

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable John Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lewis, John, 1940 Feb. 21-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis,
Dates:	April 25, 2001
Bulk Dates:	2001
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:06:19).
Abstract:	Civil rights leader and U.S. congressman The Honorable John Lewis (1940 - 2020) is a lifelong activist and has been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives since 1986. Lewis was recognized as one of the "Big Six" of the Civil Rights Movement (along with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins) who met with President Kennedy to discuss the planning of the "March on Washington". In 1965, Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led "Bloody Sunday", one of the most dramatic nonviolent protests of the Movement. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 25, 2001, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_039
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Congressman John Lewis rose from abject poverty to become one of America's leaders. He has been at the forefront of progressive social and political causes for more than forty years. Lewis was born on February 21, 1940, in Troy, Alabama to sharecroppers Eddie Lewis and Willie Mae Miles. Growing up, Lewis and his nine siblings worked regularly on his family's farm, frequently in lieu of attending the county's segregated schools.

Without his family's knowledge, Lewis became involved in the civil rights movement as a student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, where he helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In February 1960, Lewis helped spark a successful sit-in movement at segregated lunch counters in Nashville on the heels of sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. In 1961, Lewis volunteered to become a member of the Freedom Riders. Lewis risked his life and was beaten several times by white mobs for his participation.

Lewis served as chairman of SNCC from 1963 to 1966. As chairman, he was recognized as one of the "Big Six" of the civil rights movement (along with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Phillip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins) who met with President John F. Kennedy to discuss the planning of the March on Washington. In 1963, at the age of twenty-three, he was a keynote speaker at this historic event. In 1964, under the auspices of SNCC, Lewis helped coordinate and organize the successful Mississippi Freedom Summer.

In 1965, Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led "Bloody Sunday," one of the most dramatic nonviolent protests of the movement. The publicity surrounding Bloody Sunday and the subsequent march from Selma to

Montgomery, Alabama, led President Lyndon Johnson to push for the Voting Rights Act, passed by Congress on August 6, 1965.

Lewis was elected to his first governmental office in 1981, serving as an Atlanta City Council member until 1986. He then was elected to represent Georgia's 5th Congressional District, which represents the city of Atlanta and parts of several outlying counties. His 1996 bid for reelection went unopposed, and he is currently in his ninth term in office. Lewis is a member of the House Committee on Ways and Means, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congressional Committee to Support Writers and Journalists. Since 1991, Lewis has served as Senior Chief Deputy Democratic Whip. Lewis co-authored *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* with Michael D'Orso in 1998. Lewis has also been awarded numerous honorary degrees and awards, including the John F. Kennedy "Profile in Courage Award" for lifetime achievement and the NAACP Spingarn Medal.

He and his wife Lillian, the Director of External Affairs for the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Clark Atlanta University, lived in Atlanta with their two sons.

Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020.

John Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 25, 2001.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable John Lewis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on April 25, 2001, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights leader and U.S. congressman The Honorable John Lewis (1940 - 2020) is a lifelong activist and has been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives since 1986. Lewis was recognized as one of the "Big Six" of the Civil Rights Movement (along with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins) who met with President Kennedy to discuss the planning of the "March on Washington". In 1965, Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led "Bloody Sunday", one of the most dramatic nonviolent protests of the Movement.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

- Lewis, John, 1940 Feb. 21-
- Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)
- Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
- Lewis, John, 1940 Feb. 21---Interviews
- African American civic leaders--Interviews
- African American legislators--Georgia--Interviews
- African American politicians--Georgia--Interviews
- Segregation--Southern States
- Country life--United States--Anecdotes
- Discrimination in higher education--Alabama
- American Baptist Theological Seminary
- King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968
- Civil rights movements--United States
- African Americans--Civil rights--History--20th century
- Lawson, James M., 1928-
- Demonstrations--Southern States--1960-1969
- Freedom Rides, 1961
- Minorities--Violence against--United States
- Forman, James, 1928-2005

Congress of Racial Equality

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963

Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.)

