

Chapter 2: Nashville

Chapter 2: Nashville focuses on the early life and formative experiences of John Lewis as he moves to Nashville in 1957 to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary. At just seventeen years old, Lewis embarks on a new chapter away from his family, carrying with him a trunk gifted by his uncle. The seminary, established in 1924 to provide education for African Americans pursuing ministry, has a rich history. Despite being founded in response to the exclusion of Black Baptists from white institutions, it is within these walls that Lewis begins his journey toward becoming an advocate for civil rights. The campus, with its picturesque views by the Cumberland River, offers him both a sense of belonging and the opportunity for self-discovery.

Upon arriving in Nashville, Lewis settles into Griggs Hall, experiencing the freedom of living on his own for the first time. In order to support his education, he works in the dining hall, which exposes him to a diverse group of students with similar goals of pursuing ministry. While he immerses himself in his studies, Lewis struggles with his speech impediment, which often leaves him feeling isolated and disconnected from others. Despite this, he finds solace and comfort in his academic work, particularly in subjects like history and philosophy, where he excels under the mentorship of professors who inspire him to think critically about the world around him. Through his education, Lewis begins to build a foundation for his future advocacy, where the pursuit of knowledge goes hand-in-hand with the fight for social justice.

The most significant influence during his time in Nashville is Kelly Miller Smith, a respected civil rights leader and minister who challenges Lewis's thinking and urges him to consider how faith and social change intersect. As Lewis navigates his journey at the seminary, he begins to see a divide between those focused on traditional ministry and those, like Smith, who believe in using religion to advocate for social change. This realization sparks a growing interest in civil rights issues, especially in

light of the segregation and inequality that plagued the South at the time. Through Smith's guidance, Lewis's awareness deepens, and he becomes increasingly determined to take action. This period of his life proves to be a turning point, as Lewis not only strengthens his commitment to the ministry but also begins to view the civil rights movement as an essential aspect of his faith.

By joining the NAACP and attending local meetings, Lewis becomes part of Nashville's burgeoning civil rights movement. These meetings serve as a platform for learning and connecting with other activists, who emphasize the philosophy of nonviolent resistance inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. As Lewis builds relationships with other like-minded students, he is exposed to the urgency of the civil rights struggle. One of the most profound relationships he forms is with Harold Cox, a fellow student who guides him through the complexities of activism. Although Lewis initially befriends students who are less focused on activism, he remains resolutely committed to social justice, driven by the examples set by leaders like Smith. His sense of purpose grows stronger as he begins to understand the significant role he will play in the ongoing fight for equality.

As the spring semester of 1959 arrives, Lewis's commitment to civil rights activism intensifies. He becomes deeply involved in planning the sit-in protests aimed at desegregating Nashville's lunch counters. His increasing interest in nonviolent resistance sets the stage for his future leadership role in the civil rights movement. This chapter highlights not only Lewis's intellectual and emotional growth but also his evolution into a dedicated activist, ready to challenge the status quo and push for systemic change. By immersing himself in both academic and activist circles, Lewis solidifies the foundation for his future role in the movement, marking the beginning of a journey that would change the course of history.