

Tennessee State University

Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University

Nashville Conference on African American
History and Culture

University Archives

2010

29th Annual Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture (Program)

Metropolitan Nashville Historical Commission

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture>

Recommended Citation

Metropolitan Nashville Historical Commission, "29th Annual Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture (Program)" (2010). *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture*. 21. <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact XGE@Tnstate.edu.

TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY AND THE
METROPOLITAN NASHVILLE HISTORICAL COMMISSION
PRESENT THE

29th Annual

NASHVILLE  CONFERENCE ON
African-American
HISTORY AND CULTURE

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2010

8:30 AM-3:30 PM

TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY, AVON WILLIAMS CAMPUS
10TH & CHARLOTTE AVENUE * NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

CELEBRATING THE *50th* ANNIVERSARY OF



The Sit-In Movement

Special Guest

Dr. Diane J. Nash

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Diane Judith Nash is known for her leadership role in the Nashville student sit-in movement, where she enabled a southern mayor to confront his own racial views when she posed the perceptive question to then-Mayor Ben West about his personal beliefs regarding the city's segregated lunch counters. Nash possessed an unwillingness to accept the South's segregated code of behavior for American Blacks and went beyond Tennessee's borders to combat America's apartheid system of racial segregation. Because of her commitment to dismantle Jim Crow across the South, she became a leading light in the founding and initial development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an ardent advocate of the 1961 Freedom Rides, and a major player in the voter registration drives of the South.

Born in 1938, reared in a Catholic home, and educated in both the parochial and public schools of Chicago, upon being graduated from Hyde Park High School, Nash entered Howard University in Washington, D. C., where she intended to study English. In 1959, she transferred to Nashville's Fisk University and came face-to-face with the "blatant racial segregation that existed in the South." Because of being affronted and feeling subjugated by Nashville's southern racial customs, she became engaged in the Nashville movement to redress the city's civil wrongs superimposed upon its black citizens.

Seeking to rectify the South's code of racial segregation, the young college student began attending nonviolent workshops conducted by the Reverend James M. Lawson, under the alliance of the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, an affiliate of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Although skeptical at first about the espoused Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, she became inculcated with and a passionate supporter of its protest ideology.

Nash refused to give agency to America's oppressive social systems and embarked upon a mission to secure equality, justice, and social change through direct nonviolent action. She and others who participated in one of the nation's most profound social movements wanted for their people the same rights accorded to Americans of European decent.

One of the most courageous, innovative, and steadfast leaders of the student Civil Rights Movement, Nash was an insightful tactician as well; her ideas were instrumental in initiating the 1963 March on Washington. She was one of six women honored with an award on 28 August, the day of the massive march. Two years later, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave her and James Bevel the Rosa Parks Award, SCLC's highest honor. Among other awards and honors, in 2003, Nash received the "Distinguished American Award" from the John F. Kennedy Library and Foundation, and in 2004, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum gave her LBJ Award for Leadership in Civil Rights.

Fisk University acknowledged the contributions of its former student, Diane Judith Nash, an agent of social change, a civil rights leader, and social activist, made to the struggle for civil and human rights. On 7 May 2007, the university awarded her with an Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters for her unyielding pursuit of justice for African Americans crippled by state-sponsored segregation and for her never-ending quest to contribute to the moral enlightenment of America. The following year, the National Civil Rights Museum presented her with its Freedom Award. In November of 2009, Nash was honored in Selma, Alabama, during the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute's Annual Membership Banquet. She was also awarded the Key to the City. The same year, AT & T recognized her contributions as a civil rights leader when it selected her to represent the month of February for its 2010 African American *Calendar for the state of Tennessee*.



- Linda T. Wynn

2010 Program

- 8:30 Registration
- 9:00 Welcome and Opening Remarks
- 9:15 *Making Room at the Justice Table: Overview of the Sit-In Movement*
Linda T. Wynn, Tennessee Historical Commission and Fisk University
- 9:30 *Long Negotiations, Short Sit-Ins: Desegregation of Knoxville's Lunch Counters*
Dr. Cynthia Fleming, University of TN-Knoxville
- 10:10 *Jefferson's Wolf Released: Militancy and the Memphis Sit-Ins*
George Graham Perry, III, TN State Museum
- 10:40 Break
- 11:00 Remarks and Special Presentations
Karl Dean, Mayor
Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County
Dr. Melvin N. Johnson, President
Tennessee State University
- 11:30 *Nashville Sit-Ins, Then and Now: Reflections of Participants*
Gloria McKissack, Tennessee State University
- 12:00 Lunch (provided)
- 1:30 *Singing for Freedom: Songs of the Struggle*
Fisk University Choir
- 1:50 *We Sat Down, So We Could Stand for the Solution: The Nashville Sit-In Movement*
TSU Forensics Team
- 2::15 *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Institutional Responses to Student Activism in Nashville*
Crystal deGregory, Vanderbilt University
- 2:35 Special Guest Lecture
Using Lessons of the Sit-Ins to Look to the Future
Dr. Diane Nash
- 3:15 Closing Remarks



Timeline of the Nashville Movement

1958 - The Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, and other Nashville ministers establish the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), an affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1957. The NCLC ushered in a new day by dismantling Southern mores that allowed blacks as consumers of goods on an equal basis, but not as equal consumers of services.

