

# Chapter 1: The Boy from Troy

Chapter 1: **The Boy from Troy** details the early years of John Lewis, offering insight into his formative years in Pike County, Alabama. Born on February 21, 1940, John stood out in his family for his love of reading and his strong desire for knowledge, traits that set him apart from his siblings. His father, Eddie Lewis, often described him as a "peculiar boy," a label that reflected John's deep curiosity and dedication to learning. His family supported his interests, particularly his sister, Ethel Mae, and his father, who encouraged him to read books like Robert Louis Stevenson's works and biographies of influential African Americans, including Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, which became one of his favorites.

The chapter also traces John's family heritage, revealing that his great-great-grandparents, Tobias and Elizabeth Carter, had been granted a small piece of land after the Civil War, a testament to the complexities of post-slavery life in America. Despite initial success, by the time John was born, the Carters had been reduced to working as tenant farmers for a white landowner, Josh Copeland. This shift from landownership to tenant farming represents the struggles faced by many African Americans after the Civil War, a reality that would deeply influence John's understanding of economic and racial inequality. His family's difficulties were a product of a system that maintained racial and economic divisions long after the formal abolition of slavery, shaping John's early perceptions of justice and equality.

John's upbringing was marked by the harsh realities of poverty and the systemic racism of the Jim Crow South. The Lewis family lived without modern conveniences; they boiled water for baths and used outdoor toilets, typical of many Black families at the time. Despite these hardships, Eddie Lewis instilled a sense of dignity in his children, emphasizing the importance of safety, food, and respect in a world where violence, particularly from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, loomed as a constant threat.

This backdrop of fear and hardship helped John develop a resilient character, one that would drive his lifelong commitment to civil rights and social justice.

The pervasive racism and segregation of the South deeply impacted John's worldview. As a child, he experienced firsthand the discrimination that restricted access to education, healthcare, and public facilities based on race. These experiences were not just incidents of individual prejudice but part of a larger system of racial injustice that John would later devote his life to combating. His exposure to such inequalities at a young age fueled his desire to challenge the status quo and fight for equal rights for all people, a cause that would define his future activism.

John's religious upbringing, largely shaped by his mother, Willie Mae, played a central role in forming his sense of moral conviction and hope. Raised in the church, he was inspired by the teachings of Christianity, which emphasized love, justice, and equality, principles that would guide his future work. His early ambition to become a minister reflected his desire to serve both his community and a higher purpose. This aspiration was not only about preaching but also about empowering others to fight for social change, and it was this vision that ultimately propelled him toward higher education and a career in activism.

The chapter concludes with John's determination to pursue education as a means of bettering himself and his community. His ambition to attend seminary school was rooted in his belief that through education, he could become a more effective advocate for racial equality. This thirst for knowledge, paired with his commitment to social justice, laid the foundation for his future role as one of the most influential figures in the civil rights movement, shaping his journey as a leader dedicated to challenging inequality in all its forms.