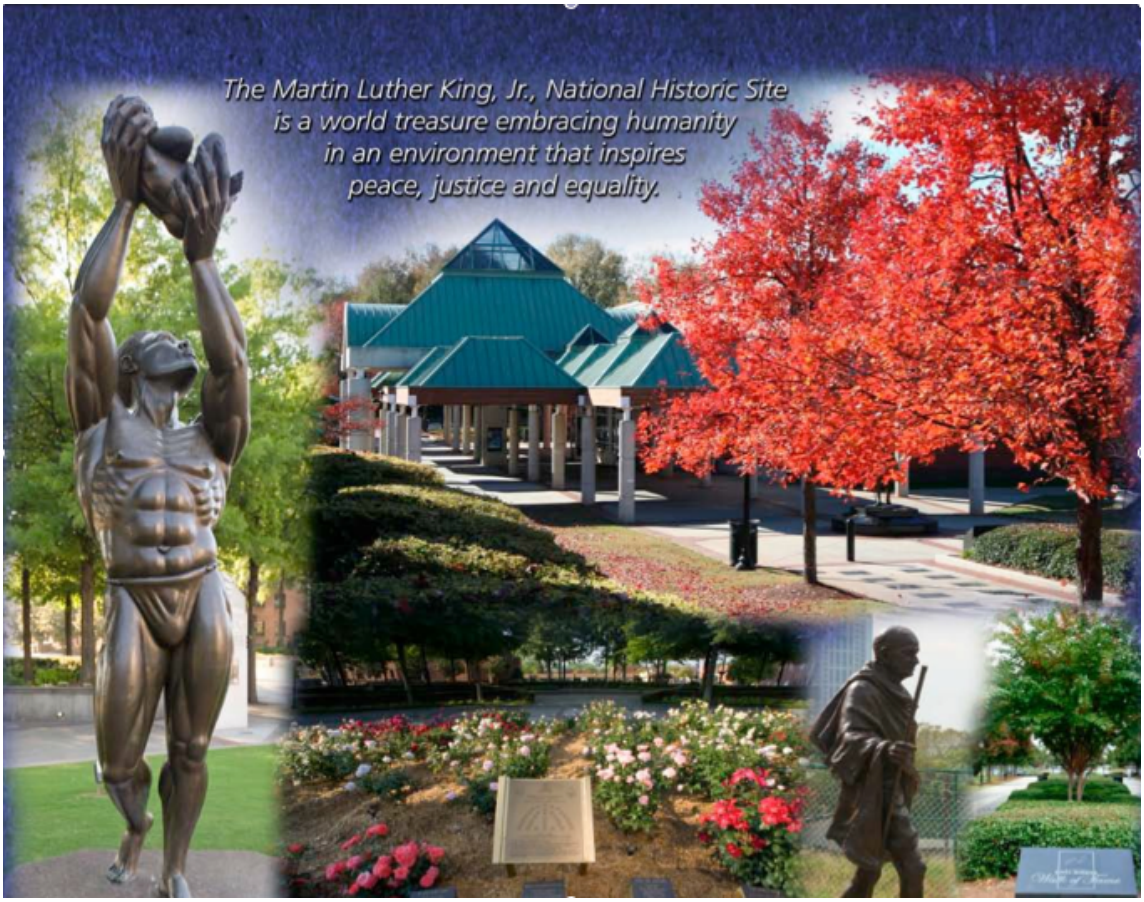
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Stewardship and Science

The Visitor Experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site

Signage, Safety and Services

Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/EQD/NRR—2013/687



ON THE COVER
A photo collage of the Peace Garden, Freedom Walk, statues, and grounds at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, courtesy of Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site

The Visitor Experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site

Signage, Safety and Services

Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/EQD/NRR—2013/687

Yen Le, Nancy C. Holmes

Visitor Services Project
Park Studies Unit
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-1139

July 2013

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Natural Resource Stewardship and Science
Fort Collins, Colorado

The National Park Service, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science office in Fort Collins, Colorado, publishes a range of reports that address natural resource topics. These reports are of interest and applicability to a broad audience in the National Park Service and others in natural resource management, including scientists, conservation and environmental constituencies, and the public.

The Natural Resource Report Series is used to disseminate high-priority, current natural resource management information with managerial application. The series targets a general, diverse audience, and may contain NPS policy considerations or address sensitive issues of management applicability.

All manuscripts in the series receive the appropriate level of peer review to ensure that the information is scientifically credible, technically accurate, appropriately written for the intended audience, and designed and published in a professional manner.

Data in this report were collected and analyzed using methods based on established, peer-reviewed protocols and were analyzed and interpreted within the guidelines of the protocols.

Views, statements, findings, conclusions, recommendations, and data in this report do not necessarily reflect views and policies of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the U.S. Government.

This report is available from the Social Science Division (http://www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience/index.cfm) and the Natural Resource Publications Management website (http://www.nature.nps.gov/publications/nrpm/).

This report and other reports by the Visitor Services Project (VSP) are available from the VSP website (http://www.psu.uidaho.edu/c5/vsp/vsp-reports/) or by contacting the VSP office at (208) 885-7863. To receive this report in a format optimized for screen readers, please email irma@nps.gov.

Please cite this publication as:

Le, Y., N. C. Holmes. 2013. The Visitor Experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site: Signage, Safety, and Services. Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/EQD/NRR—2013/687. National Park Service, Fort Collins, Colorado.

