

COMMENTARY: Acknowledge history, good and bad

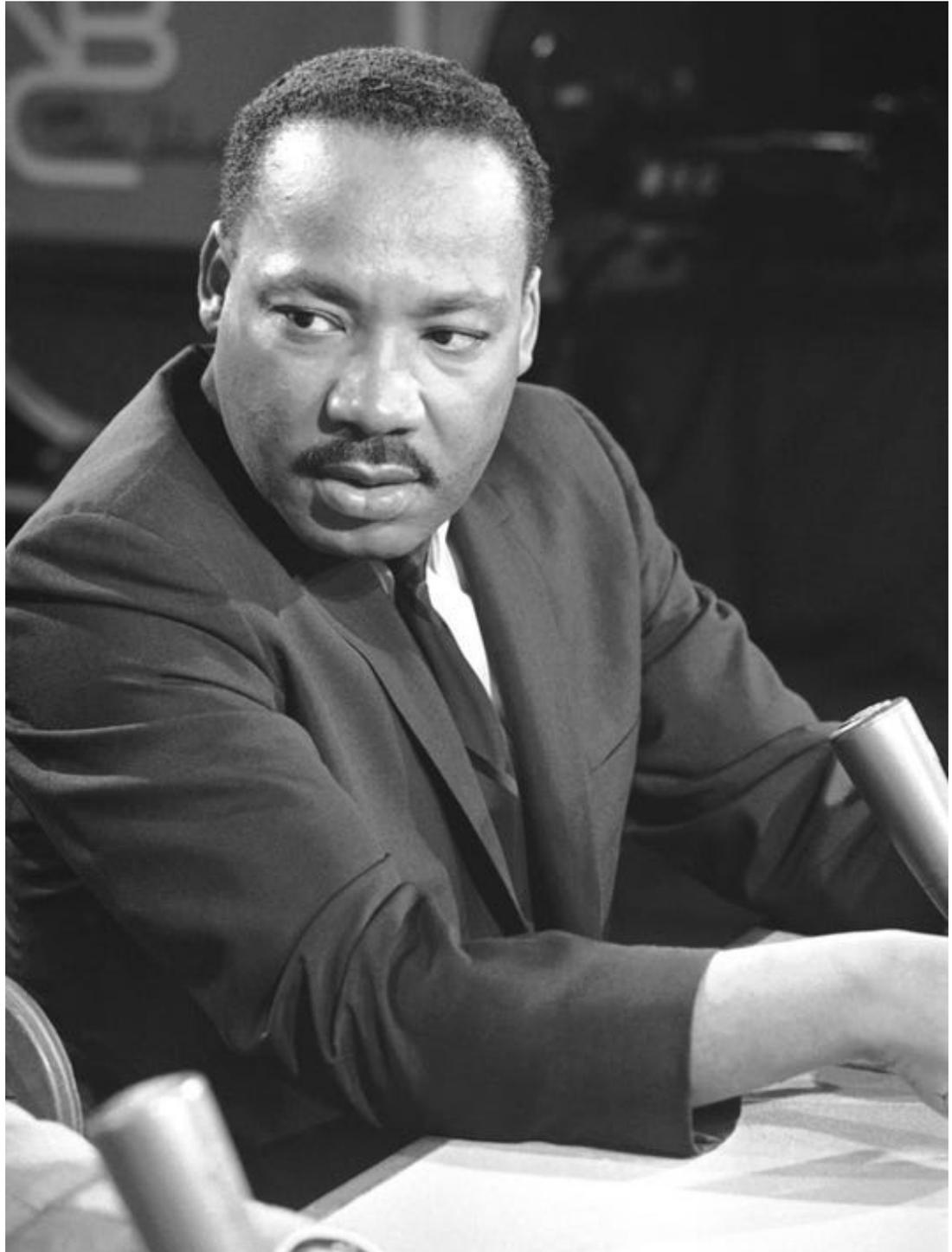
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(Photo: AP)

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What should a town do when part of its history puts it in a bad light? Should it own up to it? Tuck it under the rug? That's a question I've been wrestling with for the past couple weeks as a group of people have proposed that a memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. be placed in my hometown of Maple Shade.



The memorial would not be your average civil rights monument. It would commemorate the place where, on June 12, 1950, a 20-year-old King (then a graduate student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania), his classmate and their dates were refused service at Mary's Cafe, a bar on Main Street off Route 73. The bar's owner, Ernest Nichols, not only didn't serve them; he told the group to leave. He got loud, pulled out a gun and fired it off to make his point.

King and his classmate, Walter McCall, were incensed. They drove to the Maple Shade police station and filed a complaint, which cited New Jersey's anti-discrimination laws, passed in 1945. Nichols was arrested, but the case was dismissed after three white Penn students refused to testify.

The incident is cited by some King scholars as a formative experience, one of the reasons he focused his ministry on civil rights.

Growing up, the King story was more of a suburban myth than historical fact, and many in town still question what happened, or if it really did happen in the first place.

The site of Mary's Cafe was razed in 2010 and is now a shoulder of an on-ramp. That's where I went this Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and watched as a small group, led by activist Patrick Duff, historian William Kelly and Camden County NAACP President Colandus "Kelly" Francis gathered to express their support for the placement of a memorial on the patch of grass.

As a native Shader, I can't help but be conflicted about commemorating what amounts to an embarrassing chapter in my town's history. What does it say that I grew up in a town where such an egregious incident took place?

Maybe that's why Dennis Weaver, Maple Shade's informal historian, seems so dead set against it. "I Vote NO!" he wrote in a post he's since deleted. "Who wants to see that coming into town! He had nothing to do with our town's heritage to celebrate."

Another, more reasonable, take comes from Rob Wells, a member of Maple Shade Township Council and former mayor.

"We own our history, whether it's good or bad," he told me over the phone. Wells points out that Maple Shade is far more racially diverse than it was when we both were growing up, and the township manager, Jack Layne, is an African-American.

On Thursday, the council heard the outline of the group's proposal. That marked the first time the town had acknowledged the King event happened in any official forum.

Maple Shade's Main Street, its custard stand and its baseball fields run through my blood. Growing up, I rode my bike to my grandparents' house or to serve Mass as an altar boy. I ate more than my fair share of candy from the 5 and 10 (where I ate some awesome Tacconelli's pizza recently). By the time I turned 18, I couldn't wait to leave and see the world.

Thirty years later, with kids of my own, I now see what a special place it is. Maybe that's why the thought about King and his friends getting run out of town — the same year my grandparents moved there from the Kensington section of Philadelphia — stings so much. They never knew the Maple Shade I know.

"It should be remembered. It was part of his life," Clayborne Carson, a Stanford historian and editor of the multivolume "The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.," told me over the phone.

Like me, Carson is unsure what form that remembrance should take. A roadside plaque wouldn't exactly entice people to pull over. Carson suggested a website dedicated to the event, complete with primary documents and other accounts that might be added, to ferret out folklore from fact.

"Then you're not making any great claim about its historical significance," Carson said, "You're just saying it happened."

Maybe, by celebrating all of our history, both good and bad, we can live up to the slogan put on signs that welcome people to Maple Shade: "Nice town, friendly people."

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