

Too Heavy for Your Pocket: Opening Up the World of the Play

Harper College
Kevin Long, Director
Mary T. Christel, Dramaturg



The Playwright

"Jiréh Breon Holder is currently the Playwriting Fellow of the Department of Theater and Creative Writing at Emory University. He is an Atlanta area playwright, director, and dramaturg In 2016, he received his MFA in Playwriting from the Yale School of Drama where he studied with Sarah Ruhl. He is a co-founder of Pyramid Theatre Company in Des Moines, Iowa. . . . His play *Too Heavy for Your Pocket* was the recipient of the Laurents/Hatcher Foundation Award, winner of the Alliance/Kendeda National Graduate Playwriting Competition National Graduate Playwriting Competition, and had an extended off-Broadway run at the Roundabout Theatre."

Source: actors-express.com

Civil Rights Movement: An Overview

"The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Civil War had officially abolished slavery, but it didn't end discrimination against Black people—they continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South. By the mid-20th century, Black Americans had had more than enough of prejudice and violence against them. They, along with many white Americans, mobilized and began an unprecedented fight for equality that spanned two decades."

Source: History.com



Follow the Civil Rights Trail at <https://civilrightstrail.com/timeline/>

Nashville in the 1960's: Setting the Stage with Sit-ins

According to the 1960 Census Nashville was populated by 170,874: approximately 106,000 white and 64,000 "negro" (the official designation at that time). Based on that population reality and Nashville history in Civil Rights activism in the 1950's plus the concentration of HBCUs there. In 1960, Fisk University student Diane Nash was instrumental in ending segregation of public spaces in Nashville. That initiative began with sit-ins at diners, lunch counters, and restaurants in February of that year lead by students from area black colleges and universities. Their nonviolent protests set the stage for similar action across the Nation.



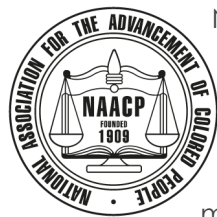
Nashville students, Matthew Walker, Peggy Alexander, Diane Nash and Stanley Hemphill, eating at a previously segregated lunch counter at the Greyhound bus terminal, undated, Gerald Holly, *Nashville Tennessean*, crmvet.org

HBCU's & Fisk University: An Opportunity for Education and Activism

After the Emancipation Proclamation, a great deal of attention was focused on how systematically to educate formerly enslaved African Americans. High schools, elementary schools as well as college and universities were established through the efforts of free Blacks and Black churches to remediate 90% illiteracy among freed slavery and to provide pathways to economic opportunity. Over time this network of colleges and universities became known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Initially, the institutions sought to train teachers and preachers. Kamala Harris is a graduate of Howard University. Jiréh Breon Holder, the playwright, is a proud Morehouse Man.

Fisk University was founded in 1866, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, by Clinton B. Fisk, and it was the first of the HBCUs to be accredited in 1930. Its forty-acre campus is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places. The Fisk Jubilee Singers have traveled the world helping to raise the university's cultural reputation. Alumni include W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, poet Nikki Giovanni, dancer Judith Jamison, Beyoncé's father Mathew Knowles, U.S. Representative John Lewis.

Key Organizations Involved in the Freedom Rides



NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), founded in 1909, is the largest civil rights organization and has been at the forefront of responding to violence against Black people. The organization published a pamphlet to guide the use of sit-ins as an effective form of nonviolent protest. "The Meaning of the Sit-ins" pamphlet can be accessed at https://www.crmvet.org/docs/60_naACP_sitins2.pdf. The NAACP posted bail for many Freedom Riders, despite the Rides creating controversy among some of the Association's leadership.

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942 in Chicago, sponsored the Freedom Rides in 1960. In 1947, the Congress had lead a Journey of Reconciliation through a number of Southern states to end segregation in interstate travel. In Nashville, it participated in the sit-ins to end lunch counter segregation.



The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) grew in prominence as a result of its participation in the lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina and Tennessee. The Committee's commitment to direct-action challenges to segregation lead to its involvement in the Freedom Rides.

Freedom Riders: Testing the Law One Bus at a Time

"Freedom Riders were groups of white and African American civil rights activists who participated in Freedom Rides, bus trips through the American South in 1961 to protest segregated bus terminals. Freedom Riders tried to use "whites-only" restrooms and lunch counters at bus stations in Alabama, South Carolina and other Southern states. The groups were confronted by arresting police officers—as well as horrific violence from white protestors—along their routes, but also drew international attention to the civil rights movement."

Their goal: "The 1961 Freedom Rides sought to test a 1960 decision by the Supreme Court in *Boynton v. Virginia* that segregation of interstate transportation facilities, including bus terminals, was unconstitutional as well."

Source: History.com

Follow the route of the Freedom Rides at

<https://earth.google.com/web/@34.73255247,-94.20826304,312.18527124a,12000006.88092462d,35y,0h,0t,0r/data=CjASLhlgMDMwNDVhMTE1NTc5MTFIOWI5YTZhMzBmYzk3YWVmZDEiCnZveV9zcGxhc2g>



Resources from the Freedom Rides Museum:

Here is also a link to videos of Freedom Riders who have visited the museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Two of these Freedom Riders, William Harbour and Matthew Walker, have passed since sharing their stories:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQJCn2CNGC-lunGuJfwCACA/videos>.

Additional resources available at museum website:

<https://ahc.alabama.gov/properties/freedomrides/freedomrides.aspx>

Parchman State Prison Farm: Brutal Incarceration, Separate and Unequal

Founded in 1901, it was the Mississippi State Penitentiary which evolved into a series of "camps" segregated by race and gender. When the Freedom Riders were incarcerated there, the prison officials relied on highly dehumanizing practices to humiliate and intimidate prisoners who were far from hardened criminals. The Mississippi governor boasted that the prison intended to break the spirits of the protestors.

Find out more



Learn more about the world of the play:

Civil Rights Trail website

<https://civilrightstrail.com>

Freedom Riders

from *American Experience* series (PBS), available through streaming platforms

PBS webpage: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomriders/>

John Lewis: Get in the Way

PBS webpage for film features clips including Nashville sit-ins

<https://www.pbs.org/show/john-lewis-get-in-the-way/>

Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Historically Black Colleges and Universities
from *Independent Lens* series (PBS)

film website: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/videos/tell-them-we-are-rising/>