.

NPS 489/121728, July 2013

Contents

Page

Contents iii
Executive Summary v
    Acknowledgements vi
    About the Authors vi
Background and Study Objectives 1
Methods 2
    Study Design 2
    Focus Group Script Development 2
    Participant Recruitment 3
    Focus Group Procedures 3
    Data Analysis 3
Findings 5
    Descriptive Statistics 5
    Qualitative Findings 6
Conclusion and Recommendations 16
Appendix 1: Visitor Focus Group Discussion Guide 19
Appendix 2: Partner Focus Group Discussion Guide 21

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of focus groups held at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site (NHS) in Atlanta, Georgia, during the week of November 2-7, 2012. Two separate focus group studies were conducted, first with park visitors then with park partners, to answer questions about directional and interpretive signage, visitor safety, and visitor services. Thirty-four individuals participated in seven visitor focus groups, and 19 individuals representing 12 organizations participated in two park partner focus groups. The focus groups revealed that challenges faced by visitors to the NHS include a lack of directional signs, perceptions of unsafe conditions, and a need for expanded visitor services within the park area. The two sets of focus groups, while revealing different perspectives of the visitor experience of navigating to the NHS and engaging in its activities, nevertheless merged at several points. The report concludes with a comprehensive list of recommendations based on input from visitors and park partners.

For more information about the Visitor Services Project, please contact the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho at (208) 885-7863 or the following website http://www.psu.uidaho.edu.

Acknowledgements

We thank Robert Parker, Chief of Interpretation, Education and Cultural Resource Management, at Martin Luther King Jr. NHS for his assistance with this study. We are most grateful to the many focus group participants who were willing to share their ideas and opinions with us. Thanks also to Allison Goldberg and Emma McAleer for transcribing the audio files.

About the Authors

Yen Le, Ph.D., is Director of the Visitor Services Project at the University of Idaho; Nancy Holmes is a Research Associate at the Park Studies Unit, University of Idaho.

Background and Study Objectives

Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site (NHS) was established in 1980 to preserve, protect, and interpret the places where Dr. King was born, where he lived, worked, worshipped and is buried. The legislation establishing the park also established the Martin Luther King Jr. Preservation District.

Martin Luther King Jr. NHS consists of 5 historic buildings, a visitor center, and a parking lot, which cover over three city blocks in Atlanta, Georgia. Other historic buildings, managed by park partners in the adjacent city blocks, also contribute to interpretive efforts that commemorate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Major resources of the site include the birth home of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (the "King Center") where Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr. are buried. In addition, the NHS includes the block on which the Birth Home is located, as well as a significant portion of the residential neighborhood where Dr. King spent his first twelve years of life. The NHS also includes a portion of Edgewood Avenue, which preserves the flavor of the historic commercial portion of the community. The park's preservation district surrounds the NHS and includes the balance of the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, which was one of the nation's most prosperous and successful black communities in the early 20th century. Within the preservation district, the National Park Service assists with the preservation and interpretation of historic properties.

In 2011, the park received 666,482 visitors. With the exception of the King Birth Home, visitors are self-guided through the site, using interpretive signage and brochures. The objectives of this study were to evaluate visitors' experiences navigating the site and assess their perceptions of services, interpretive opportunities, and safety features at the site. Specifically, the study examined:

1. Visitors' way-finding experiences
2. Visitors' satisfaction with signage
3. Visitors' perceptions of safety on the site
4. Visitors' perceptions and preferences for visitor services

.

Methods

Study Design

Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, located in one of Atlanta's historic districts, coexists with other culturally and historically significant sites. These individual sites create a cultural landscape in which the visitor can explore and experience local, regional, national and international history. For this reason, it was important to gain the perspectives from park partners on how the visitor experience could be improved, and to this end, we held focus groups with both park visitors and individuals representing park partners. Concurrent with the focus group study, the Park Studies Unit conducted a survey of visitors to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS. The in-depth information about the visitor experience generated by the focus groups complement the quantitative data collected by the survey. The results of the visitor survey will be presented in a separate report.

The focus group method of data generation was selected for this study as the most applicable to obtain data in a relatively short period of time and at a low cost. Focus groups are facilitated discussions about a specific topic. Unlike an individual responding to a survey questionnaire, focus groups generate rich, in-depth data through interaction and discussion. For this reason, the focus group method was also deemed as the most appropriate approach for obtaining a wide range of opinions and insights from park partners.

The focus group approach has been widely adapted and proven beneficial in marketing, consumer, and social science research. This method is used to learn about how people feel about a certain topic and to find a range of opinions across several groups. Typically, six to twelve participants are included in each focus group. The participants in each group can be diverse in demographic characteristics, but should be compatible enough to create a comfortable environment for open dialogue. In this environment the participants can freely express their opinions, ideas, and evaluations of a product, program, or service.

Focus Group Script Development

Discussions with park staff defined this study's objectives, which then guided the development of the focus group questions. The question routes were designed to move from the general to the specific, beginning with broad questions and progressing to specific questions regarding way-finding and visitor services. Some focus group questions were also asked in the concurrent visitor survey. The qualitative information derived from the focus groups complemented and provided depth to the quantitative survey data.

