



## MLK Penned 'I Have a Dream' at Penn School in SC



The Rev. Jesse Jackson, from left, Joan Baez, Ira Sandperl, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dora McDonald (King's secretary) are photographed at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff workshop held at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island in 1966.

**DASHA MORGAN**

**JANUARY 26, 2022**

**St. Helena Island, S.C.** – Out of public view, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent time incognito at a landmark location near Beaufort, South Carolina. Here at Penn Community Services on St. Helena Island, in the heart of the South Carolina Sea Islands, he strategized his thoughts and plans for his civil rights movement. King stood fast in his belief for social justice and non-violence.

“Violence may murder the liar, but it doesn’t murder the lie,” King said. “It doesn’t establish truth ... Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn’t murder hate. It may increase hate.”

He visited Penn Community Center five times between 1964 and 1967. Here he worked on and drafted his "I Have a Dream" speech, as well as plan and strategize the March on Washington. He said then "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." He worked in a secluded corner of the campus in a simple wooden cottage called the Gantt Cottage. After his death, the staff at Penn Center found portions of his handwritten "I Have a Dream" speech and turned them over to the King family.

### **Meeting Place of Revolutionaries**

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was just one of many groups that used this quiet campus of older buildings to plot radical strategies. At the time, it was one of the few places blacks and whites could meet, discuss and argue issues and strategies. Many human rights activities visited the campus and hammered out their thoughts. CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), the Southern Regional Council, the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, the World Peace Foundation, the NAACP and the American Friends Committee were among those to visit. John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and Joan Baez all traveled there to be with King, taking time to join arms and sing "We Shall Overcome."



*"WE MAY HAVE ALL COME ON DIFFERENT SHIPS,  
BUT WE'RE IN THE SAME BOAT NOW." --REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.*



Gantt Cottage – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's Penn Center Home  
© SCIWAY 2008

ST. HELENA ISLAND, S.C. □ In the hour between sunset and nightfall, the view from this slate-blue cabin consists of a steadily darkening palette. The salt marsh silvers into stone gray, the grassy hummocks ash away into soft black. A blue heron, perhaps feeling conspicuously colorful, flies away.

The scene was intended to soothe the sore eyes of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But as evidence of just how much he needed the kind of solace it offered, Dr. King died before the cabin was finished. He was assassinated 40 years ago on Friday.

The cabin is part of the Penn Center, founded in 1862 as one of the country's first schools for freed slaves and used more than 100 years later by Dr. King as a retreat center for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

At the time, willing hosts were hard to find for interracial gatherings in the South. The Penn Center, known for vocal advocacy on behalf of the black residents of Beaufort

County and the region, provided an environment where Dr. King could speak and act more freely than when he was on the national stage □ where he could give voice to doubts and disappointments.

## About the Penn Center

By [Shaila Dewan](#)

- *April 4, 2008 New York Times*

SCLC was just one of many groups to use the quiet campus of older buildings to plot radical strategies. At the time, it was one of the few places blacks and whites could meet or spend the night together. (The Penn Center - Island Packet)

It is noted that the most distinct African community in the United States is in South Carolina in the Sea Islands south of Charleston. This remarkable area is populated by the Gullah who were slaves from West Africa. While engaged in agriculture for the South Carolina slave owners, they were largely isolated and, importantly, maintained much of their African language, culture and skills.

In 1862, just before the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, The Penn School, now 'The Penn Center', was created in Beaufort, South Carolina by abolitionist activists from Pennsylvania to educate freed slaves. The Penn Center name is derived from the Quaker William Penn (1644-1718) who was the founder of the State of Pennsylvania. Penn "was an early advocate of democracy and religious freedom, notable for his good relations and successful treaties with the Lenape Native Americans. Under his direction, the city of Philadelphia was planned and developed". (Wikipedia)

In the 1960s, the Penn Center was one of the few places in the South where you could, safely, hold an integrated meeting. It was, at the time, under the direction of the late Courtney and Elizabeth Sicheloff.



[www.penncenter.com](http://www.penncenter.com)