Philadelphia, near the mausoleums for Charles Eisenlohr, Peter Widener, and Thomas Develon Jr. that Abele had designed. The Corinthian-colonnaded Free Library of Philadelphia, which Abele designed in 1917, can be seen from his gravesite.

FURTHER READING


—Dreck Spurlock Wilson

ABERNATHY, RALPH

(11 Mar. 1926–17 Apr. 1990), clergyman and civil rights leader, was born David Abernathy near Linden, Alabama, the tenth of twelve children of farm owners Will L. Abernathy and Louivery Bell Abernathy. Abernathy spent his formative years on his family's five-hundred-acre farm in rural Marengo County in southwestern Alabama. His father's economic self-sufficiency and industry spared the family from most of the hardships of the Great Depression.

"We didn't know that people were lining up at soup kitchens in cities all over the country," he would recall in his autobiography, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down (Abernathy, 6). Along with other family members, he attended Hopewell Baptist Church, where his father served as a deacon, and decided early to become a preacher, a commitment strengthened by a conversion experience at the age of seven. Abernathy attended high school at all-black Linden Academy, a Baptist-affiliated institution. Having little exposure to whites during his childhood, he remembered being "relatively unaware of racism or segregation" (Abernathy, 28).

In 1944 Abernathy was drafted into the armed services and enlisted as Ralph David Abernathy, a name given to him by his sister Manerva that he would use publicly for the rest of his life. Promoted to the rank of sergeant in the army, Abernathy served with his unit in France during the closing months of World War II, and he did not see combat before Germany's surrender. A bout of rheumatic fever prevented him from accompanying his unit to the Pacific theater, where, he later heard, nearly all of his comrades were killed in a battle on a Japanese-held island.

Returning to Alabama, Abernathy enrolled at Alabama State College in Montgomery. Elected president of the student council during his sophomore year, he led a strike against poor food in the student dining hall and

Ralph Abernathy gives the victory sign from a police van after his arrest in Washington, D.C., during the Poor People's Campaign in June 1968. © Bettmann/CORBIS
the following year led another protest against substandard student housing. In 1948 Abernathy also chose the occasion of Mother’s Day following his mother’s death (his father had died several years earlier) to announce before the Hopewell congregation his call to the ministry. Soon afterward, he was ordained. He graduated from Alabama State College in 1950 with a BS in Mathematics. After serving briefly as a radio disc jockey during the summer of 1950, he spent a year in graduate studies in sociology at Atlanta University.

While in Atlanta, Abernathy attended a service at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he heard a sermon by MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., who was finishing his summer duties as his father’s assistant before returning to his studies at Pennsylvania’s Crozer Theological Seminar. “I stopped to shake his hand and comment on his sermon,” Abernathy later wrote. “At that meeting we both recognized in one another a kindred spirit” (Abernathy, 89).

Abernathy returned to Montgomery to become dean of men at Alabama State, while also serving as minister of a small congregation at Eastern Star Baptist Church in Demopolis. Soon afterward, however, he accepted a call from Montgomery’s hundred-year-old First Baptist Church. In 1952 Abernathy married Juanita Odessa Jones of Uniontown, Alabama, a teacher at the Monroe County Training School in Beatrice, Alabama. The following year, the first of the couple’s four children was born.

In 1954 King moved to Montgomery to assume the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and the Abernathys quickly formed ties with King and his wife, CORETTA SCOTT KING: “Because of Jim Crow we could only have dinner at home. So the four of us did have dinner every night, with Coretta preparing the meal one evening, Juanita the next. And usually conversations among the four of us would last way beyond midnight” (Abernathy, 129). According to Abernathy, the two preachers and their wives discussed plans to turn Montgomery “into a model of social justice and racial unity,” but they did not begin to implement these plans until ROSA PARKS was arrested on 1 December 1955 for refusing a bus driver’s order to give up her seat to a white man (Abernathy, 129). The next day, E. D. NIXON, a local NAACP leader and a Pullman car porter, called Abernathy to seek his help in rallying support for a bus boycott initiated by JO ANN ROBINSON of the Women’s Political Council in Montgomery. Abernathy took the lead in mobilizing the city’s black clergy and other local residents.