Participant Recruitment

The two populations of interest were 1) all visitors to Martin Luther King Jr. NHP who had completed a ranger-guided tour of the Martin Luther King Jr. Birth Home; and 2) individuals representing park partners.

To recruit for the visitor focus groups, park visitors who had obtained tickets for the King Birth Home tour were intercepted prior to taking the tour and invited to attend a focus group immediately after the tour. At the end of the tour those who had agreed to participate were escorted to a meeting room. Each participant was offered refreshments and an incentive - a gift from the park bookstore.

The park partner focus group participants were recruited from an exhaustive list provided by NPS staff that included individuals from a multitude of private, civic, and governmental organizations whose professional duties and interests have some connection with activities at Martin Luther King Jr. NHP. Each individual partner received an invitation letter via mail or email, depending on the available contact information.

Focus Group Procedures

Two researchers - a moderator and a note taker - were present at all focus groups. Focus groups were recorded using digital audio recorders, and one of the moderators took brief notes. Within 24 hours of conducting the focus groups, recordings and written notes were reviewed for accuracy. Within three weeks of the study's conclusion the recordings were transcribed for analysis. Code names were used to protect participants' privacy.

Data Analysis

Coding is a technique of assigning meaning, or themes, to various pieces of text. In this study, data were analyzed using a process of open coding. Using the focus group questions as a framework, the dominant themes were identified, as well as themes that arose organically from each discussion. This approach provided a structure to gather and group similar participant responses and create a cohesive picture of the focus group discussion results.

In this process, a researcher who was also present at the focus group discussions read the transcripts through several times while comparing them with the audio recordings to become very familiar with the content of each. Participants' comments were then evaluated for their specificity (level of detail), and extensiveness (repetition by different individuals).

Since this is a pragmatic rather than a theory-based study, the operationalized themes include topic areas that relate to recreational preferences and awareness of parks as well as issues and suggestions regarding park visitation. The section on Qualitative Findings, below, summarizes participants' responses to the focus group questions, organized by topics related to the focus group questions.

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Visitor focus groups

Thirty-four individuals representing a range of age groups participated in seven focus groups. Over two-thirds of U.S. participants (65%) were African American, 23% were White, with smaller proportions of other races. Eighteen percent of participants were from Georgia, and 15% were from the city of Atlanta. Smaller proportions of participants came from Illinois, New Jersey, California, Minnesota, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. International participants comprised 18% of the focus group participants, and came from England, Scotland, France, Germany, and Australia. Forty-one percent of participants were under 30 years old; 44% were between 30 and 50 years old, and 15% were in the 50 to 65 year age group. Seventy-six percent of participants were female.

Partner focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted with 19 individuals representing the 12 organizations listed below. Each organization is in some way connected to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, due to its location within the Auburn Historic Preservation district, its cultural/historical preservation activities, or its interactions with the visiting public.

1. APEX (African American Panoramic Experience) Museum: A museum of history presented from the black perspective, located on Auburn Avenue.
2. Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau: Supports and promotes Atlanta's hospitality industry and serves as a liaison between meeting planners, tour operators and its 1,200-plus member organizations..
3. Auburn Avenue Resource Library on African-American Culture and History: A public library offering specialized reference and archival collections dedicated to the study and research of African American culture and history and of other peoples of African descent, located on Auburn Avenue.
4. Central Atlanta Progress: A private, nonprofit corporation that strives to create a robust economic climate for downtown Atlanta, funded through the investment of businesses and institutions.
5. City of Atlanta
6. Eastern National: A non-profit cooperating association that supports the interpretive and educational mission of the National Park Service. At Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, it maintains a bookstore on site with educational and interpretive material to enhance visitors' enjoyment of park.
7. Ebenezer Baptist Church: The historic church, circa 1922, where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s maternal grandfather and father served as senior pastors for over eighty years, and he and his brother served as co-pastors to their father, Daddy King. Ebenezer also served as one of the main spiritual homes to many of the Sweet Auburn's residents.

This historic structure is located on Auburn Avenue, adjacent to The King Center and across from the park Visitor Center and Park Headquarters.

8. Historic District Development Corporation: A nonprofit community development corporation whose mission is to facilitate the preservation, revitalization and non-displacement of residents in the preservation district.
9. Jimmy Carter Library and Museum: part of the Presidential Library system. Contains archives, museum, library, and research facility, administered by the National Archives and Records Administration. Located on Freedom Parkway, and connected to the park via a bike/walking trail.
10. National Park Service Southeast Regional Office: A support office for National Park Service units and activities in the Southeast.
11. Southern Christian Leadership Conference: An African-American civil rights organization founded in Atlanta, whose first president was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. SCLC headquarters are located on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta.
12. The King Center (Martin Luther King Center Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change): A memorial to Dr. King, nonprofit resource center, and community institution. The King Library and Archives is the largest repository of primary source materials on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Civil Rights Movement. Located on Auburn Street directly across from the park visitor center and headquarters.

Qualitative Findings

Visitor focus groups

This section summarizes participants' responses to questions during the visitor focus groups, organized by topic.

Topic 1. Motivations for visiting Martin Luther King Jr. NHS

People came to the park for a variety of reasons. A common theme was to learn more about the history of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Modern American Civil Rights Movement. Many participants had heard or read about Dr. King, and wanted to see and experience his home firsthand. For others, their sense of personal connection to and respect for the civil rights leader was significant motivation to visit. For some participants in Atlanta on business or visiting family and friends, the historic site was a "must see" in addition to their other activities. As one visitor stated, "it's definitely a part of history I read about in books. I've seen it in books, and to come here and actually get the visual sight was a must. We're here visiting, so this was like number one on the list."

