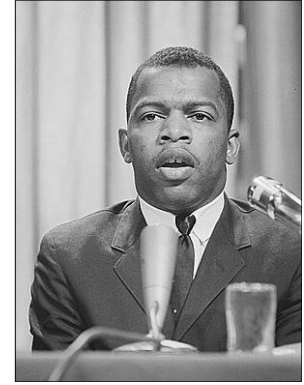


# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## **John Lewis (1940-2020)**

Born near Troy, Alabama on February 21, 1940, the venerable John Robert Lewis came into this world as the son of sharecroppers Willie Mae and Eddie Lewis. Nicknamed "Preacher" as a child, he was the third born of their ten children and attended segregated public schools in Pike County, Alabama. The teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a profound influence on the young Lewis, and he came to Nashville at the age of seventeen to attend American Baptist Theological Seminary. There he met other like-minded civil rights activists including fellow American Baptist student Bernard Lafayette and Fisk University student Diane Nash. During his freshman year at the seminary, Lewis tried to establish a campus chapter of the NAACP but the college blocked his efforts. Throughout the fall semester of 1959, he attended student-oriented civil disobedience workshops led by Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr. at Clark Memorial United Methodist Church. In October 1959, Lewis and students from several local colleges formed the Nashville Student Movement responsible for initiating the downtown lunch counter sit-ins.

Pre-1960 lunch counter sit-ins did not garner much press, though they occurred in many cities including Nashville. In November and December 1959, Lewis and other students conducted two "test sit-ins" at the segregated lunch counters of Harvey's and Cain-Sloan Department Stores in downtown Nashville. Lewis led the December sit-

in at Cain-Sloan, where they endured significantly more hostility than at Harvey's the month prior. On February 13, 1960, emerging leaders Lewis and Nash joined by other students including James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Berry and The Reverends Kelly Miller Smith and James Lawson staged the first full-fledged Nashville sit-ins at three more downtown establishments-Kress, Woolworth, and McClellan's. In total, 124 students participated in that day's protests which concluded without incident. During a subsequent sit-in on February 27, 1960 involving 400 students, a violent event which Lawson termed "Big Saturday," Lewis was incarcerated- the first of his fifty arrests during the Civil Rights Movement. He and more than 2,500 other demonstrators conducted a silent march through Nashville on April 19 after the bombing of attorney and civil rights activist Z. Alexander Looby's home. Local sit-ins lasted three months and ultimately made Nashville the first Southern city to begin desegregating public facilities. The tireless work of Lewis and other unflappable civil rights activists made this hard-won success possible.

The year 1961 was pivotal for John Lewis. That spring, he was part of the original group of Freedom Riders, a group of Black and White pro-desegregation activists who boarded a Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C. headed for New Orleans. This group included several students and leaders

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from Nashville, including Rev. C.T. Vivian, James Bevel, and James Lawson. Led by Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) national director James Farmer, the ride encountered peril in Anniston, Alabama where Klansmen ambushed and firebombed the bus. Lewis and the other Freedom Riders thankfully managed to escape the dire situation.

Upon his graduation from American Baptist, Lewis enrolled at Fisk University in 1961 with a focus on religion and philosophy. However, he paused his studies in order to lead the student movement as a co-founder and National Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), serving in that position from 1963 to 1965. During that time, a young Lewis represented SNCC in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where he spoke to a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people about the need to disrupt an unjust political and judicial system that included the Kennedy administration. His powerful speech necessarily highlighted how radical the civil rights movement needed to be in order to effect meaningful change. In 1965, he went on to actively participate in the Selma voting rights campaign which SNCC initiated two years prior. On March 7 that year, he led a protest across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on what became known as "Bloody Sunday." Lewis and others were viciously attacked by state troopers but their nationally-publicized efforts directly led to passage of the Voting Rights Act that August.

John Lewis returned to Fisk and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967. For the next eleven years, he continued to fight for social justice and equality by working for the Field

Foundation of New York City, the Southern Regional Council's Community Organization Project in Atlanta, and the Voter Education Project. He served a two-and-one-half year term under the Carter administration as an associate director of ACTION, self-dubbed "the federal domestic volunteer agency." From 1981 to 1986, he served on the Atlanta City Council and in January 1987, he began a 33-year term representing Georgia's 5th Congressional District, a post he held until his death in July 2020. Lewis' life ended the same day as his friend and fellow civil rights activist the Rev. C. T. Vivian.

An inspiration to us all, Rep. John Lewis fought for what was right and just. He boldly faced tumultuous and dangerous encounters time and time again to stand up for what he a millions of Americans wanted to see change for the future of America. Lewis' work was perhaps best summarized by his own 2012 quote during a visit to Nashville when he stated, "I was inspired to get in the way. For more than 50 years, I've been getting in the way. I've been getting in trouble – good trouble, necessary, trouble."

-Caroline Eller

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