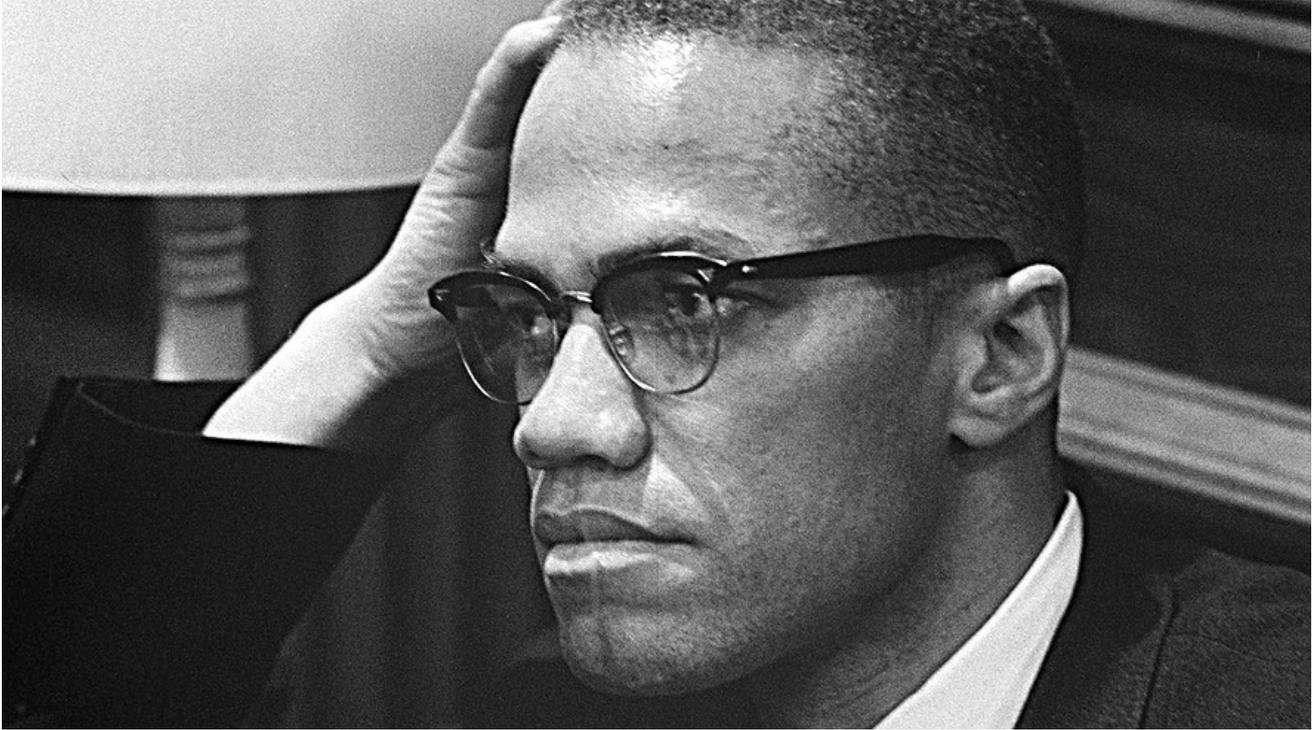


Civil Rights Leaders: Malcolm X

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.20.16

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Malcolm X waiting for a press conference to begin on March 26, 1964. Marion S. Trikosko - U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

Synopsis: Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. He was a well-known black nationalist leader. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was a spokesman for the Nation of Islam. This was an African-American Muslim religious group that still exists. Malcolm X helped the group to grow much bigger. He was an expressive, passionate and naturally gifted speaker who urged blacks to break free from racism "by any means necessary." This included using violence. Malcolm X left the group shortly before his assassination on February 21, 1965. He was killed in New York City while preparing to deliver a speech.

From Omaha To Michigan

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. He was one of eight children. His parents were Louise and Earl Little. Louise was a homemaker and Earl was a preacher who worked for civil rights. He wanted to improve conditions for black people.

Because of this, the family often faced harassment from white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. These groups thought that white people were better than black people. They were often very violent.

When Malcolm X was 4 years old, Klan members smashed all of the family's windows. As a result, Earl Little decided to move the family from Omaha to East Lansing, Michigan.

Shortly after the Littles moved in 1929, a racist gang set their house on fire. The town's emergency responders were all white and refused to help. Two years later, Earl Little's dead body was discovered on some streetcar tracks. Malcolm X's father was probably murdered by white supremacists. His mother never recovered from her shock and sadness.

From High School Success To A Prison Library

Malcolm X was the only black student in his high school. He got very good grades and was well-liked by his classmates. The turning point for Malcolm X came in 1939, when his English teacher told him that his dream of becoming a lawyer was probably not going to happen. Malcolm X dropped out of school the following year, at the age of 15.

After quitting school, Malcolm X moved to Boston. He got a job shining shoes, but he also started selling drugs. In 1946, he was arrested for stealing and sentenced to ten years in jail.

In prison, Malcolm X embraced the idea of black nationalism. He believed that in order to be free and equal, black Americans had to establish their own state separate from white Americans. Malcolm X also converted to the Nation of Islam. When he was released from prison in 1952, he changed his last name to "X." This was meant to honor the unknown name of his African ancestors.

Nation Of Islam

Now a free man, Malcolm X traveled to Detroit, Michigan, where he worked with the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad. Their ideas differed from those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King promoted change by peaceful means.

In 1963, Malcolm X learned that Elijah Muhammad had gone against many of his own teachings. Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam in 1964.

That same year, Malcolm X took a long trip through North Africa and the Middle East. He returned to the United States more hopeful about a peaceful resolution to America's race problems.

On the evening of February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was killed. He was about to deliver a speech in Manhattan, when three gunmen shot him 15 times. He was 39 years old. The men convicted of the assassination were all members of the Nation of Islam.

After his death, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley" was published. The book showed that Malcolm X was an important political and spiritual leader.

Personal Life

In 1958, Malcolm X married Betty Sanders, a fellow member of the Nation of Islam. The couple had six daughters. Sanders later became known as Betty Shabazz. She became an important civil rights and human rights leader in her own right.

In May 2013, Malcolm X's grandson, Malcolm Shabazz, was beaten to death in Mexico City. He was 28 years old. Police said Shabazz died in a robbery.