Topic 2. The King Birth Home tour

Two very common remarks made by participants regarding the Birth Home tour were 1) how much they enjoyed the tour as well as the tour guides' excellent presentations; and 2) their disappointment at not being allowed to take pictures inside the home. Participants suggested that, given the small size of the

tour groups, tours should be offered more frequently. For some participants this visit was one of several they had already made because on previous visits the tours had been consistently full and they had been unable to obtain tickets. There was some concern about the ability to get tickets, as one participants mentioned: "at first like I said it was hard to get in because such a small group that are allowed to tour but once we were in it was a smooth process."

Topic 3. Obtaining Birth Home tour tickets

For those who were aware that Birth Home tours sometimes fill early, getting tickets was a primary goal upon arrival at the park. Participants said the waiting time between obtaining tickets and the tour start time gave them an opportunity to view exhibits and the video in the Fire Station No.6. Some felt they felt they had missed interpretive opportunities at the Visitor Center because they had to leave it to obtain tickets, and did not have time to return to see the exhibits and movies. Many participants stopped at the NPS Visitor Center at the beginning of their visit, expecting to get Birth Home tour tickets there, only to find that tickets were only available at the Fire Station No.6. Although some visitors did not have a problem with this arrangement others felt differently, and voiced their opinions thus: "I think that it may have been helpful to be able to get tickets at the visitor's center. I think that's the way they have it in Philadelphia. You can get your tickets at the visitor's center and then you can do all the different sights," and, " cause you are having the visitors run back and forth."

Topic 4. Way-finding to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS

Participants who drove their private vehicles to the site said they'd had difficulty with one-way streets and a lack of signs to the site and to the parking lot. Several participants had walked to the site from downtown Atlanta, and mentioned a lack of pedestrian sign directing them to the park. A couple was told by their hotel concierge not to use the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) system because they would not be able to find their way from the MARTA station to the park. Others who did use MARTA mentioned the lack of signs from the station to the park. Participants said they had difficulty locating the King Birth Home on Google Maps because they did not know which physical location to enter.

Topic 5. Way-finding within Martin Luther King Jr. NHS

Participants who received directions and information from staff at the NPS Visitor Center said they had no difficulty finding their way within the park, and many said they specifically went first to the Visitor Center for orientation and/or to obtain tickets for the Birth Home tour. There was some confusion as to where to go to get Birth Home tour tickets, and where the tour began. Some participants suggested posting signs directing visitors to the Fire Station for the tickets and the tour. Participants mentioned

seeing and using signs outside the Visitor Center to find their way to other buildings on the site. As one person said, "It really wasn't hard getting the tickets, it was just trying to find the place to meet the Ranger at. You know if there would have been signs saying 'go straight' it wouldn't have been quite so difficult to find it."

Some participants did not differentiate between the King Center and the NPS Visitor Center. For some participants, the close proximity of the buildings within the site facilitated way finding. Participants suggested that roving personnel would be a helpful feature to help direct visitors, and to provide interpretation.

Participants were given park maps and asked to indicate the order of their visit on the map. Among the 34 participants, 18 maps were completed (only one map per group was distributed). Most groups (88%) began their visit at the Visitor Center (some began at the parking lot then proceeded to the Visitor Center). For 38% of visitors, the Historic Fire Station No. 6 was their second stop, because they were already aware that the Birth Home tour tickets were available there. For 38%, the King Center or Dr. King's tomb was their first stop. When asked about their reasons for visiting in their chosen order, many participants said it was important to first go to the Visitor Center, some for orientation and others to obtain tour tickets.

Participants were also asked to indicate, on the map, where they thought directional, safety, and educational signs should be placed. Identical maps for the same purpose were provided to visitors participating in the concurrent visitor survey. The results of both map questions will be presented in the visitor survey report.

Topic 6. Interpretive signage

Many participants were not aware of the interpretive signs posted in front of historic houses on the Birth Home block, and most did not venture further along the street, beyond the Birth Home. Some families with children said they had used the interpretive signs to complete their Junior Ranger booklets. A few participants did notice and read the signs, and commented that it was interesting to learn about the former occupants of each house.

Topic 7. Visitor services in Atlanta

Participants had few comments about obtaining services in Atlanta, but in general had no difficulty finding food and lodging in the city, thanks to friends, relatives, the Internet, and GPS devices. Some participants asked City Ambassadors for directions to restaurants. Some participants were surprised at how early restaurants were closed in the evening, and others felt that there were too few restaurants in the city.

Topic 8. Visitor services within Martin Luther King Jr. NHS

For some participants the lack of food services within the park neighborhood posed a dilemma when looking for a place to eat, especially during the time between obtaining tickets for the Birth Home tour and the beginning of the tour. This was particularly true of visitors in families with young children, those who were less mobile, and those who were on foot. While discussing this topic one participant remarked: "Very good point because one of the things is with getting the tickets for the tour a lot of them fill up. They only run fifteen people at a time, and on a day like today you're coming in at eleven o'clock and everything up to four o'clock may be already booked so instead of people actually leaving the park or leaving and may not even participate they can hang out and go visit the other sites and also grab something to eat at one of the cafes in the building or something."