March 26-28 - NCLC with the assistance of the Fellowship of Reconciliation—a Christian pacifist organization headquartered in New York, held a workshop with Glenn Smiley, the Reverend James Lawson, and Anna Holden of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), serving as leaders. The Reverend Ralph Abernathy, who had been a leader in the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott was the guest speaker.

May 1958 - The Reverend James Lawson is accepted into Vanderbilt University's Divinity School. Lawson becomes active in NCLC and because he is well-versed in the Gandhian philosophy of direct-nonviolence, the Reverend Smith appointed him as chairman of the Project Committee. Students from Fisk University, Tennessee Agriculture and Industrial State University (now Tennessee State University), American Baptist College (ABC), and Meharry Medical College join the workshops. The Reverend C. T. Vivian assisted Lawson in instructing participants how to protect themselves in the midst of violence and to be creative in difficult situations.

1959 - Early in 1959, the NCLC decided that the time had come to desegregate the downtown eating facilities, since downtown-eating facilities illustrated the hypocrisy of the economic system.

Leaders of NCLC attempt to negotiate with representatives of the two larger department stores, Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, but store managers would not change the status quo for fear they would lose more business than they would gain.

Leaders of NCLC had verbal confirmation of the stores' policies regarding racial segregation, but felt that the stores' governing principle of segregation should be tested in an 'action' situation. They not only looked at those who perpetuated the system of segregation, but also at those who complied with the system. In its opinion all who participated in the charade were in accord with the system of racial segregation.



1959 - In November and December, black leaders of NCLC and students John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Berry, along with other participants conduct 'test' sit-ins at Harvey's and Cain-Sloan department stores to confirm Nashville's exclusionary custom of racially segregated lunch counters.

Lawson's workshops on nonviolence continued and the group planned to oppose vigorously the policy of racial segregation with continuous sit-ins beginning in 1960. Before the Nashville students could execute their plans, students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College staged a sit-in and capture media attention.

1960 - February 1, Ezell A. Blair, Jr., David Richmond, Joseph McNeil, and Franklin McCain from North Carolina A and T College sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

February 13 - 124 students from American Baptist, Fisk University, and Tennessee A & I State University launched their first full-scale sit-ins. They convened at the Arcade on Fifth Avenue, North; at approximately 12:40 p.m., small groups of two and three entered Kress's, Woolworth's, and McClellan's stores, all located on 5th Avenue, North. They made small purchases and within minutes occupied all vacant lunch counter seats. By 2:30 p.m., all three retail outlets had closed their lunch counters, and the students left without incident.

February 18 - Approximately 200 students conducted the second sit-in, selecting the same three lunch counters and W. T. Grants (now the site of the Nashville Public Library). In each case, management immediately closed the counter.

February 20 - 350 students struck the same lunch counters at 11:45 a.m. The protesters converged on Walgreen's at 1:30 p.m. and management immediately displayed a prepared sign: 'CLOSED IN THE INTEREST OF PUBLIC SAFETY.' While the students were sitting in at Walgreen's, a group of whites began verbally harassing Carol Anderson, a white protester attending Fisk University. Police cleared the store.

The Walgreen's episode caused Nashville students to formulate rules of conduct for demonstrators, which became the code of behavior for later protest movements across the South.

February 23 - Students Bernard LaFayette (ABC); Curtis Murphy (A & I), and Julia Moore (Fisk), representing Diane Nash, met with Chief of Police Douglas Hosse. They asked that law enforcement officials be placed inside of each store to thwart the possibility of violence advanced by hecklers. Hosse refused the request on the premise that it would disrupt business.

Riots break out in Chattanooga during lunch counter sit-ins. Several whites are arrested.

February 27 - 400 students sit-in and Cain Sloan was added as a site. Violence meets students on this day as hostile whites badger them. Eighty-one protesters were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

February 29 - The trials of the students began. More than 2500 people gathered around the courthouse as attorneys from Black community defended the students. Each student was found guilty and fined \$50, which they refused to pay, choosing to serve 33 1/3 days in the county workhouse.

Group of black ministers meet with Mayor Ben West at First Baptist Church, with the Reverend C. T. Vivian presiding. Mayor West states that he is going to uphold the law and that applied to all races. Lawson responded that 'apparently the law was being used as 'gimmick' to keep the Negro in his place and, that being the case, a minority group was justified in defying said law.'

March 2 - 350 students staged another sit-in protest, which included Greyhound and Trailways bus stations and Harvey's department store.

March 3 - Vanderbilt University expels the Reverend Jim Lawson for his participation in the Nashville sit-in movement.

Mayor West appoints biracial committee to examine the issue and to make recommendations.

March 16 - Four students from Fisk University sit-in at the Post House Restaurant in the Greyhound bus terminal, they took seats and placed orders. After being served, they were beaten by whites.

March 25 - Sit-ins resume and a crew from the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) arrived in Nashville to film a documentary, 'Anatomy of a Demonstration,' which covered the workshops on non-violent resistance. Governor Buford Ellington charged that the sit-in was 'instigated and planned by and staged for the convenience of CBS.'

April 4 - Local newspapers report on the economic boycott of all Nashville downtown stores. The boycott or economic withdrawal lasted approximately seven weeks with a 98% success rate.



April 5 - The mayor's seven-member biracial committee made its report. The committee recommended that the merchants divide their lunch counters into two sections, one for whites and one for Blacks. Student protest leaders and the NCLC rejected the committee's recommendation.

