

GREAT GATHERINGS

On a steamy August day in 1963, a large man walked up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (► 86) and took his place in front of a microphone. Before him lay a sea of faces: 250,000 people, mostly African-Americans, had walked to the nation's capital from places like Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, as well as cities in the North. It was the largest gathering of people in US history. As he began to speak, his rich orator's voice rose and fell with words that captivated not just his audience, but via television and radio, an entire nation:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up

and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character...".

The man, of course, was Martin Luther King Jr, whose "I Have a Dream" speech became a touchstone for the civil rights movement, and is

Background:
The Bonus March in 1932 protested against how veterans from the armed forces had been treated

considered one of the greatest American speeches of all time.

It was no accident that King chose the steps of the Lincoln Memorial from which to make his speech. Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, is a symbol of freedom to African-Americans. But more than that, the National Mall itself, that great lawn in the heart of the US capital, has been a favourite gathering place for groups promoting their causes since the early 1900s.

The Lincoln Memorial was the site of one of the first civil rights protests, albeit a gentle and musical one, in 1932. The popular contralto opera singer Marian Anderson was denied permission to sing at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), because she was African-American. When first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the DAR herself, learned of the situation, she was outraged. In a highly publicized action, she resigned

from the DAR, and helped Ms Anderson to arrange a free concert from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Over 75,000 people turned out to hear the singer, who opened her concert with the song *America*, whose lyrics begin: "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing."

Not every gathering on the Mall has had such high ideals. One of the first large

Martin Luther King Jr salutes the people who came from all over America to hear him speak