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., 1963

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Georgia

Occupations:

Civil Rights Leader

U.S. Congressman

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|PoliticalMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, April 25, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

(Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, Section A2001_039_001_001, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

Congressman John Lewis discusses his father's background; Eddie Lewis was born in rural Alabama to poor sharecroppers. John Lewis's mother was also from rural Alabama and lived in 'Carter's Quarters', a section of town said to have been named for her family. Lewis then describes his nine siblings and their stations in life. Lewis's earliest memory involves his family's purchase of a 110-acre farm and the responsibilities that their change of residence entailed. Lewis remembers gathering all of the family's chickens together and preaching to them, evidence of his early aspirations of becoming a minister. Lewis describes that as a child, he preferred school life to farm life; his parents encouraged his commitment to education. Lewis goes on to describe himself as having been a precocious boy, influenced by the social segregation that pervaded life in the American South.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

African American legislators--Georgia--Interviews.

African American politicians--Georgia--Interviews.

Segregation--Southern States.

Country life--United States--Anecdotes.

Discrimination in higher education--Alabama.

American Baptist Theological Seminary.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968.

Civil rights movements--United States.

African Americans--Civil rights--History--20th century.

Lawson, James M., 1928-.

Demonstrations--Southern States.

Freedom Rides, 1961.

Minorities--Violence against--United States.

Forman, James, 1928-2005.

Congress of Racial Equality.

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963.

Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., 1963.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, Section A2001_039_001_002, TRT: 0:29:33 ?

Congressman John Lewis remembers time spent with his tight-knit extended family. Specifically, Lewis recalls that at age eleven, he spent one summer with family members in Buffalo, New York; this was Lewis's first trip outside of the South. Lewis discusses his commitment to attending college; though he was rejected for admission to Troy State University in Troy, Alabama on discriminatory grounds, he eventually attended the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition to studying and working, he attended lectures at nearby Fisk University where he was influenced by the prominent speakers of the day. Lewis describes the mentoring relationship that he and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared. Lewis goes on to discuss how the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, garnering interest in black colleges and universities and then in white institutions. He then discusses the nonviolent approach to protest that won his favor early in the Movement. Lewis cites Jim Lawson as a great proponent of such an approach and as a generally influential and "extraordinary human being."

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, Section A2001_039_001_003, TRT: 0:18:52 ?

Congressman John Lewis discusses the sexism that pervaded the Civil Rights Movement: the contributions of many prominent black women continue to go unrecognized. Lewis reveals that his family was unaware of the extent of his participation in the Civil Rights Movement; they did not know that Lewis was taking part in the notoriously dangerous Freedom Rides. His mother in particular, Lewis describes, was concerned about his safety as he made journeys through the polarized South. Lewis discusses the events of May 1961, the month during which he took part in his most memorable civil rights efforts. Lewis and fellow activists visited various sites, testing the influence of segregation. One such occasion resulted in the Freedom Riders' imprisonment. Their efforts drew attention to the cause for civil rights; they were recognized by high-ranking political figures. Lewis emphasizes the great courage of these young Freedom Riders.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, Section A2001_039_001_004, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Congressman John Lewis continues to describe a frightening episode for the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights Movement. After being arrested for their involvement and subsequently released, the group of black and white activists was abandoned in the South by law enforcement agents. Lewis goes on to discuss a violent confrontation that the Freedom Riders encountered upon their journey from Birmingham to Montgomery, Alabama. Lewis describes the Freedom Riders's experiences in jail. He goes on to explain that the idea of the Freedom Rides originated with James Forman of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. He cites Robert F. Kennedy and John F. Kennedy as two leaders who involved themselves in the efforts of the civil rights activists. Lewis discusses his appointment as the third chairman of SNCC, at the age of twenty-three. Lewis and other civil rights leaders held a meeting with President Kennedy at which they laid out their plans for the March on Washington.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable John Lewis, Section A2001_039_001_005, TRT: 0:20:08 ?

Congressman John Lewis reflects on his involvement in various aspects of the Civil Right Movement. Specifically, Lewis discusses the leaders of the March on Washington, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and

Bayard Rustin. Lewis discusses some of the conflicts within the March on Washington circle of leaders, and he emphasizes the ultimate success of their efforts. Lewis asserts that the number count conducted by officials underestimated the overwhelming participation by people of all races in the historical March on Washington. Lewis discusses that young leaders, like Lewis himself, were crucial to the movement and were recognized as such, particularly by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.