April 11 - Blacks protested against segregation in downtown Nashville. Law enforcement authorities arrest two whites.

April 12 - Students launched a sit-in with a new approach; integrated groups sit-in, while larger groups picketed outside. Student protesters are arrested. McClellan's on Fifth Avenue, North was evacuated after a bomb threat was received.

April 15-17 - The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is founded in Raleigh, North Carolina at Shaw University. James Lawson of the Nashville sit-ins gives the keynote address, emphasizing both the need for immediate direct-action (as opposed to

slow court cases) and the power of direct nonviolent resistance. Marion Barry of Fisk University in Nashville is elected as SNCC's first Chairman.

April 19 - An early morning explosion damages the home of Attorney Z. Alexander Looby, defense counsel for the students, a city councilman, and a leading figure in desegregation movements throughout Tennessee.

By mid-day at least 4,000 protesters, including some whites, marched silently, in defiant columns to city hall. The Reverend C. T. Vivian and Diane Nash cause Mayor West to affirm that lunch counters should be desegregated.

April 20 - Front-page headline of the *Tennessean* reads, 'Integrate Lunch Counters, Mayor'

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a crowd of approximately 4,000 at Fisk University. King prefaced his talk by saying that

"The movement here is one of the best organized and best disciplined of the movements in the southland today."

Sit-in protests continue. Downtown merchants reluctantly negotiated with leaders of the Black community to resolve the economic and racial problems. The merchants requested that the negotiators for Black Nashvillians be representative of the black community. The conferees for the black community included Rodney Powell, a student at Meharry Medical College; Diane Nash, a junior at Fisk



University; the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith; and Coyness Ennix, an attorney and member of the school board. Greenfield Pitts, of Harvey's department store and head of the Chamber of Commerce Retail Merchants Division, was the chief negotiator for the merchants.

Negotiation began the second week of April and, by the end of the first week of May, "The Nashville Plan" was laid out for settlement of the sit-in crisis. The plan was simple: only small groups of blacks were to ask for service and the merchants would have their employees fully prepared for the event. Plain-clothes policemen also were to be on hand to take care of any trouble that might develop and a corps of white United Church Women were sent to mingle with the control groups and "give the appearance of normalcy."

May 10 - Six of the seven-targeted stores led by Cain-Sloan and Harvey's served blacks at their lunch counters. The four other stores included Woolworth's, Kress, McClellan's, and Walgreen's. Black patrons, seated next to white supporters and observed by the United Church Women, who were ready to lend any needed support, entered the stores first, then sat down and requested service.

W. T. Grant declined to join the other stores in the settlement. Although students and their supporters refrained from any further sit-in demonstrations downtown for "a reasonable period of time," the economic boycott against W. T. Grant continued.

May 18 - All controls were removed.

May 30 - Twelve of sixteen Divinity School faculty tendered their resignations, and Vanderbilt University endured national embarrassment because of its attempt to repress Lawson and the sit-in movement.

June 8 - Grant's opened its lunch counters on a desegregated basis.

June 13 - City Judge Andrew Doyle retired cases against sixty-three students, all resulting from sit-in demonstrations.

June 15 - Merchants and representatives of the Nashville sit-ins met to evaluate the integration of the lunch counters. The merchants said they had been wrong in predicting dire consequences to desegregation. Food service decreased slightly and a few employees resigned rather than work in a desegregated lunchroom. Merchants also reported no effect on retail sales.

The desegregation of the seven lunch counters in the spring of 1960 did not end the sit-in movement in Nashville. In November sit-ins resumed, as racist practices were still customary in most eating establishments and institutionalized racism remained intact.

Information for this timeline is taken from Wynn, Linda T. "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-ins, February 13-May 10, 1960," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Spring 1991.

- Linda T. Wynn, Tennessee Historical Commission and Fisk University

Nashville Sit-Ins (1959-1963)



Contrary to popular belief, the 1960s was not the first time that American Blacks sat-in to protest unequal treatment at lunch counters and other public accommodations, not even in the South. In 1866 blacks in Tennessee staged their first "freedom rides," by boarding streetcars operated by a private Nashville streetcar company, paying the fare, and refusing to sit in the "colored section." Later, when the United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that guaranteed equal access to public accommodations, black Nashvillians tested the act with sit-in demonstrations in March, the same month that the act was passed. Believed to be a new tactic to combat racial segregation, earlier protest actions of this type by American blacks have been forgotten. Established in 1942 in Chicago, Illinois, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was an interracial group, used Gandhian tactics of direct nonviolent action in the struggle for racial equality. During the 1940s, it organized sit-ins and pickets to protest racial segregation in public accommodations and successfully desegregated some public facilities in the North.

Mary Church Terrell, who was well into her eighties, led a successful crusade to desegregate eateries in the District of Columbia. In February 1950, she and three other colleagues (one white and two blacks) entered the Thompson Restaurant and were refused service. When Church and her associates were denied service, they filed a lawsuit. While awaiting the court's decision in the *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co.* case, Terrell targeted other restaurants, this time using tactics such as boycotts, picketing, and sit-ins. Her direct action campaign proved successful. On 8 June 1953, the United States Supreme Court rendered its decision and affirmed that segregated eating establishments in the nation's capital were unconstitutional.