Participants suggested using some of the historic buildings to house cafes, restaurants, and even hotels or bed and breakfasts. These suggestions led to discussions about the preservation of historic buildings on the Birth Home block. There was strong sentiment among participants that the authenticity of the historic buildings on Auburn Avenue should be preserved, and that commercial activities should not significantly alter the streetscape. Here's an example of one of the discussions on this topic:

MULTIPLE VOICES: No McDonalds!

PARTICIPANT 1: Not something largely commercial, but you know, like a small café or something that you can't tell is a café, you know.

PARTICIPANT 2: Make it in one of the houses so it fits in.

PARTICIPANT 1: Don't change the outside or anything.

PARTICIPANT 2: It could be a cute little café actually and do it in style, make it in period style. It would be kind of nice.

Topic 9. Suggestions

Although participants were not specifically asked about how to improve the visitor experience at the NHS, suggestions did emerge as we discussed various aspects of their visit. The following is a list of participants' suggestions.

- Golf carts for mobility-impaired visitors would be appreciated.
- It would be good to provide activities, shops, food, etc., to give more of a feel for what it was like to live on Auburn Avenue during Martin Luther King, Jr.'s boyhood.
- Provide GPS coordinates, and/or a physical address on the park website, to help locate the actual buildings at the park.
- Roving interpreters to inform, interpret, and provide directions would enhance the visitor experience.
- Seating in the visitor center's exhibit/video area would be appreciated.
- Seeing graffiti on a sign directing visitors to the park "could be off-putting for someone" and should be removed.
- The lack of turn lanes from Boulevard onto Auburn Avenue made it difficult to drive to the NHS parking lot.
- There should be a larger selection of DVD's in the park bookstore.

Park Partner focus groups

This section summarizes participants' responses to questions during the park partner focus groups, organized by topic.

Topic 1. Visitor safety

Park partners were asked to share their perceptions of visitor safety at Martin Luther King Jr. NHS. Participants felt that the park site itself had no significant safety issues, however they identified areas of concern connected to the visitors' experience getting to the Auburn Preservation District, and within the district.

First, participants remarked on the general perception, held in particular by people who live in the suburbs outside the city's perimeter, that downtown Atlanta is not a safe place to visit. Participants themselves generally did not recommend that their friends, families, nor customers walk from downtown Atlanta to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, primarily because of the condition of the neighborhoods and the highway I-

75 underpass that separates the two locations. Once visitors arrive at the historic Auburn area, the presence of fenced, abandoned lots and boarded homes, although interspersed with refurbished buildings, do not promote the perception of safety. This "safety gap," between downtown and historic district creates a disconnection that may discourage Atlanta tourists from exploring the park and its environs.

Participants also pointed out the disconnectedness of Martin Luther King Jr. NHS with neighboring sites such as the Jimmy Carter Library, the MARTA station, and sites on Auburn Avenue east of the park including the APEX Museum and the Auburn Avenue Research Library. The distance between these sites and Martin Luther King Jr. NHS is not significant, but are not connected by a unified way-finding system. Visitors may be unaware of how to navigate from one site to another.

The following excerpt from one of the focus group discussions illustrates this topic:

PARTICIPANT 1: MLK center is always on my radar when people come to visit. That's one of the places we always go, every time, hands down. In our underground visitor center, Martin Luther King is in our top five questions, hands down. Getting there isn't easy, you know if you don't have a car to get to the Martin Luther King center because it is not on the MARTA Train…

PARTICIPANT 2: There is that huge gap between Georgia State University and that official MLK starting point. And I work with leisure groups. I used to work with family reunions, which loved the site and student groups that come on motor-coach buses. When you are coming in on the motor-coach bus, not too scary, but I did have a group of people who wanted to walk from their hotel and I was concerned about their safety, but once again I was concerned about their perception of Atlanta, being that we are always trying to present the best picture of the city. That gap between GSU and the actual center is not something that I want to sell per say.

Another safety issue that participants identified concerned traffic within the Auburn Preservation District and the certain areas of Birth Home block. Speeding motorists on Boulevard, and disregard for a "no left turn" sign at the intersection of Boulevard and Auburn St. pose dangers to pedestrians. Some participants were also concerned with dangerous driver behavior on Auburn Street in front of the Birth Home.

Topic area 2. Solutions to safety issues

Participants were enthusiastic when it came to suggesting solutions to the safety issues they had just identified. Comments centered around seven primary actions that participants believed would help create a climate of safety and increase visitors' sense of security.

1. People presence. Roving NPS interpreters, rangers, and volunteers, as well as Atlanta police officers and city ambassadors would interact with visitors, providing interpretive and navigational information as

needed. Ranger patrol vehicles parked along the streets promotes a sense of law enforcement presences and safety.

2. Signage. Increase, improve, update, and visually link signage directional and interpretive signage leading to and within the Auburn preservation district. Specific comments regarding signage are presented under Topic area 3, below.

3. Development. Facilitate the development of visitor service-oriented businesses and vendors within the preservation district while preserving the authenticity of the neighborhood and its historic structures. Continue the restoration of historic structures. More activity leads to more pedestrians, which increases safety.

4. Lighting. Improve the lighting throughout the neighborhood.

5. Neighborhood image. Strive for a "clean, green" neighborhood by restoring abandoned lots and adding green space, such as pocket parks. Install artwork.

