

“What does the Hall of Fame induction of Malcolm X mean to Nebraskans?” by Aaron Bonderson

Nebraska will soon be celebrating the first Black person inducted into the state's Hall of Fame. Nebraska Public Media's Aaron Bonderson reports on the honor for Malcolm X.

In September of 2022, Malcolm X was voted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame. This spring, his bust will stand inside the Nebraska State Capitol, along with 26 other Nebraskans.

“Proud, proud to say I'm from Nebraska. Proud to say I'm from Omaha, same place Malcolm X was born.” That's Marino Allen—he says Minister Malcolm X's famous autobiography changed his life. “Should have been done a long time ago, man, but it's here now.”

In 1925, Malcolm X was born with the name Malcolm Little. In 2004 the Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission proposed his induction but chose someone else. Diamond Lucas of Omaha says she's also surprised it took this long, but “I feel like it shows that our community is evolving.”

Despite being a free state from its founding, Nebraska has a history of racism and violence. Malcolm's father, Earl Little began a Marcus Garvey pan-Africanist chapter, a nationalist movement. Shortly after Malcolm was born, the Ku Klux Klan threatened the Littles. “The Klan showed up at his front door looking for his father.” That's JoAnna LeFlore Ejike, Executive Director of the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation in Omaha. “They were looking for him because he was stirring up trouble in the so-called community. But the trouble was already there, you see, because in 1919, there was a lynching of Will Brown.”

Brown was accused of raping a white woman. With tensions high in Omaha, the Littles escaped to Michigan. Malcolm says his own father was lynched in Michigan by a White supremacist group. Malcolm X says those experiences shaped his beliefs. He often referred to white people as devils, similar to his 1964 interview in Omaha, “all they've done is taken off their sheet, their Ku Klux Klan sheet, and put on a police uniform.”

Malcolm X publicly criticized Martin Luther King Jr. by arguing his teachings rendered black people defenseless. LeFlore Ejike says historians have long called Malcolm X violent, “but the truth of the matter is he himself was not violent.” Later, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam after his pilgrimage to Mecca. There, he saw how Islam unites people of all races, changing his view on America's racial divide.

The Nebraska Hall of Fame commission voted four to three narrowly choosing Malcolm X. Sarah Crook, a commissioner, did not vote for him. “I never felt like Nebraska particularly shaped him since he left as a young person. I believe he was around a year and a half old when they left for reasons that are awful.” She says she wouldn't vote for Gerald Ford either, because he also only lived in Nebraska as a baby.



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People on the commission argued Malcolm turned his life around. LeFlore Ejike continues, “there is no recording of violence at any of his rallies or speeches, except for the day he was assassinated.” On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York. Decades later, two men were exonerated for the assassination after spending more than 50 years in prison. The case remains unsolved. Nearly 60 years after his assassination, LeFlore Ejike says the springtime statue ceremony is perfect timing. “May is actually the month that George Floyd was murdered and a number of other modern day lynchings. So, it’ll spark new conversations at the dinner table about what we’re going to do next, because that’s what Malcolm probably would be asking.” LeFlore Ejike says Malcolm X set an example for how to discuss difficult topics and search for solutions. For NPR News, I’m Aaron Bonderson.