Although the four male students at North Carolina A & T in Greensboro, North Carolina, are given credit for beginning the sit-in



desegregate downtown Nashville. It utilized the concept of Christian nonviolence to stage the Nashville sit-in movement to combat de jure and de facto racial segregation. The Reverend James Lawson, a devoted adherent of the Gandhi philosophy of direct-nonviolent protest, trained local residents and students in the techniques of nonviolence. In November and December of 1959, NCLC leaders and college students staged unsuccessful "test sit-ins" in an attempt to desegregate the lunch counters at Harvey's and Cain-Sloan's department stores. The Reverends Smith and Lawson, students John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry and others bought goods and then attempted to desegregate the lunch counters. Before the end of 1959, other college students were trained to participate in the protests. The students were from Nashville's black colleges and universities, including American Baptist Theological College, Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee A & I State University. The Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in received the first publicity on February 1, 1960.

Twelve days after the Greensboro's sit-in, Nashville's students launched their first full-scale sit-ins on February 13, 1960. Throughout the spring, they conducted numerous sit-ins and held steadfastly to the concept of Christian nonviolence. In addition to Kress's, Woolworth's, McClellan's, Harvey's and Cain-Sloan's department stores, W. T. Grant's, Walgreen's and the Greyhound and Trailways bus terminals were targeted. The students' principles of direct nonviolent protest and written rules of conduct became models for later protests in the South. When the students met with white violence and arrests on February 27, the black community rallied to their support with attorneys and bail money. Approximately eight-one students who were found guilty of disorderly conduct on February 29 refused to pay the fines and chose to serve time in jail. Vanderbilt University's administrators expelled the Reverend James Lawson, a divinity student, for participating in the sit-ins.

Shortly before Easter, black Nashvillians withdrew their economic support and boycotted downtown stores, creating an estimated twenty percent loss in business revenues. "To destroy radical evil, you have to be radically good," said Dr. Vivian Henderson, an economics professor at Fisk University. "It is a radical evil that rules this town and it will take radical good to break it." As racial tension escalated, segregationists lashed out at civil rights activists. The April 19 bombing Z. Alexander Looby's home, attorney for the students, a city councilman, and a leading figure in desegregation movements throughout Tennessee, caused thousands of blacks and some whites to silently march to City Hall, where Mayor Ben West conceded to Diane Nash of Fisk University that lunch counters should be desegregated. Nashville became the first major city to begin desegregating its public facilities on May 10, 1960. Merchants and representatives of the sit-ins gathered to evaluate the desegregation of the lunch counters on 15 June 1960. During the meeting merchants admitted they were wrong in predicting dire consequences to desegregation. While food service decreased slightly, and a few employees resigned rather than work in a desegregated lunchroom, the merchants reported no effect on retail sales. In November sit-ins resumed, as racially exclusive practices continued in most eating establishments and institutionalized racism remained intact.

One of the best organized and most disciplined movements in the South, the Nashville sit-in movement served as a model for future demonstrations against other violations of black American civil rights. Many of the Nashville student participants became leaders in the struggle for civil rights throughout the South.

The deliberate nonviolent actions of college students across the nation caused the walls of racial segregation to crumble and made America live up to its professed principles of equality and justice for all.

- Linda T. Wynn, Tennessee Historical Commission and Fisk University

Sources:

- Lovett, Bobby L. *Civil Rights in Tennessee. A Narrative.* University of Tennessee Press, 2005.
- Morris, Aldon. *Origins of Civil Rights Movements: Black Communities Organizing for Change.* Free Press, 1986.
- Wynn, Linda T. "The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-ins, February 13-May 10, 1960," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. L, No. 2, 1993.



Walter S. Davis (1905 - 1979)



Walter S. Davis is said to have had a "Touch of Greatness." He spent his entire professional career at Tennessee A & I State College (now Tennessee State University), where his leadership as a coach, college professor, and later as president was known for its common touch. A Tennessee A & I alumnus, Walter S. Davis led his alma mater as its second president for a quarter of a century. During his tenure, Davis distinguished himself as a dynamic college administrator, passionately ushering Tennessee A & I into the modern era. Under his headship, the once small black college of less than 700 students became a regionally-renown university of 6,000 students.

Born on a plantation near Canton, Mississippi, on August 9, 1905, Davis was one of seven children born to the Reverend Walter M. and Annie Belle (Anderson) Davis. He received his early education at the Madison County School in Canton and at the Tougaloo College's Practice School before attending Cameron Street High School. Later, Davis left his hometown to attend the high school department of Alcorn A & M College in Lorman, Mississippi, from which he received his high school diploma. While Davis began his collegiate studies at Alcorn, he later transferred to Tennessee A & I in Nashville, Tennessee, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1931. Two years later, Davis earned a master's degree from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York before earning a doctoral degree from Cornell in 1941.

Having won two General Education Board Fellowships during his graduate school tenure, Davis also began his career as a teacher and coach while at Cornell. In 1933, he began working at Tennessee A & I as an agricultural teacher and football coach. While his stint as the college's football coach lasted just three years, Davis had taught agriculture for a decade when William Jasper Hale, Tennessee A & I's first president announced his retirement. Despite his limited formal education, Hale had assumed the headship of the then-fledgling Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes in 1912 and over the next thirty-two years transformed the school onto an accredited four-year degree-granting teachers college.