6. Traffic control. Add speed bumps on the Birth Home block, and/or create pedestrian-only areas by closing certain sections of the street to vehicles.

7. Marketing. The Auburn Historic Preservation district should be marketed to greater Atlanta as a safe, educational, preservation district that easy to access. This effort could correct negative images currently held by residents in the suburbs.

Participants were encouraged by the current expansion of Georgia State University, just a few blocks from the preservation district. An increase in nearby student housing would result in increased pedestrian activity in the area. They also discussed the benefits of the Atlanta Streetcar Project (see Topic area 4).

Topic area 3. Way-finding

Participants remarked that, in general, directional signage in Atlanta leaves much to be desired. Discussions regarding signs leading to the NHS generated a list of needs:

- lack of pedestrian and road directional signs between the NHS and the Jimmy Carter Library
- signage should connect the two Nobel Peace Prize recipients
- lack of signs on Boulevard
- lack of signs on Auburn Avenue
- need for larger signs on 85/95
- need for more signs on Freedom Parkway to the NHS parking lot
- lack of signs from the MARTA King station

- signs directing visitors from downtown to the NHS and its parking lot should be visually connected
- signs advertising and directing to the NPS free parking should be more frequent and more prominent

Most participants felt that directional signage within the park boundary is adequate, but that the interpretive signs and exhibits need some work. The two main points expressed were that some of the aging wayside/interpretive signs should be updated, and that interpretive signs in the same style should be extended throughout the preservation district to include other buildings, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Visitors don't realize that there are interpretive signs beyond the King Birth Home. Park staff could encourage them to extend the range of their visit to include more of Auburn Avenue. Participants suggested that the mural across from the Visitor Center should have an interpretive sign. Some also thought that interpretive signs could be added to the area under the 85/95 overpass to make it more visually appealing, and link it to the preservation district. It was mentioned that the City of Atlanta has interpretive signs which are waiting to be installed.

Topic area 4. The Atlanta Streetcar Project

The Atlanta Streetcar, planned to begin operations in 2013, would connect the Auburn Preservation district with other parts of Atlanta, including the downtown area. Participants saw both positive and negative impacts that the streetcar might have on the NHS as well as the preservation district.

Positive impacts

A common theme regarding the positive impacts of the streetcar was that for visitors from downtown Atlanta it would provide safe, easy access to the Auburn preservation district and the NHS. It would link thematically connected sites such as the NHS, the King Center, the trail to the Jimmy Carter Library, and the Civil and Human Rights Center. Participants also felt that the streetcar operation would also encourage and inspire business development within the preservation district, particularly businesses that supported visitor activities and needs. A third theme concerned the streetcar's potential contributions to visitor safety and to Atlanta's image of a city that cares about its residents and visitors.

Negative impacts

Participants voiced concerns that, while new development in the preservation district may be a positive outcome for some, the resulting higher property values and consequent higher taxes and increased rents could displace local residents from their homes. There was also concern that more development could result in fewer historic structures and eventually the loss of the Auburn neighborhood's preservation

district designation. A third area of concern was that the streetcar will not reach the actual King Birth Home block, thus leaving visitors at risk when dealing with traffic.

Topic area 5. Historic structures

Participants discussed the preservation of historic buildings on the King Birth Home block as well as within the surrounding preservation district. The following concerns were voiced

- Auburn Avenue does not meet visitors' expectations. The vacant lots and abandoned buildings reflect poorly on the NPS and Atlanta.
- Care should be taken to save and preserve historic structures, while cleaning up the neighborhood.
- Any development should be sympathetic with the historic character of the neighborhood and district.
- Interaction between visitors and Auburn Avenue residents can be an enriching experience for both groups.

Topic area 6. Collaboration: opportunities to enhance the visitor experience

Participants were asked about the roles their particular organizations could play to enhance visitors' experiences at Martin Luther King Jr. NHS. While many suggestions to improve visitor safety and directional signage had been made earlier during the focus groups, this portion of the discussion focused on collaboration. It was interesting that the majority of comments regarding collaborative activities centered on providing visitors with information and interpretation. Specifically, participants suggested:

- Use of D.O.T. grant, or other grants, to develop interactive technology for way finding, walking tours via phone apps and GPS devices.
- NPS should collaborate with other organizations in the preservation district by including these sites and their significance on the maps and/or brochures that are handed out at the NPS Visitor Center. Examples given were APEX Museum, Southern Christian Leadership Conference building and Historic District Development Corporation. Dispersing visitors throughout the district would increase pedestrian activity and enhance safety.
- Partners could collaborate on developing an outdoor, roving docent program to provide orientation and interpretation for pedestrians in the Birth Home block and beyond. An example of a successful program was the 4th Ward Home Tour, and visitors' positive experience talking to docents about the Prince Hall Mason's building.

- Participants suggested that each partner have a complete listing of all visitor opportunities in the area, with contact information, addresses, hours of operation, entrance fees, accessibility information, websites, etc. for each
- Partners should work together to market and promote the Auburn Preservation district as a safe, educational, easy place to visit; and in particular, that there is free parking available for visitors to the NHS.
- The NPS could take part in the Main Street Initiative, a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, " a unique preservation-based economic development tool that enables communities to revitalize downtown and neighborhood business districts." (http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the focus groups revealed challenges faced by visitors to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, and a willingness on the part of park partners to help alleviate those challenges. The park visitors who attended our focus groups were a select group of people who were motivated to experience what the park has to offer, and although apparently undeterred by the potential barriers voiced by park partners, they did bring up some issues associated with signage, safety, and services. Park partners, looking at the park from the perspective of potential, untapped visitation, were clearly concerned with these three issues.

