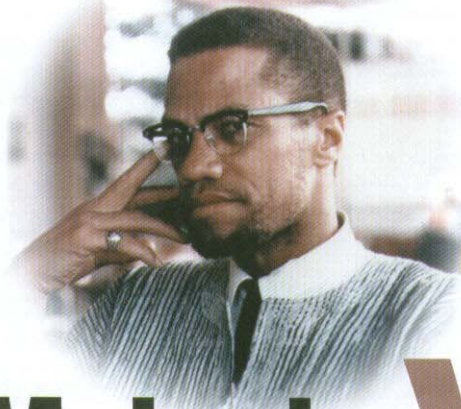


THE SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE  
The New York Public Library



# Malcolm X

A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

May 19, 2005 – December 31, 2005





Photographer: Richard Saunders. Richard Saunders Collection, Photographs and Prints Division

**Malcolm X, wife Betty Shabazz, and daughters Attallah and Qubilah, circa 1962.**

## INTRODUCTION

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, is pleased to present *Malcolm X: A Search for Truth*, an exhibition in commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The exhibition is based in part on the collection of personal and professional papers and memorabilia of Malcolm X that was rescued from auction in 2002 and placed on deposit at the Schomburg Center by the Shabazz family in addition to items from the Henry Hampton Collection at Washington University in St. Louis and the Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit.

Complemented by an epilogue focusing on courtroom evidence from the New York Municipal Archives and courtroom images by Tracy Sugarman from the Schomburg Center's Art and Artifacts Division, *Malcolm X: A Search for Truth* uses the materials from this extraordinary collection as well as other collections from the Center. These never-before-exhibited materials present a provocative and informative perspective on the life of the person known variously as Malcolm Little, "Detroit Red," Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. More significantly, the exhibition poses questions about the nature of the developmental journey that Malcolm Little pursued to become El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The subtitle *A Search for Truth* focuses the interpretive dimensions of the exhibition on the process and products of his driving intellectual quest for truth about himself, his family, his people, his country, and his world.

## MESSENGERS OF HOPE AND LIBERATION

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in the midst of one of the most dynamic periods of political, cultural, and spiritual transformation in African-American history. After almost a half century of racial segregation, political disfranchisement, and racial terrorism, the African-American community in the United States had begun the search for alternative political, economic, cultural, and religious paths. Ten years before Malcolm X's birth, Booker T. Washington, the national leader of black folk since the last decade of the nineteenth century, died, leaving a leadership vacuum. Into this void came new political and religious formations that competed for the loyalty and allegiance of the black masses. Marxists, socialists, the African Blood Brotherhood, and a few communists emerged on the political scene, jockeying with storefront preachers, the NAACP, the Urban League, grassroots community organizers, black nationalists, and Christian and non-Christian religious bodies for leadership roles in the New Negro Movement of the time.

Marcus Garvey, founder and President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and so-named Provisional President of Africa, won the allegiance and support of millions of African peoples in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. From his base in Harlem, Garvey, the dominant political figure in the New Negro Movement, had organized and managed the largest mass movement and self-help economic enterprise in African diaspora history and had established the model for twentieth-century independent black economic and political action. Malcolm X's father, a Baptist preacher, was an organizer for Garvey's UNIA, and his mother reported for Garvey's newspaper, *The Negro World*. Elijah Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam from the 1930s to his death in 1975, was also a Garveyite who built his self-help program on the UNIA model. Noble Drew Ali's earlier Islamic organization, the Moorish Science Temple, likely provided the initial inspiration for Elijah Muhammad's religious program. In turn, Malcolm X was drawn to his teachings, which wove the philosophies of Garvey and Drew Ali into the Nation of Islam.

## I. Growing Up: Malcolm Little to "Detroit Red," 1925–45

During the first twenty years of his life, Malcolm Little was shaped by social, familial, and personal forces that forged his identity as an independent thinker with a strong personality and innate leadership abilities—although he lost his way during his adolescence and young manhood.

Malcolm's parents, Earl and Louise Little, had met in Montreal, Canada, at a UNIA convention, and they remained devoted to the international black worldview and political stance of the movement. White supremacists harassed them because of their politics, and when Malcolm's father was killed in East Lansing, Michigan, black neighbors felt the local racists were responsible.

