

## Introduction

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska, to Earl and Louisa Little. From early childhood he observed firsthand the hatred and ignorance aimed toward people of his race. He had a combination of his mother's fair skin (she was often mistaken for white) and his father's very dark skin, and he was frequently teased about his appearance. Early class pictures show him as the only black child among many white classmates.

Malcolm and his family were victimized by the Ku Klux Klan. Their house was burned to the ground, and Earl Little died in an emergency room after police found him severely wounded at a trolley station. Officials reported that he had been crushed by a trolley, but Malcolm agreed with his mother, who believed that Earl had been murdered by white men. Malcolm held on to that belief and later became convinced that the hate group Black Legion was responsible. Louisa suffered a breakdown after her husband's death and was institutionalized.

The remainder of Malcolm's childhood was spent in detention homes until he finally joined his sister in Boston. In 1946 he was sent to prison for burglary. It was here that he was converted to the Nation of Islam (NOI). Upon his release in 1952, he moved to Chicago, home of the NOI's headquarters, where he met its leader Muhammad and changed his last name to "X." Dropping the last name was a tradition with NOI followers, who felt that their family names descended from white slaveholders. In 1958, Malcolm married Betty Sanders, another NOI member, and together they had four children.

The NOI often sent Malcolm on speaking tours, a move that helped to increase membership within the movement. His talents expanded beyond speaking when in 1961 he founded an official publication for the movement, *Muhammad Speaks*.

As Malcolm's popularity increased, he developed a following and was appointed minister of Harlem's popular Mosque number seven. His teachings at that time discouraged integration and encouraged violence to maintain separatism; he opposed those civil rights leaders who advocated nonviolence. Due to his rising popularity, however, other Black Muslim leaders within the NOI became increasingly jealous. He was finally suspended from the movement and in March 1964 left the NOI altogether to form his

own movement, Muslim Mosque Inc. This group followed the orthodox Islamic religion to which Malcolm reaffirmed his conversion in October of that same year. Even his former views changed as he came to envision a brotherhood between blacks and whites. However, his new group was not successful in attracting members, especially since he did not try to recruit any of his earlier followers. He made a second attempt by forming another group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), an attempt that did not yield any better success with a weak membership and organizational elements.

By January 1965 violence against Malcolm and his followers began to escalate. Many previous NOI members were brutally beaten, some killed. Malcolm spent much time abroad but on February 5 announced that there would be an OAAU rally held on February 21, at which he would describe a new militant action program. He never got that chance. Violence between his followers and Black Muslims escalated until Malcolm was shot at the rally in Harlem on February 21, 1965, by three Black Muslims who were later convicted.

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