We observed some overlap as well as some differences between visitors' and park partners' views and opinions. Regarding motivations for visiting the historic site, visitors indicated that doing so was at the top of their list, and for many it was a "must-see." Park partners echoed this sentiment, and those who worked directly with Atlanta visitors said that questions about visiting Martin Luther King Jr. NHS was one of most common topics discussed.

As far as getting to the NHS, visitors in the focus groups did not mention significant challenges, although there was some confusion as to directional signs for those arriving by vehicle, and those who arrived on foot mentioned a lack directional signs for pedestrians. On the other hand, park partners voiced many concerns about signage and safety issues faced by visitors to the site, as well as visitors' perceptions of safety to the site and in the surrounding neighborhood. Overall, park partners had greater concerns about visitor safety than did actual visitors, and they projected these concerns onto the many potential visitors who may not be visiting the NHS due to perceptions of unsafe conditions.

Visitors and park partners had differing comments concerning interpretive signage at the NHS, in that many visitors did not notice or view the signs, while park partners felt the signs were important to the visitor experience, and should be improved and their number increased.

The numerous suggestions they shared can be found in the previous section. The following recommendations are based on the findings from the focus groups held with both park visitors and park partners.

Signage

<u>Directional signage to the park</u>

The number, quality, and prominence of signs leading pedestrians and drivers from downtown Atlanta, from the Freedom Parkway, and from the MARTA station should be increased. Signs with a unified style and appearance would help visitors identify routes to the park. An increase in the number of signs would promote an image of safety and concern for easing visitors' abilities to find the park. Directional signs to

the NHS parking lot should also be increased and placed strategically throughout the area to make it very easy to find.

Directional signage within the park

There were so significant issues regarding directional signs in the park. However, signs directing visitors to the correct location for obtaining Birth Home tour tickets would alleviate confusion and the potential stress associated with the possibility of not securing a ticket. Since visitors were most likely to begin their visit at the Visitor Center, we recommend that the tickets be distributed there, so that visitors can take full advantage of the interpretive opportunities it offers.

Interpretive signage

There is potential to increase interpretive exhibits and signs throughout the park as well as the Auburn Historic Preservation district. Visitors may be unaware as to whether or not they are inside the park boundary, and there are many opportunities to interpret the buildings in the historic district to help tell the story of Dr. King and the modern Civil Rights Movement. In particular, the African American Panoramic Experience Museum, the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, the headquarters for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, are all within walking distance of the park, and each has a story to tell.

Safety

Park partners focused on the concern that people may not be visiting the park due to perceptions that it is unsafe to visit downtown Atlanta. They emphasized that the word "perception" is key. In other words, whether or not it is unsafe to be in downtown Atlanta, the perception that it might be dangerous will govern people's decisions. To change this perception will take concerted efforts on several fronts. First, improved and augmented signage directing pedestrians and drivers from key points in Atlanta to Martin Luther King Jr. NHS will make the site more inviting and welcoming. Second, streetscape improvements, including transforming vacant lots, increased lighting and continuing to restore boarded homes will aid in the historic neighborhood's appeal. Third, increased pedestrian activity on Auburn Street through roving NPS interpreters and rangers, volunteer docents, students from Georgia State University will lend the neighborhood a sense of friendly activity. Finally, a concerted effort to market the park and its historic district as a pleasant, safe, educational place to visit will draw positive attention to it.

Services

Food, lodging, transportation, education and information services are part the visitor experience at any recreational, cultural, or historic site, and this is no less true at Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, where each of

these services could be augmented. The Atlanta Streetcar project will certainly enhance transportation options for visitors of all kinds; the National Park Service and The King Center along with their respective programs and interpretive media do much to address the educational needs at the site, but more could be done with additional wayside exhibits and roving personnel; food and lodging are virtually non-existent in the historic neighborhood, and if developed in creative ways without threatening the historic value of the Auburn Historic Preservation district nor the lifestyles of it residents, could greatly enhance the visitor experience.

Marketing and communication

Visitor studies conducted by the Park Studies Unit have consistently shown that word of mouth is one of the most common sources of information. Park partners pointed out that as the perceptions regarding the safety of visiting Martin Luther King Jr. NHS and the Auburn Historic Preservation district begin to shift to a more positive outlook, and as new opportunities for obtaining on-site food and accommodations appear, word will spread. This, coupled with marketing efforts on the part of park partners could suffice to encourage and sustain a steady flow of visitors.

Collaboration with park partners

Park partners' attendance at the focus groups and the variety of suggestions for collaboration that they offered demonstrate their commitment to and interest in working with NPS to further enhance the visitor experience. These partnerships should be maintained and nurtured via continuing dialogs and, more importantly, taking action on the ideas and suggestions shared during the focus groups.

Appendix 1: Visitor Focus Group Discussion Guide

VISITOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE
Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site

Introduction:

Good (Morning/Afternoon), my name is [MODERATOR), I work for the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho. We're conducting research sponsored by the National Park Service. The purpose of the research is to better understand visitors' experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site.