Following Hale's resignation, Davis assumed the presidency of Tennessee A & I on September 1, 1943. As Hale's successor, Davis, knew all too well that Hale's pioneering efforts had set high expectations for him. Davis, however, was ready for the challenge. Immediately, he began working to transform the college into 'a strong 'A'-Class university.' His plan included the restructuring of the school's business affairs, curriculum, and administrative organization. The college was reorganized into various schools including those of agriculture and home economics, arts and sciences, education and engineering as well as a Graduate School and divisions of business, field services and air science.

By 1947, Davis launched a multi-million dollar expansion of the college's physical plant to construct an engineering school, annexes to the library and cafeteria, and a heating system. Over the course of his tenure, he also oversaw the acquisition of 175 additional acres of land as well as the construction of eight major buildings. In all, improvements and additions to the campus during Davis' presidency totaled approximately \$17 million. The increase of student and faculty populations mirrored the growth of the physical campus. In addition to increasing the student population from several hundred to several thousand students, the number of faculty increased from a mere 32 to 250 instructors, several of whom were among the most distinguished in the nation.

Likewise, academic opportunities as well as campus activities were also extended during Davis' tenure. In 1948, the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools first awarded the college with accreditation. Davis' dream for the college to be elevated to university status was fulfilled in August 1951 and seven years later, the university was fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and accorded land-grant university status. Like Hale, the Jim Crowism of the segregated South forced Davis to lead the all-black university through the treacherous social and political realities faced by institutions promoting black self-determination. There was perhaps no greater time, at which Davis' leadership and diplomacy were tested, than during the nonviolent activism of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Tennessee State students like those of fellow Nashville black colleges American Baptist Theological Seminary, Fisk University and Meharry Medical College led, organized and participated in one of the most disciplined strategic campaigns against segregation in the nation. While a public position of support by Davis would have spelled dire consequences for his professional life, Davis is said to have privately backed the efforts of Tennessee State's student activists. Even so, the consequences faced by several of the students for their civil disobedience, most notably those that were expelled following their participation in the Freedom Rides of 1961, were also dire and probably beyond Davis' control.

Ever "The Coach," Davis' visionary leadership also extended to the school's athletic program which enjoyed unprecedented success during his presidency. The Tennessee State basketball team won the NAIA Championship three consecutive years (1957-59) while the football team won the Grantland Rice Bowl Classic four times. Led by John A. Merritt, who Davis hired in 1963, Tennessee A & I's football program would later go on to be named No. 1, National College Division Champion in 1973 by both the Associated Press and United Press International.

Especially notable was the college's track and field program, whose sprinters won twenty-three Olympic medals. Under the tutelage of now legendary coach and National Track and Field Hall of Famer Edward S. "Ed" Temple, who Davis hired in 1953, the Tigerbelles Women's Track club produced world renown sprinters Mae Faggs, Barbara Jones, Edith McGuire, Madeline Manning, Barbara Jones, Martha Hudson, Lucinda Williams, Chandra Cheeseborough, Wyomia Tyus, and Wilma Rudolph, who during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome became the first American woman to win the gold medals in one Olympics.

Davis retired in 1968, but remained active. At the time of his retirement, Tennessee State's physical property was valued at \$30 million. The course was set for the



Tennessee State University N.D. Davidson Co. TN 37043



university's bright future in all categories of measure. Davis stayed busy through active membership in a number of civic and community organizations including the Agora Assembly, Boy Scouts of America, Chi Boule of Sigma Pi, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated, the Free and Accepted Masons, the YMCA and the Chamber of Commerce. His professional memberships were also numerous including the National Education, American Vocation, and Tennessee Education associations. Davis' honor society memberships included Alpha Kappa Mu, Beta Kappa Chi (Scientific), Kappa Delta Pi (Education) and Pi Omega (Business) societies. A board member of Tennessee Youth Guidance Commission, United Givers Fund, Universal Life Insurance Company and Meharry Medical College, his honors and awards include Educator of the Year, Mason of the Year and Administrator of the Year. Cited for Outstanding Contributions and Dedicated Service to Higher Education in Tennessee by the State Board of Education in 1968, Davis was also listed in *Who's Who in Colored Americans* as well as *Who's Who in America*.

Following an extended illness, President Emeritus Davis died on October 17, 1979 at the George Hubbard Hospital of Meharry Medical College. Married to his college sweetheart, the former Ivanette Hughes of French Lick, Indiana, since 1936, Davis was survived by his wife as well as a son, Ivan R. Davis, a Nashville physician. On October 19, 1979, a memorial service was held for Davis at Tennessee State University, the school he had so dutifully served, where his body also lied in state in the school's Administration Building Auditorium. The following day funeral services for Davis were held at First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill. His remains are interred at Greenwood Cemetery.

- Crystal A. deGregory, Vanderbilt University

Sources:

"Walter Strother Davis," *Obituary*, October 20, 1979.

Lloyd, Grann R. "A Half Century of Presidential Leadership at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial States University, 1911-1961." *The Negro Educational Review*. (1962) , pp. 2-9.

