

# Civil Rights Leaders: Marcus Garvey

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.19.17

**Synopsis:** Born in Jamaica in 1887, Marcus Garvey was a leader of the Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements, which sought to give black people freedom and political power. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Garvey promoted Pan-African ideas which inspired a global mass movement, known as Garveyism. Garveyism would eventually inspire others, from the Nation of Islam to the Rastafari movement. Garvey died in London in 1940, and was eventually buried in Jamaica.

## Early Life

Social activist Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. was born on August 17, 1887, in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica. Garvey was the last of 11 children born to Marcus Garvey, Sr. and Sarah Jane Richards. His father was a stone mason, and his mother a domestic worker and farmer. Garvey, Sr. was a great influence on Marcus, who once described him as "severe, firm, determined, bold, and strong, refusing to yield even to superior forces if he believed he was right." His father had a large library, where young Garvey learned to read.

At age 14, Garvey became a printer's apprentice. In 1903, he traveled to Kingston, Jamaica, and soon became involved in union activities. In 1907, he took part in an unsuccessful printer's strike and the experience kindled in him a passion for political activism. Three years later, he traveled throughout Central America working as a newspaper editor and writing about the exploitation of migrant workers in the plantations. He later traveled to London, where he attended University of London. He also worked for the African Times and Orient Review, which advocated Pan-African nationalism.

## Founding The Universal Negro Improvement Association

Inspired by these experiences, Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1914. There he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with the goal of uniting all African people to "establish a country and absolute government of their own."

Garvey eventually began corresponding with Booker T. Washington, the American educator who founded the Tuskegee Institute. He traveled to the United States in 1916 to raise money for a similar venture in Jamaica. Garvey settled in New York City and formed a UNIA chapter in Harlem, a major African-American neighborhood. Garvey's goal was to promote a separatist philosophy of social, political and economic freedom for blacks. In 1918, he began publishing the widely distributed newspaper *Negro World* to spread his message.

By 1919, Marcus Garvey and UNIA had launched the Black Star Line. This was a shipping company designed to establish trade between Africans in America, the Caribbean, South and Central America, Canada and Africa. At the same time, Garvey started the *Negros Factories Association*, a series of companies that would manufacture goods in every big industrial center in the Western hemisphere and Africa.

In August 1920, UNIA claimed 4 million members and held its first International Convention at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Before a crowd of 25,000 people from all over the world, Garvey spoke of having pride in African history and culture. Many found his words inspiring, but not all. Some established black leaders found his separatist philosophy ill-conceived. W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent black leader and officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) called Garvey "the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America." Du Bois thought Garvey was giving into white supremacists

like the Ku Klux Klan with his "Back to Africa" movement, and that Garvey threatened the civil rights movement which was seeking equality in the U.S. Garvey felt Du Bois was an agent of the white elite.

### **Under Surveillance**

But Du Bois wasn't Garvey's worst enemy. History would soon reveal that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was committed to ruining Garvey for his radical ideas. Hoover felt threatened by the black leader, fearing he was encouraging blacks across the country to take up arms in order to fight for their freedom.

Hoover referred to Garvey as a "notorious negro agitator." For several years he tried to find damning personal information about Garvey, even going so far as to hire the first black FBI agent in 1919 to spy on him.

"They placed spies in the UNIA," says historian Winston James. "They sabotaged the Black Star Line. The engines ... of the ships were actually damaged by foreign matter being thrown into the fuel," James claims.

Hoover would do the same decades later to find information on black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

In an essay of five paragraphs, tell about Marcus Garvey and answer the inquiry question: Should Marcus Garvey be considered a hero?

### **Charges And Loss Of Authority**

In 1922, Garvey and three other UNIA officials were charged with mail fraud involving the Black Star Line. The trial records indicate several improprieties occurred in the prosecution of the case, though it didn't help that the shipping line's books contained many accounting irregularities. On June 23, 1923, Garvey was convicted and sentenced to prison for five years. Claiming to be a victim of a politically motivated miscarriage of justice, Garvey appealed his conviction, but was denied. In 1927 he was released from prison and deported to Jamaica.

Garvey continued his political activism and the work of UNIA in Jamaica, and then moved to London in 1935. But he did not command the same influence he had earlier, and over time he lost even more support among the black population.

### **Death And Legacy**

Garvey died in London in 1940 after several strokes. Due to travel restrictions during World War II, his body was interred in London. In 1964, his remains were exhumed and taken to Jamaica, where the government proclaimed him Jamaica's first national hero and re-interred him at a shrine in the National Heroes Park.