This discussion group has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget in compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act. The Office of Management and Budget control number and expiration date are available upon your request.

Before we begin I want to tell you that the information that we obtain here is anonymous and will not be used for any commercial purposes. I also want to inform you that we are audio recording this session, but the recording will not be shared with anyone outside of our research team and will be used only to create a summary of our discussion.

This focus group will take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete.

I am going to ask you to please take turns when speaking, that you do not speak at the same time, and that you do not interrupt when others are talking during the session. If you have something to share while someone else is speaking, raise your hand and I will make time for you to share when that person finishes. I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers. What we want to know are your opinions and feelings.

You do not have to use your full names during this session. We can refer to one another by using our first names only. Let's begin the session by going around the table and introducing ourselves, please:

- Introduce yourselves by stating your first name.
- Please tell us where you are from.

Let's go around the table one by one, starting to my right....

1. What were your primary reasons, or motivations, for visiting Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site today?

2. The Historic Site includes seven buildings operated by the National Park Service, and two buildings operated by partner organizations.

a) Using the map in front of you, please mark which of these buildings you have visited so far, and the order in which you visited them, by writing a 1,2,3 etc. in the space provided.
b) Why did you visit in that particular order?
c) Did you have any difficulty knowing or deciding what to do or where to go? If so, please explain.
d) What [kinds of facilities or services] would help you and others to navigate the site?

3. Tell us about your experience obtaining tickets for the Birth Home Tour.
a) Did you know where to go to get the ticket? If no, explain.
b) Once you picked up the ticket did you know where to go for the tour? If no, explain.

4. Were you aware that there are educational signs throughout the Birth Home block (the neighborhood surrounding the Birth Home)

a) If yes: how did you become aware of the educational signs?
b) Did you have a chance to look at any of the signs?

If no: what were the reasons for not looking at the signs?

If yes: What did you learn from the signs?

5. Using the map in front of you, please write "E" where you think there should be an educational sign, and "D" where you think there should be a directional sign.

6. Please tell us about your experiences obtaining services such as food, overnight accommodations, rental services, and so on.

Prompt: *did you have any difficulties finding or obtaining the services you needed?*

7. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your visit to Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site?

Appendix 2: Partner Focus Group Discussion Guide

PARK PARTNER and STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT AND DISCUSSION GUIDE
Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site

Introduction:

Good (Morning/Afternoon), my name is [MODERATOR], I work for the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho. We're conducting research sponsored by the National Park Service. This focus group will take a maximum of two hours to complete.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the visitor experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, and how it can be improved. You have been invited to this discussion because your organization interacts with the National Park Service, and because visitors to Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site to may also be visitors to your sites.

This discussion group has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget and is in compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act. The Office of Management and Budget Control Number and expiration date associated with this collection are available at your request.

Before we begin I would like to tell you that the information that we obtain will be anonymous and will not be used for any commercial purposes. I would also like to inform you that we are audio recording this session, but the recording will not be shared with anyone and will only be used to create a summary of our discussion. If necessary, codes will be used in transcript to protect your privacy.

During the session, I am going to ask you to please take turns when speaking, that you try not speak at the same time, and that you do not interrupt when others are talking. If you have something to share while someone else is speaking, raise your hand and I will make time for you to share when that person finishes. I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers. What we want to know are your opinions and feelings.

You do not have to use your full names during this discussion. We can refer to one another by using our first names only. Let's begin the session by going around the table and introducing ourselves. As we go around the table, please:

- Introduce yourselves by stating your first name.
- Please tell us what organization you are representing today and how long you have been with your organization.

Let's go around the table one by one, starting to my right.

1. First, we'd like your opinions concerning the visitor experience at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site (NHS).

a) In your opinion, do visitors face any potential safety concerns during their visit to the site? [Moderator will list example issues] If yes, please describe them.
b) In your opinion, what could be done to improve visitor safety [for each safety issue listed]?

2. We're interested in your opinions on the directional signs that help visitors find Martin Luther King Jr. NHS, and the directional signs within the Martin Luther King Jr. NHS.

a) Are you aware of any problems that visitors have as they navigate from the city (Atlanta) towards the historic site? If so, please describe the problems.
b) What could be done to make it easier for visitors to find the site?
c) Are you aware of any problems visitors may have finding their way within the site? If so, please describe the problems.
d) What could be done to make it easier for visitors to find their way within the site?

3. We are interested in your opinions about the educational signs within the Birth Home Block (the six-block area around the historic site). These signs are placed in front of historic structures to provide visitors with historical information.

a) In your opinion, are there any issues regarding the educational signs?
b) In your opinion, what could be done to improve the educational signs?

4. One of the many stops along the Atlanta Streetcar Project route includes Martin Luther King Jr. NHS. In your opinion, what impacts do you feel the Streetcar Project might have on Martin Luther King Jr. NHS?

5. In your opinion, how can the organizations represented here today help the National Park Service to improve the visitor's experience at Martin Luther King Jr. NHS?

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Martin Luther King Jr. NHS and the visitor experience?

The Department of the Interior protects and manages the nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provides scientific and other information about those resources; and honors its special responsibilities to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated Island Communities.

NPS 489/121728, July 2013

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Stewardship and Science
1201 Oakridge Drive, Suite 150
Fort Collins, CO 80525

www.nature.nps.gov