Carl T. Rowan (1925-2000)

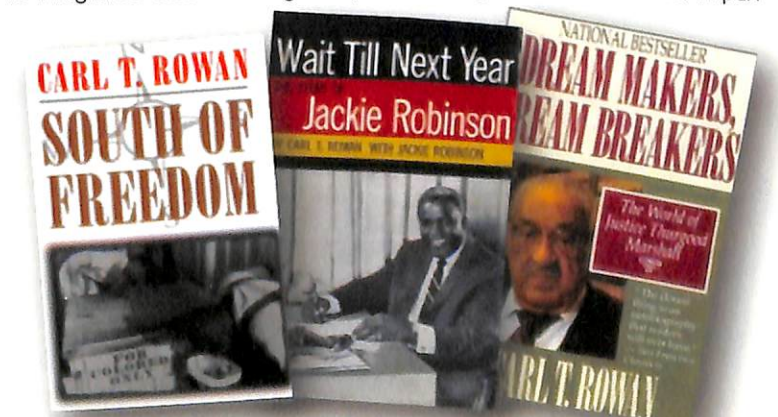
Acclaimed journalist, author, and diplomat, Carl T. Rowan was born in White County, Tennessee, in 1925. His parents, Tom and Johnnie Rowan, moved from the tiny hamlet of Ravenscroft to McMinnville before Carl's first birthday, in search of greater economic and educational opportunities for their family. Such opportunities were in short supply, however, and Rowan's father earned twenty-five cents an hour as a day laborer stacking lumber during the Depression-era years. Carl Rowan's early years were spent in abject poverty, with 'no electricity, no running water, no toothbrushes...no telephone, no radio, no clocks or watches, and no regular inflow of money.'

Rowan left McMinnville to live with his grandparents in Nashville at age eleven, attending seventh and eighth grade at the school run by the Seventh-Day Adventist church, where he worshipped with his grandparents. As the church did not have a high school, he chose to return to McMinnville's Bernard High School rather than attend Pearl High in Nashville. Rowan credited his Bernard High English and history teacher, Bessie Taylor Gwynn (a graduate of Fisk University's teacher education program in 1911), with educating him not just academically, but in dignity and respect. Rowan excelled at football and his studies, and graduated as valedictorian of Bernard High's Class of 1942. Two months later, he hitched a ride to Nashville to attempt to enter Fisk University on a football scholarship, where he was told 'you'd never make it here.' Disappointed, he returned to his grandparents' home in Nashville. His grandfather, employed at the State Tuberculosis Hospital in Madison, arranged for Rowan to work there as well, where he mopped floors and delivered patient meals while saving money for college.

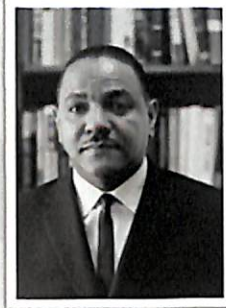
Instead of Fisk, Rowan entered Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial Normal School (now Tennessee State University), where he did well in his classes, and later recalled two TSU teachers who made lasting impacts on his life, art instructor Frances Thompson and history professor Merle Eppse. Because of Eppse's recommendation to Dean George W. Gore, Rowan was selected as a handful of Tennessee A&I students to test for Officer Candidate School for the Navy. Rowan passed the examination, the interview process, and the physical, and entered the Naval Reserve in 1943. He was ordered to report to Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, where he was the only African American in an officer class of 335. After the academic year at Washburn, Rowan was transferred to Oberlin College in Ohio, and in 1944 became one of the first fifteen African Americans as commissioned officers in the United States Navy. Rowan served on the USS *Mattole* and the USS *Chemung* in a deputy command as communications officer.

Following the war, Rowan returned to McMinnville and then Nashville. Finding no meaningful opportunities for an educated African-American naval officer, he quickly decided to return to integrated Oberlin College to pursue a degree in mathematics, in part because his naval training had provided him with several hours of mathematics and science courses that would allow him to obtain a quick bachelor's degree. Following his graduation from Oberlin in 1947, Rowan attended the University of Minnesota, studying journalism, and he obtained his master's degree in 1948. After graduation, he took a job at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, first as copyeditor, then as a reporter. While working in Minneapolis, he met Vivien Murphy, a nursing student, who became his wife in 1950.

It was during Rowan's time as reporter for the *Tribune* that he conceived his first ground-breaking journalistic endeavor, a series of articles about 'what it



means to be a Negro in the postwar South.' Travelling for six weeks, first through Tennessee, then in Oklahoma, Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, Rowan wrote a series of eighteen articles for the *Tribune* he entitled 'How Far From Slavery?,' exploring issues of segregation and racism, for which he received several awards. In 1952, he published a book-length account of his experience, titled *South of Freedom*. Rowan followed up these articles with another series, 'Jim Crow's Last Stand,' where he visited the five cities joined together in *Brown v. Board of Education*, studying what school desegregation would mean to these cities, and to the country. As a result of these two series, Rowan received the Sigma Delta Chi award for best general reporting, and was named as one of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce Ten Outstanding Young Men of 1953. Rowan also received a grant from the U.S. State Department to travel to India and Pakistan for three months to lecture on the role of the press, during which time he wrote a series of articles for the *Tribune* on this experience, and for which he received another Sigma Delta Chi award. Following his India adventures, he travelled across Southeast Asia lecturing and writing, resulting in the winning of a third consecutive Sigma Delta Chi award. His experiences in Southeast Asia led to his second book, *The Pitiful and the Proud*.



