



# sclc / HISTORY OF CIVIL RIGHTS

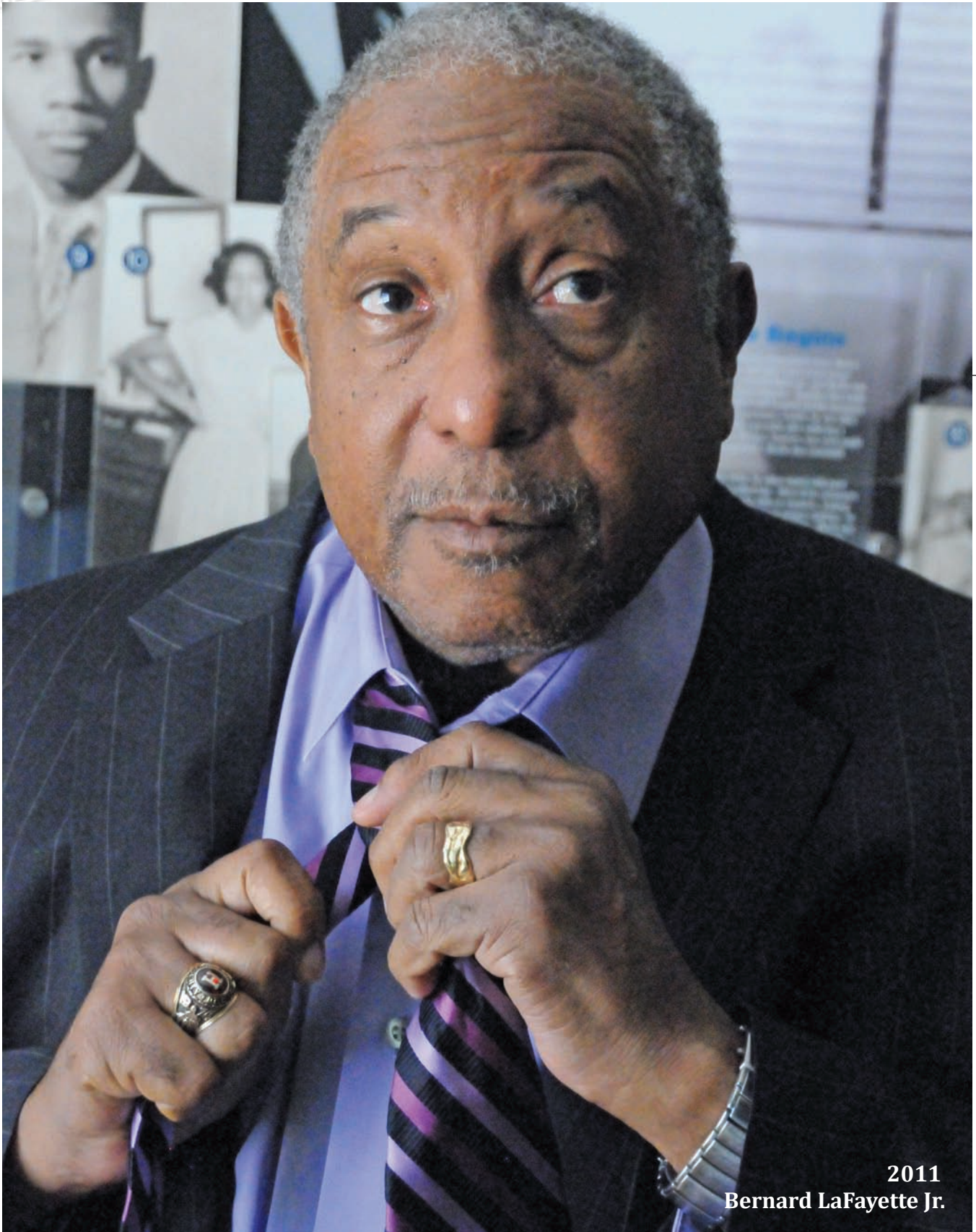


Photo Credit: Pam Zappardino

2011  
Bernard LaFayette Jr.

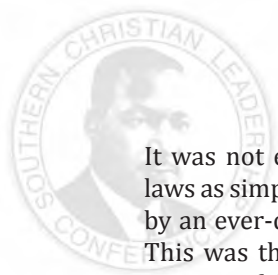
By Bernard LaFayette Jr., Ed.D.  
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# A Test Ride to Freedom

