

PULLOUT

Bayard Rustin's Activism & Perseverance

Born in 1912 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Bayard Rustin was taught Quaker beliefs such as pacifism and nonviolence from an early age by his grandmother, Julia Davis Rustin, who was a Quaker. In 1942, he joined an interfaith peace organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). While at FOR, he not only studied Mahatma Gandhi's concept of satyagraha, which employed nonviolence as a tactic against injustice, but he also enacted it. For example, in 1947, he led a group of eighteen men and women on a two-week trip through Virginia and North Carolina to test the state segregation laws on interstate buses. Known as the Journey of Reconciliation, this nonviolent resistance later inspired the Freedom Rides of 1961. In 1953, A. J. Muste, the executive secretary of FOR, asked Bayard Rustin to resign from the organization because Bayard Rustin refused to hide his identity as a gay man.

Leaders of the civil rights movement recognized Bayard Rustin's work in pacifism and nonviolence when they called upon him to work with Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) at the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Bayard recalled meeting MLK at this time: "We hit it off immediately, particularly in terms of the whole concept of nonviolence."¹ Though he was later asked to leave because MLK and his other advisors worried that Bayard's sexual orientation would draw negative attention to the bus boycott, Bayard Rustin retreated to Birmingham, Alabama, where he continued to help MLK from a distance, including working as a ghostwriter for a news article about the events occurring in the bus boycott.

Bayard Rustin served as a confidant and advisor to MLK: "I think he [MLK] needed someone to talk to. I think he depended on me.... I would tell him the truth."² Their friendship was not without conflict. In 1960, when threatened with a smear campaign against him by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., a member of the U.S. Congress who falsely accused him of being in a relationship with Bayard Rustin, MLK conceded. He cut Bayard Rustin out of his inner circle and distanced himself.

Though disheartened, Bayard Rustin continued to work as an activist in the Civil Rights Movement and

eventually began work on an idea for a huge protest in the form of a march in Washington, DC. In 1963, with the help of A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin convinced MLK to participate in this march. As other civil rights leaders signed on, many raised concerns about Bayard Rustin leading the march. Therefore, A. Philip Randolph agreed to be the director on the condition that Bayard Rustin was made deputy director—a move that MLK fully supported even when others pushed back. As deputy director of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Bayard Rustin set up headquarters in New York City and led the effort to organize the march. With over 250,000 attendees, this march remains one of the largest forms of protest to take place in the United States.

Notes

1. John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 230.
2. D'Emilio, 238.



Bayard Rustin and Dr. Eugene Reed

Bayard & Martin Comparing Photographs

The Google Slides presentation can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/2th8aa8c>

Childhood

Bayard Rustin was born on March 17, 1912, in West Chester, PA. He was raised by his grandparents Janifer and Julia Davis Rustin. Janifer was born an enslaved person but was freed one year after his birth. Bayard grew up attending the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. He also grew up with Quaker beliefs that his grandmother, Julia, taught him, including the philosophy of nonviolence, i.e., using nonviolent actions to resist injustices and evil.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on Jan. 15, 1929, in Atlanta, GA. He was raised by his mother Alberta Williams King and father Martin Luther King Sr., who was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. He was the middle child with one older sister, Christine King Farris, and one younger brother, Alfred Daniel.

Stanley Wolfson/Library of Congress



Bayard Rustin

Don Rice/Library of Congress



Martin Luther King Jr.

Images to Compare:

1. Photograph of Julia Davis Rustin (Bayard's grandmother) from *Troublemaker for Justice* by Jacqueline Houtman, Walter Neagle, and Michael G. Long (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2019), 4.
2. Photograph of Janifer Rustin (Bayard's grandfather) from *Troublemaker for Justice*, 6.
3. Photograph of MLK's parents, Alberta Williams King and Martin Luther King Sr., from the photo essay "29 Facts about Martin Luther King Jr." on *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* website.
4. Photograph of Martin Luther King Sr. preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church from *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia*, published online by the Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

Work

Bayard Rustin attended Wilberforce University in the fall of 1932 on a music scholarship. He left one year later because he would not be part of the required military training, due to his Quaker beliefs in non-violence and pacifism. He joined an interfaith peace organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), to spread a message of peace across the U.S. instead of attending university and earning a degree.

On January 12, 1944, Bayard was arrested for not joining the military to fight in World War II and spent over two years in jail because of his beliefs. He moved to New York City after his release. In 1947, he engaged in nonviolent action to test the new law that forced the desegregation of bus passengers traveling between states. He boarded a bus in spring of 1947 and sat in the section reserved for whites. He was eventually arrested and sentenced to serve on a chain gang for thirty days, but his actions brought to light the refusal of Southern states to honor the bus desegregation law.