After Rowan returned to the United States, he again travelled across the South, this time with fellow journalist Richard Kleeman (who was white), to document the efforts of massive resistance to court-ordered desegregation in the months and years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, starting in Montgomery, Alabama, during the days of the bus boycott. These articles led to Rowan's third book in four years, *Go South to Sorrow*. While finishing up this book, Rowan's editor sent him to the United Nations to cover the growing unrest in Eastern Europe in 1956. Throughout the rest of the decade, Rowan continued covering the American Civil Rights Movement, for diverse publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Ebony*, while at the same time continuing his work with the *Minneapolis Tribune*. In 1960, Rowan co-wrote the autobiography of one of America's greatest sports heroes, Jackie Robinson, titled *Wait 'Til Next Year*.

Because of Rowan's international experiences and in part because John F. Kennedy believed him to be a fair and balanced reporter, he was tapped for a State Department job as a deputy director, and immediately made front-page news. In Rowan's words, 'no Negro had ever held so high a job in the State Department.' In 1961, Rowan accompanied Vice-President Lyndon Johnson on a world tour including stops in Iran, Turkey, Thailand, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam. In 1963, Kennedy named Rowan ambassador to Finland, and in January 1964, President Johnson named Rowan director of the United States Information Agency (USIA), a position he held until July 1965, when he resigned following differences with Johnson.



Following his work in the State Department and with USIA, Rowan returned to journalism as a syndicated columnist and as a television commentator, and his work through the 1970s and 1980s became more politicized. As a national columnist and commentator, Rowan developed a reputation for being independent and often controversial; many of his positions were expressed in his 1974 book *Just Between Us Blacks*. In the 1960s, he had urged Dr. Martin Luther King to soften his anti-war stance, because he felt King's anti-war position was hurting the focus of the Civil Rights Movement and called for the resignation of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In the 1980s, Rowan disapproved of President Ronald Reagan throughout his presidency and afterwards, vilifying Reagan's cuts to social and economic programs during his administration. He was highly critical of Washington Mayor Marion Barry for his corrupt administration, calling Barry 'a disgrace, a betrayer of black children.' Rowan also produced television documentaries, including one on Thurgood Marshall, on the racial unrest in Rhodesia, and on drug abuse in America, for which he won an Emmy Award.

Although much of Rowan's writings and commentaries focused on civil rights, Rowan was often critical of African Americans such as Marion Barry who he viewed as obstacles to the cause, and admonished those he felt were not doing enough to improve their own circumstances. In 1988, Rowan shot and wounded a young man trespassing on his property, and found himself in a maelstrom of publicity surrounding this incident. The Barry administration sought to make a case out of the Rowan shooting, and he was tried for unlawful possession of an unregistered firearm. Although the charges were later dropped, Rowan's national reputation was considerably damaged at the time by widespread criticism in news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces. Rowan continued his writing and commentary, and raising money for his Project Excellence, founded in 1987, to provide scholarships to African-American students from the Washington, DC area. He published his best-selling memoir, *Breaking Barriers* in 1990, followed by his biography of Thurgood Marshall, *Dream Makers, Dream Breakers: The World of Justice Thurgood Marshall*, in 1993. His last book, *The Coming Race War in America* was published in 1996.

Plagued by diabetes and other health concerns, Rowan retired from writing in 1999, in part due to his faltering health, and he died on September 24, 2000. He was hailed by journalists and newspapers across the country as a 'crusading journalist, best-selling author, defender of affirmative action, proud to call himself a liberal' (*New York Times*, 24 September 2000). Secretary of State Madeline Albright posthumously honored Rowan by rededicating the State Department briefing room as the Carl T. Rowan Briefing Room in 2001.

-Tara Mitchell Mielnik, Ph.D., Metropolitan Nashville Historical Commission

(All quotations taken from Carl T. Rowan, *Breaking Barriers: A Memoir*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991, unless otherwise credited.)

Stephen J. Wright (1910-1996)



Stephen J. Wright, Jr., whose career in higher education was described in 1996 by *The New York Times* as 'a road map of black educational progress in the 20th century,' was born September 8, 1910, in Dillon, South Carolina, to Stephen Junius Wright, Sr., and Rachel Eaton Wright. His father was a practicing physician in the Dillon area until his death in 1915, leaving his widow to support Stephen and three siblings. Mrs. Wright took the children to Williamsboro,

North Carolina, to be reared by her parents on the Eaton farm, while she pursued employment north of the Mason and Dixon Line to support the family.

Stephen Wright attended Williamsboro schools until he was fifteen, then began undergraduate study at Virginia's Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (known simply as Hampton Institute by 1930; it became Hampton University in 1984), which his father and a number of relatives had attended. He majored in chemistry and received his B.S. degree in 1934. He began his career as a teacher at Kennard High School in Centreville, Maryland, and later served as a high school principal in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, to support himself while pursuing graduate studies. He was awarded the M.A. degree in education from Howard University in Washington, D.C., in 1939.

The previous year, in June of 1938, Stephen Wright married Rosalind Elizabeth Person, born June 21, 1912, to the Reverend Shephard S. Person (who performed the 1938 marriage ceremony of his daughter) and Mary Jones Person, of Franklinton, North Carolina. Rosalind Person, who had been educated in Franklinton schools, received her B.S. degree in 1933 from Shaw College (now University) in Raleigh, North Carolina; she celebrated her 75th class reunion during Shaw's 2008 homecoming.