After Earl Little's death, Malcolm's mother sank into desperate poverty. The children, especially Malcolm, became increasingly difficult to handle, and the racist social service authorities hounded Louise Little. Despite her valiant efforts, she lost control and suffered a nervous

*Continued inside*

**“I’ve had enough of someone else’s propaganda. . . . I’m for truth, no matter who tells it. I’m for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I’m a human being first and foremost, and as such I’m for whoever and whatever benefits humanity *as a whole*.”**

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

breakdown that sent her to a mental institution, and her younger children to foster homes and a juvenile facility. Malcolm was an adolescent too young to understand all the forces at work on his family. Though his behavior strayed further and further from his parents’ standards, he and his siblings managed to maintain close ties throughout their separation.

Then an older sibling from Earl Little’s first marriage, Ella Little Collins, came to visit from Boston in 1940 and invited Malcolm to spend some time with her there. His foray to the big city exhilarated him, and he ended up dropping out of school after the eighth grade and living with her. He loved the relative freedom Boston offered, and he found ways to express his resistance to white power. For the next five years he escalated his involvement in Boston’s black criminal underworld and tried to master the street life of the black mecca, Harlem. There he became known as “Detroit Red.” But he got caught after a string of burglaries in Boston and, in January 1946, was convicted and sentenced to up to ten years in prison.

## II. Becoming Malcolm X: Incarceration and Conversion, 1946–52

The “Detroit Red” who entered prison in February 1946 gained a place for himself there as the angry, irreligious “Satan,” as Malcolm X describes him in the *Autobiography*. But an older prisoner, John Elton Bemby, recognized Malcolm’s intelligence and encouraged him to read. Then his older siblings Hilda, Wilfred, and Philbert, and the younger Reginald, brought him word of a way of looking at the world that was new—and yet not so. They coaxed him back to his beginnings.

They had all converted to a small religious group called the Nation of Islam (NOI), and eventually Malcolm started to pay serious attention to its practices. The Nation had a *familiar* philosophy: self-determination, pride, and cultural and economic independence from white society. This approach to life had been built into their formative years through the Marcus Garvey/UNIA philosophy of their parents. The Nation offered Malcolm the Honorable Elijah Muhammad—a father figure, protector, mentor, and guide through the trials and tribulations of life as a black man in the United States. At the same time, Malcolm began a dedicated quest for knowledge that he pursued to the end of his life. He turned prison into a university. Reading broadly and constantly, always writing and thinking, he also began to hone his natural intellect and verbal skills through the debate club. Prison became the training ground for his coming ministry in the Nation of Islam. Brought back to his roots by his new life, spurred by his utter faith in and devotion to the Islam he had embraced, Malcolm, at his parole in August 1952, was being pushed forward into a world he couldn’t have imagined.



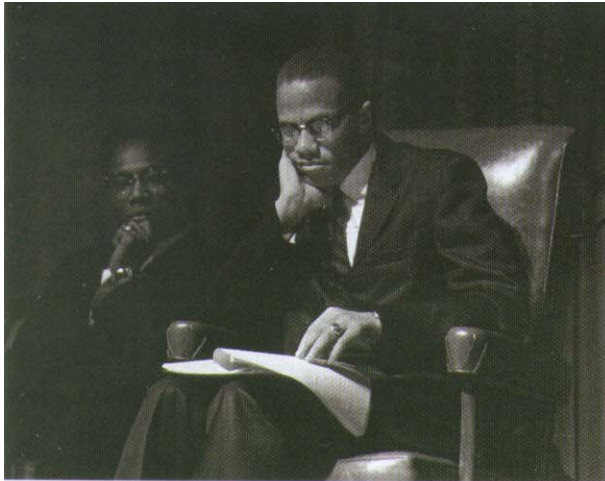
Robert J. Harstone, Robert J. Harstone, Philbert, Bemby, and Dr. D. D. Jackson

## III. Being Minister Malcolm: Growing the Nation, 1953–63

The Malcolm who emerged from imprisonment became Malcolm X in September 1952. Within twelve years, the Nation of Islam had mosques all over the United States and sympathizers in every segment of the black population. Malcolm X’s dynamism as a minister, teacher, and organizer spurred this phenomenal spread of what had been a tiny organization into a major force in black life.

