The 1963 March on Washington:
A Montage of the Civil Rights Movement

**Topic:** March on Washington

**Grade level:** 7-8

**Subjects:** Social Studies, American History, Biography, Art

**Time required:** 2-3 class periods

**Goals/Rationale**
The modern civil rights movement is closely identified in most people’s minds with the life and times of Martin Luther King Jr., and almost every American schoolchild is familiar with the phrase, “I have a dream.” But students may not know the context in which King’s memorable words were spoken. They may also be unaware of the many different groups and leaders that were part of the movement, and the different ways that they were working to end discrimination against African Americans.

The diversity of the civil rights movement was perhaps most evident on August 28, 1963 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—the event at which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his most famous speech. In this lesson students examine the official program for the March on Washington to learn about the event itself and about others who played a leading role in the civil rights struggle. They research different organizations and civil rights leaders and then create a montage to depict the diverse makeup of the movement in visual form.

**Essential question:** Who else spoke at the 1963 March on Washington along with King, and how did the people on the program reflect the diversity of the civil rights movement?

**Connections to Curricula (Standards)**

*National Center for History in the Schools:* Era 9/Postwar United States History Standards
*Standard 4:* The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

*Massachusetts History and Social Science Frameworks:* US History II Learning Standards
*USII.25:* Analyze the origins, goals, and key events of the Civil Rights movement.
*Event F:* The 1963 March on Washington

**Objectives**
Students will:
- learn about leaders of the 1963 March on Washington and the organizations that participated.
- understand that there was diversity *within* the civil rights movement—that people of many different backgrounds and concerns were involved and that civil rights organizations fought discrimination in different ways.
• recognize that women played an important role in the civil rights movement even though the gender inequalities of the times prevented them from assuming leadership positions;
• practice examining and interpreting a primary source document.

Materials
• Official program for the event at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963 ("Today's Program" in "The Event" subchapter.)
• Selection of photos showing speakers and people who participated in the March (found in "The Event" subchapter.)

Historical Background and Context
In 1941, African-American labor leader A. Philip Randolph conceived the idea of a mass demonstration in the nation’s capital to obtain greater equality for blacks in the workplace. It was called off after President Roosevelt issued an executive order banning discrimination in war industries and creating the first Fair Employment Practices Commission. Randolph revived the idea in the fall of 1962, hoping to stage an “Emancipation March for Jobs” on January 1, 1963, the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, he received an unenthusiastic response from other civil rights leaders.

Randolph soon came up with a new proposal, renaming it “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” Working closely with Bayard Rustin, a younger activist who had assisted with the original 1941 effort, he approached other key figures in the movement, including Roy Wilkins, who headed the NAACP, and Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The response remained lukewarm. But after the dramatic confrontations in Birmingham, Alabama in the spring of 1963, Randolph succeeded in galvanizing broad support for the March. It would be an opportunity to bring together the various civil rights groups and their leaders — who had often competed for both influence and support — in an unprecedented display of unity. They chose August 28, 1963 as the date for the event and Rustin was put in charge of organizing it.

Despite initial opposition by the Kennedy administration, plans went forward. The goal of having 100,000 participants was far exceeded by the actual number of demonstrators who converged on Washington D.C. on August 28 from throughout the country — estimated at over 200,000 people. It would prove to be one of the most memorable events of the civil rights era, capped by King’s historic speech.

Procedure
1. Write “I HAVE A DREAM TODAY” on the board and ask students if they know when or where Martin Luther King Jr. gave the speech in which these famous words were said. Other prompts: What was the occasion? Who else was there? Did anyone besides King speak that day?
2. Provide brief background on the March on Washington, using photos included under “Materials.”
3. Introduce the key document. Explain that, as with other such events, people who attended received a program showing the names of speakers, performers and other special guests. Distribute copies of the program (or project it onto a screen).

4. The following questions and discussion points may be used to analyze the document with students, and to help them understand the significance of the individuals and organizations involved in this historic gathering.

- **What made the Lincoln Memorial such a fitting place for this event?**
  Almost everyone was aware that 1963 marked the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. Abraham Lincoln’s symbolic presence helped to send a powerful message to the entire country – to say, in effect, “one hundred years is long enough…the time for full equality is NOW.”

- **Who is the first person listed on the program? What made her such an appropriate choice to sing the national anthem?**
  Marian Anderson’s 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial was a milestone in civil rights history and the memory of that event would add special significance to her singing the anthem.

- **Why was it called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom?**
  One of the chief obstacles that African Americans faced was economic discrimination, being denied both employment opportunities and equal pay for equal work. A. Philip Randolph, the director of the March, had been a highly respected labor union organizer and other labor leaders also played an important part in the civil rights movement. (What was the name of another labor leader who was scheduled to deliver remarks?)

- **Can you identify clergy and leaders of religious groups on the program?**
  Many people took an active part in the fight for civil rights based on strong ethical and religious beliefs. Having Protestant, Catholic and Jewish speakers would demonstrate a unified concern by people of different faiths to the cause of justice for all.

- **Martin Luther King Jr. was a religious leader and he was also the president of a civil rights organization. What was the name of the organization he led?**
  The Southern Christian Leadership Conference brought together black ministers from churches across the South who were committed to using nonviolent methods to end racial discrimination.

- **Leaders of four other civil rights organizations are listed on the program. Who are they and which organizations do they represent?**
  The five major civil rights organizations may have shared many of the same goals but they had different methods and different areas of focus,
and they didn’t always work in a harmonious way. But they did come together to organize the March on Washington.

- **What else do you notice about the roster of speakers? All ten people scheduled for remarks are men—why no women?**
  Even though women were as actively engaged in the fight for civil rights as men, it was a time when men still took the leadership positions, by and large, as they did in government, business and most other fields of work. But things would soon begin to change as the civil rights struggle helped to pave the way for the women’s movement.

- **Which women “fighters for freedom” were honored in the program? Why were each of these women considered heroes in the fight for freedom and justice?**
  Rosa Parks is famous, but many of the other women may be less familiar. Let’s see what we can find out about them, and about others who played a heroic part in the civil rights movement.

5. Divide the class into research teams. Have them use the library and internet to look for more information about the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, individuals listed on the program, and the five major civil rights organizations. Ask each team to bring back biographies, pictures and quotes (excerpts from speeches at the Lincoln Memorial, lines from songs that were sung, etc.)

*Note:* Students may find additional source materials on the National Archives and Records Administration web site. Go to [www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/washington-de/](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/washington-de/)

6. Have students work together to create a montage centering on a photo of the event at the Lincoln Memorial, a copy of the program, pictures of those listed, words that were spoken or sung that day, and information about the groups that participated.

**Assessment**
Point out to students that if their montage were being exhibited in a museum, it would likely be accompanied by an introductory panel providing visitors with an overview of the display and helping them to understand its significance. Assign them to each write at least one page of text describing the March on Washington and how it brought together the various groups and individuals who made up the 1960s civil rights movement.

**Extension**
With the montage as a backdrop, students present excerpts from the speeches and songs from the program at the Lincoln Memorial. A great way to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day!

**Additional resources**
*The March on Washington* by James Haskins tells the story behind the event in a book aimed at middle and high school level readers. *A Dream of Freedom* by Pulitzer Prize-winning author
Diane McWhorter, is also written for this age level and includes a chapter about the March on Washington.

Students can learn more about the seven people who were most responsible for planning the March on Washington in an online exhibit on the Kennedy Library web site. Go to www.jfklibrary.org and select Education > Students > Leaders in the Struggle for Civil Rights.