's Lane High School and Venable Elementary School had closed for five months in 1958-1959 in resistance to the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling. The University of Virginia had admitted its first African American student, Gregory Swanson, into its law school in 1950, but it was not until 1962 that Roy Willis became the first African American student to graduate from the College of Arts & Sciences, the university's largest school. In 1963, inviting Dr. King to speak at Virginia's universities had not been without controversy; in Lexington, the board of visitors of Washington and Lee University had recently blocked students' attempt to bring Dr. King to the university to speak. The University of Virginia, however, did not offer such resistance, though many school officials did not acknowledge his visit.

Dr. King was greeted in Old Cabell Hall with a standing ovation, and he received a second standing ovation at the conclusion of speech. He ended with words that he would echo months later at the March on Washington, "We will be able to speed up the day when all God's children can sing the Negro spiritual, 'We are free at last; thank God, we are free at last!'"

For more on Dr. King's time in Charlottesville and on the University of Virginia's ongoing celebration of King's life and work, visit **MLK.VIRGINIA.EDU**. See also the University's Office of the Vice President and Chief Officer for Diversity and Equity at **VPDIVERSITY.VIRGINIA.EDU**.

Dr. King in Old Cabell Hall in 1963

Wesley and William Harris present a plaque in Old Cabell Hall commemorating of Dr. King's visit to the University of Virginia
Photo by Dan Addison, University Communications

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