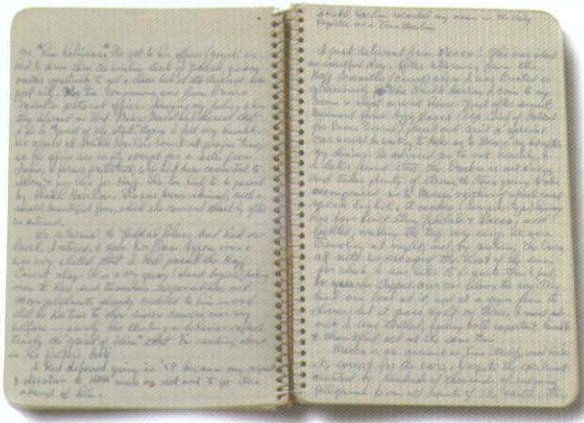
Through the 1950s, Elijah Muhammad’s vision of a separate black nation guided by Islam reached the hearts and minds of those living with the most limited possibilities. It offered a worldview that put them at the center, one that separated them from and placed them above the society that despised them. It offered them a set of well-defined rules by which to live. The Nation bought land, ran farms, opened businesses, held mass gatherings in small and large cities, and provided a training ground for manhood and womanhood in a new kind of society. Malcolm X organized and ministered in service to this vision.

The minister married Betty X (Sanders) in 1958. Eventually they lived in East Elmhurst, Queens, with their daughters Attallah, Qubilah, and Ilyasah. Family life gave him the base from which to take



Photographer: Unknown. Malcolm X Collection, Photographs and Prints Division

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Malcolm X with Minister Isaiah Kareem of Baltimore mosque, Howard University, circa 1961; Malcolm X's hand-written journal detailing journey to Mecca; Malcolm X at Harlem rally, circa 1963.



Malcolm X Collection, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

his Nation mission to an ever wider world. First the broader black community and then mainstream America took increasing note of the bold message and leadership of the Nation—as did various local and national government intelligence agencies. Malcolm X traveled at a frenetic pace, speaking on college campuses and debating civil rights leaders on radio and television. He founded *Muhammad Speaks* as the Nation's official newspaper. He started work with writer Alex Haley on an autobiography. His ideas were being constantly tested and honed—and expanded—by extensive exposure to hostile as well as receptive audiences.

Not surprisingly, high-placed Muhammad family members and others running the Nation from Chicago headquarters began to scheme against Minister Malcolm. Beneath the surface, turmoil and increasing signs of corruption in the NOI hierarchy provided the opportunity for the FBI to infiltrate and fan the flames of discontent. Then rumors surfaced of Elijah Muhammad fathering several children with young women who worked as his secretaries. Although Minister Malcolm remained devoted to the Nation's leader, this turn of events shook him to his core. Some political issues had already begun to eat at his certainties. The Nation's policy of non-involvement in politics

and the civil rights movement increasingly disturbed him, because he was coming to see black nationalism and political unity under Nation leadership as the most powerful way to struggle against the white supremacist system.

#### IV. Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964–65

By January 1965, Minister Malcolm had been “silenced” and stripped of his ministry (supposedly for ninety days) by Elijah Muhammad for his comment after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in which he used the phrase “chickens coming home to roost” in his response to a reporter's question after a speech. By the time those days passed, Malcolm X had made the momentous decision to strike out on his own because he knew the forces against him in the Nation of Islam were now insurmountable—Elijah Muhammad believed he had betrayed him. But he had to have an organizational foundation from which to do his work.

First he formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI), in March. By June he realized he needed a secular political organization to attract the broad group of non-Muslim supporters he'd always had. This became the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which he saw as spearheading a drive to charge the United States, before the United Nations, with violating the human rights of black people—a move the U.S. government considered dangerous to its interests. Personally, he was looking to traditional Islam for answers to the spiritual quest on which he found himself now that he was out of the Nation.

Malcolm X traveled to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and in letters and interviews he shared his experiences, at times shocking even his followers in the U.S. He made the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, where his vision of humanity was transformed, as he saw that Islam could unite Muslims of every race and nationality. He was transformed: having made the hajj, he became El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Back home in Harlem, through both of his organizations, he tried to strengthen ties to the civil rights movement and local community leaders struggling around issues such as housing and education. Something much more sinister also occupied him. Threats, assaults, and murder attempts on his and his followers' lives had become a regular occurrence, escalating as time went on. He had publicly revealed Elijah Muhammad's transgressions, and the Nation was in a retaliatory mood. On February 21, 1965, the day he was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom, Malcolm X was also under surveillance by local and federal authorities.

The search for truth, on which this global man of politics and faith embarked, continues.

# Malcolm X

A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

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*Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
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*Hours: Wednesday and Thursday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m., and Friday and  
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*For more information on public programs related to Malcolm X:  
A Search for Truth, or to access an on-line teachers' guide related to  
the exhibition, visit [www.schomburgcenter.org](http://www.schomburgcenter.org).  
To schedule a tour, call (212) 491-2207.*

In January 2003, the Estate of Betty Shabazz placed the Malcolm X Collection on long-term deposit at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

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