After the boycott got off to a successful start on 5 December, Abernathy became program chairman of the newly organized Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)—a name he later took credit for suggesting—and King was elected the MIA’s president. As the boycott continued during the following year, Abernathy became a key figure in the movement. He often spoke at mass meetings, sometimes giving fullsome introductions of King, who would later describe Abernathy as “my closest associate and most trusted friend” (King, Autobiography [1998], 64). Abernathy was one of more than one hundred boycott leaders arrested in February 1956 for violating Alabama’s antiboycott statute. The willingness of the indicted leaders to go to Montgomery’s jail to be arrested demonstrated their resolve and proved to be a turning point in the boycott. After King’s conviction in March was appealed, the trials of Abernathy and the other defendants were postponed by a continuance. In November the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation in Montgomery was illegal, and in the following month Abernathy joined King in riding the city’s first desegregated bus.

In January 1957 Abernathy was among a group of black ministers who gathered in Atlanta to organize a regional group to sustain and expand the bus protests that had occurred in Montgomery and other southern cities. Although he was called away from the meeting owing to the bombing of the First Baptist Church and his parsonage, he returned to form an organization that eventually became the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King became president and Abernathy secretary-treasurer of the new group.

Abernathy accompanied King to most of the subsequent major events of the southern civil rights struggle, joining him in jail during the key campaigns in Albany, Georgia, in 1961 and 1962 and Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.
A year after King moved from Montgomery to Atlanta in order to be closer to SCLC’s headquarters in that city, Abernathy followed him and, at King’s urging, became pastor of Atlanta’s West Hunter Street Baptist Church in August 1961. Abernathy shared King’s firm commitment to nonviolence and traveled with him to Oslo, Norway, in 1964 to attend King’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance ceremony. In 1965 Abernathy was named at King’s request to the new position of vice president at large of SCLC, clarifying his status as King’s successor.

Abernathy continued to work closely with King during the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and was at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when an assassin killed King on April 4. Abernathy was the first person at King’s side. He knelt down and tried to comfort the dying King while cradling his head: “Martin. It’s all right. Don’t worry. This is Ralph.”

After the assassination, Abernathy assumed the presidency of SCLC and continued the Poor People’s Campaign. He later admitted, however, that he lacked many of King’s attributes: “I didn’t have as many degrees as he did and I didn’t have his polish. In addition, my skin was darker, a more important factor in dealing with the white press than anyone would dare admit” (Abernathy, 499). The Resurrection City encampment of antipoverty protesters in Washington, D.C., could be sustained only until July 1968, when Abernathy and the remaining protesters were arrested. He served twenty days in jail. After this setback, Abernathy continued as SCLC’s president, but the group’s effectiveness declined as many of King’s former associates departed.

In 1977 Abernathy left SCLC to make an unsuccessful run to represent an Atlanta district in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Abernathy’s post-SCLC years were marked by continued outspokenness on civil rights issues and some controversy. In the 1980s, he broke ranks with most black leaders to support Ronald Reagan’s presidential candidacy. “Reagan promised me that he would make a jobs program a top priority for his administration,” he later explained. When Abernathy’s autobiography was published in 1989, he again sparked controversy by confirming reports of King’s “weakness for women” (Abernathy, 470). Abernathy denied rumors that King had interracial affairs, saying “He was never attracted to white women and had nothing to do with them, despite the opportunities that may have presented themselves” (Abernathy, 472).

But he suggested that on the night of King’s assassination, King may have been involved in a sexual assignation and argued with another lover. Members of King’s family and some of his former SCLC associates publicly rebuked Abernathy, who defended himself by insisting that King’s dalliances had already been revealed. The year following the publication of his autobiography, Abernathy died at the age of sixty-four.

**FURTHER READING**

Some of Ralph Abernathy’s papers are included in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference collection, Library and Archives of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia. Portions are available on microfilm.


—*Clayborne Carson*

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**AILEY, ALVIN**

(5 Jan. 1931–1 Dec. 1989), actor, dancer, and choreographer, was born in Rogers, Texas, the son of Alvin Ailey, a laborer, and Lula Elizabeth Cliff, a cotton picker and domestic. Before Ailey was a year old, his father abandoned the family, leaving them homeless for close to six years. During that time Ailey and his mother made their way, often by foot, across the unforgiving terrain of the impoverished and bitterly racist Brazos Valley in southeastern Texas to seek shelter with relatives and find work in nearby fields.

A bright, curious child, Ailey joined his mother in the cotton fields as soon