In 1948, he traveled to India for seven weeks of training in nonviolence techniques, which he put to use when he organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and insisted that Martin Luther

King Jr.—his good friend at the time—should give the last speech of the event to end the day.

Martin Luther King Jr. graduated from Morehouse College with a degree in sociology. He attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, and graduated with a divinity degree in May of 1951. He started Boston University in 1951 and graduated with his doctorate in theology in 1955, earning the title of Dr. King.

Before he finished his doctorate, he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL, in September 1954. This set the young pastor up to be a part of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed to lead the mass movement and coordinate the boycott, which lasted 381 days. On December 5, 1955, he was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and in February 1956, he was arrested for his role in the bus boycott, a nonviolent tactic used to fight against the injustice of segregation in the U.S. His work in the Montgomery Bus Boycott catapulted him to a national leader of the civil rights movement.

Images to Compare:

1. Bayard Rustin speaking to a crowd in 1965, photograph by Stanley Wolfson, Library of Congress. (See facing page)
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking to a crowd gathered for an anti-war demonstration in 1967, photograph by Don Rice, Library of Congress. (See facing page)
3. Various photographs of Bayard Rustin speaking, from The NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project website. This webpage also includes a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr., speaking to the crowd during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom with Bayard Rustin visible behind him. This photograph is also included in *Troublemaker for Justice*, page 3.
4. Civil rights leaders talk with reporters after meeting with President Kennedy following the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in DC, photograph by Warren Leffler, Library of Congress. Notice that MLK, representing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and John Lewis, representing the Southern Non-violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) are present, but Bayard is not, even though he organized the march. He also helped start SCLC but was not allowed to be a leader in the organization because of his sexual orientation.
5. Bayard Rustin in front of a sign advertising the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 7, 1963 (21 days before the march), photograph by Orlando Fernandez, Library of Congress.
6. Photograph of Bayard Rustin's mugshot from 1945, from "Bayard Rustin: The Inmate that Prison Could Not Handle," on the Rediscovering Black History blog on The National Archives website. This photograph is also included in *Troublemaker for Justice*, page 54.
7. Photograph of MLK's mugshot, from "Dr. King's Complex Relationship with the Camera," *The New York Times*.

Identities & Injustices

Bayard Rustin identified as both an African American and an out gay man. The intersection of his two identities created unique obstacles for him during his life that he navigated with persistence and a firm belief in nonviolence and social justice. He experienced the injustices of living in a racist society like many African Americans. However, within his own community of African Americans—and especially among the leaders of the civil rights movement—he experienced extreme prejudice and injustices because of his sexual orientation. It was homophobia that relegated him to a lesser role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and prevented him from being officially named the director of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, though he served in this role behind-the-scenes. It was homophobia that also influenced his friendships with many other civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King Jr. Homophobia and prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community also prevented him from marrying the man he loved, Walter Neagle.

Bayard met Walter Neagle in 1977, late in his life, and they became partners for ten years until his death in 1987. They could never get legally married in the U.S., so Bayard Rustin adopted him as his son. This was a common practice in the LGBTQ+ community because it was the only way for same-sex couples to attain legal protection for each other. In Bayard Rustin's *New York Times* obituary, his partner Walter Neagle was only identified as his "administrative assistant and adopted son,"



Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King

demonstrating an oppressive act of silence even after his death.

Martin Luther King Jr. faced racism in the U.S. because of his African American identity. This racism manifested in multiple ways for him and other African Americans. One such example was the segregation of buses in Montgomery, AL, that required African Americans to ride at the back of the bus and give up their seat for white riders if it was crowded. In fact, it was the issue of segregated buses that brought Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King Jr. together for the first time.

Martin Luther King Jr. married Coretta Scott in 1953, and they had four children together. His father officiated the wedding at the home of Coretta's parents in Alabama.

Images to Compare:

1. Photographs of Bayard Rustin and Walter Neagle as a couple, from "Long Before Same-Sex Marriage, 'Adopted Son' Could Mean 'Life Partner,'" *StoryCorps*, NPR.
2. Photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. with his wife and four children, from "Martin Luther King's Heirs Milk a Legacy: Our View," *USA Today*.
3. Photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King on their wedding day in 1953, from a photo essay "15 Photos That Show Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King," on the *Essence Magazine* website. This photograph might be paired with a blank image representing that Bayard Rustin could not get married to Walter Neagle because of the discriminatory practices against the LGBTQ community, in order to reveal the homophobia Bayard Rustin faced due to the intersectionality of his identities.
4. A Photograph of a segregated bus in Birmingham, AL, from "60 Years After Rosa Parks, Montgomery's Civil Rights History Remembered," *Alabama News Center*.