In 1939, Stephen Wright took his young bride to Durham, North Carolina, where he served as assistant professor of education and director of student teaching at North Carolina College (now N. C. Central). He continued graduate studies at Columbia and City College in New York, and in 1943 received his doctorate in education from New York University. He returned to Hampton Institute in 1944 as professor of education and later served as dean of students. In 1953 he was appointed president of Bluefield State College in Bluefield, West Virginia, where he served four years until his appointment as president of Fisk University in Nashville. In the summer of 1957, Wright became the seventh president of Fisk and the second African American to serve in that position.

While at Fisk, Dr. Wright continued 'in the forefront of efforts to improve the quality of black education and to remove the road blocks that had barred black students from going to college.' His equal-rights philosophy was mirrored in the rising protest against racial segregation revived by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, mandating an end to segregation in education. College students throughout the South became active in the Modern Civil Rights movement that 'began' the following year on December 1, 1955, in Alabama, when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give Montgomery City Lines bus for a white fellow passenger. In Nashville, in the fall of 1959, James Lawson, an African American began to conduct a series of weekly nonviolent sit-ins in the South in groups of four to lunch counters of two major February 13, 1960, student-leader John Lewis University Chapel to be transported downtown the movement continued, violence erupted thugs harassed the sit-in students, leading to Although local newspaper headlines President Stephen Wright publicly stated that in the necessary action for desegregation, reiterating in the spring of 1960 that 'No students will be expelled from Fisk University for participating to bring about change that is good.' Through his support of the students, President Wright became the only college president in Nashville to openly support the student movement for civil rights.



up her seat on the public passenger. In Nashville, in the fall of student at Vanderbilt University, workshops on nonviolent protest of Fisk students were 20-year-old John undergraduate Paul LaPrad, and joined other workshop trainees in the November, 1959, when they went in Nashville department stores. On met with 500 students at the Fisk to sit-in at local lunch counters. As when a group of white hoodlums and arrests of the sit-in students, condemned the sit-in movement, Fisk he approved of student involvement

As the turbulence of social change continued through the 1960s, Dr. Wright served on White House commissions by appointment of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. In 1966, as Fisk University celebrated its centennial year, Dr. Wright resigned his presidential post to become the first full-time president and chief executive officer of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in New York. Over the following three years of raising funds in support of the 41 private colleges under the UNCF umbrella, Dr. Wright's numerous essays on the value of equal opportunity in higher education were published to national acclaim in both popular and academic venues. In one of his published speeches, he addressed 'The Tragic Waste of the Black Mind and Talent,' which later gave rise to the slogan, 'A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste,' adopted in 1972 by the UNCF.

After Dr. Wright's tenure at the UNCF, he and Rosalind Wright returned to Hampton, Virginia. He served in five successive positions with the College Entrance Examination Board, where he was 'a pioneer in the development of an educational equality program for minority students.' From 1982 to 1990, Dr. Wright served as chairman of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. He received alumni awards from Hampton and Howard universities, as well as twelve honorary degrees, and he served on the boards of more than a dozen foundations and educational organizations. He also was the founder of the American Association of Higher Education.

Dr. Stephen Wright died April 16, 1996, less than five months before his 86th birthday, at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland. His funeral service was held in the chapel of Howard University, with Dr. Lawrence Jones presiding. The two men had been lifelong friends, and Dr. Jones had served as dean of chapel at Fisk during Wright's presidency. The following February 14, 1997, the Virginia General Assembly adopted House Joint Resolution Number 747 honoring Dr. Stephen J. Wright as 'one of the most prominent and accomplished educators of the 20th century. . . who left an unmatched legacy of service and dedication to the Commonwealth and the nation.' In memoriam, the Stephen J. Wright Scholars Program was established in Virginia.

Rosalind Wright had her husband's remains returned to Franklinton, North Carolina, for burial in Evergreen Cemetery. Three years later, she too returned to permanent residence in Franklinton, where she celebrated her 97th birthday in 2009.

- Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr., Fisk University

Sources:

Mitchell, Reavis L., Jr. Telephone interview of Rosalind E. Person (Mrs. Stephen J.) Wright, Franklinton, NC., December 9, 2009.

----- "Vision of Greatness" (Chapter 7: Dr. Stephen Junius Wright, Fisk University 7th President), *Thy Loyal Children Make Their Way: Fisk University Since Nashville*, TN: Fisk University, 1995, pp. 121-136.

'On the death of Dr. Stephen J. Wright, Jr.,' House Joint Resolution No. 747, offered February 14, 1997. Adopted proclamation by the Virginia General Assembly.

Corporate Sponsors:



at&t



Old Country Store

Financial Supporters:

Alkebu-Lan Images
Aramark
Cameron Alumni Group
Frierson Foundation
Friendship Baptist Church
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Tennessee Historical Society
Spruce Street Baptist Church
TSU Friends of the Library

Planning Committee:

Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr., Conference Co-Chair
Fisk University

Linda T. Wynn, Conference Co-Chair
*Tennessee Historical Commission
and Fisk University*

Yildiz Binkley, *Tennessee State University*

Pamela Bobo, *Tennessee State University*

Crystal deGregory, *Vanderbilt University*

Gloria Johnson, *Tennessee State University*

Michael McBride, *Tennessee State University*

Gloria McKissack, *Tennessee State University*

Tara Mitchell Mielnik, *Metropolitan Historical Commission*

Special Thanks to the Nashville Public Library and its Civil Rights Collection which graciously gave permission for use of several photos used in the production of this commemorative booklet.



Layout & Design courtesy of:
www.WriterinChief.com