*Without any doubt,  
my journey with  
John Lewis that  
Christmas of  
1959 testing the  
segregated bus  
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beginning of the  
journey & Jackson,  
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ended segregation  
in public interstate  
transportation  
throughout the  
entire nation.*

**T**he Freedom Rides not only focused on desegregating the portion of a national industry which had allowed its buses, bus terminals, facilities, and restaurants to succumb to the fears and prejudices of the day. However, the goal of the Freedom Rides was to test the very foundation on which those laws continued to be enforced. The United States Supreme Court had in the cases of *Morgan* and *Boynton* declared these practices unconstitutional and illegal. The issue was being twisted as to whether or not people would be allowed to exercise their constitutional rights to travel freely throughout the United States. The other issue was being argued as a state's rights issue of whether the Federal Government could tell the several states, mainly the southern portion, what they could and could not do regarding their black and white citizens.

It must be said that the discrimination practiced in the southern states main focus only helped to feed the false notion that blacks and whites were not equal; with whites having an undeserved sense of superiority and blacks a feeling of inferiority. The fierce enforcement of Jim Crow Laws which were spelled out in the codified laws of the southern states were to punish with a purpose those whose behavior did not conform to these laws. The underlying notion was to present these laws as moral authority, one where, if not obeyed, the will of God was being violated.



It was not enough to simply present these laws as simple man-made edicts, edicts made by an ever-decreasing racist white majority. This was the premise that they gained the support of the separation of the races, it was often heard during that time that, *"If God meant for us to be together He would have made us together."*

Southern states viewed people who came from the north and encouraged others to stand up to this injustice as outside agitators who were bent on changing the Southern way of life. It was most important to have this support of the minority of whites who believed it was time for the Southern way of life to be as ancient as the actual battle of the states which originally determined the direction of America's way of life. The other purpose of the Freedom Rides was to give a "shot-in-the-arm" to movements in local cities. It was to help inspire them to end desegregation in their local communities. We would arrange for mass meetings in each town where the buses stopped to ensure we challenged the system not upon our arrival, but on our exit—In some places where we experienced no visible opposition to our ride, we later joked that we were "honorary whites for a day."

Long before the Freedom Rides of the 1960s became known to the world, the idea was gaining life in a trip taken by myself and John Lewis (currently a U.S. Representative, Atlanta, GA) the Christmas of 1959. John and I were students at American Baptist College at the time and we decided to take our own freedom ride down south to our homes. John was traveling to Troy, AL and I was heading to Tampa, FL. We both boarded the same bus in Nashville, TN towards our respective destinations. I remember our tickets called for us to leave around 7 or 8 that night. I even remember the tickets for interstate travel came like a



**Above, Picture: Nashville Movement Freedom Riders Rip Patton (left), Bernard Lafayette Jr. (right), and James Lawson (behind Lafayette), seated on a bus with armed National Guards en route to Jackson, MS.**

**Below, Picture: May 14, 1961, a Greyhound bus with 14 members of an interracial group that was part of the Freedom Rides was firebombed outside Anniston, AL.**

booklet, where at each stop along the way we had to present the booklet. This was unlike the single intrastate tickets that came on a single stub.

Since bus tickets were not seat specific we decided in Nashville that we would sit in the front of the bus. I sat in the first seat behind the driver and John sat on the opposite side in the second row. We were so ready to begin our journey we were the first to get on the bus. Once we were seated the bus driver ordered us to move to the rear we didn't reply nor did we move from our seats. Having been trained by Rev. James Lawson Jr., participated in the Nashville Sit-Ins and arrested on numerous occasions, we

were ready to go to jail and possibly received physical abuse. We had previously decided not to move from our seats even if ordered.

Looking back on it, I was fortunate that I carried my luggage, one leather suitcase, onto the bus and placed it at my feet behind the bus driver's seat. As we waited for the other passengers to board the bus, the bus driver stood up and said, *"OK, since you're not going to move, wait until I come back."* We had no idea of what was about to happen, but we assumed he had gone to get a policeman or possibly to call the Ku Klux Klan. He returned no more than ten minutes later, but alone. Other passengers had boarded the bus with some whites sitting in the seats behind John and me. The bus driver appeared visibly upset as he stood over us in an apparent sign of intimidation. The man was tall and very large, an imposing



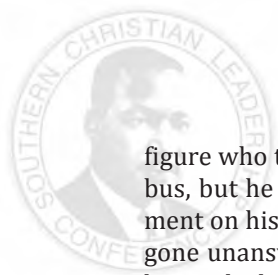
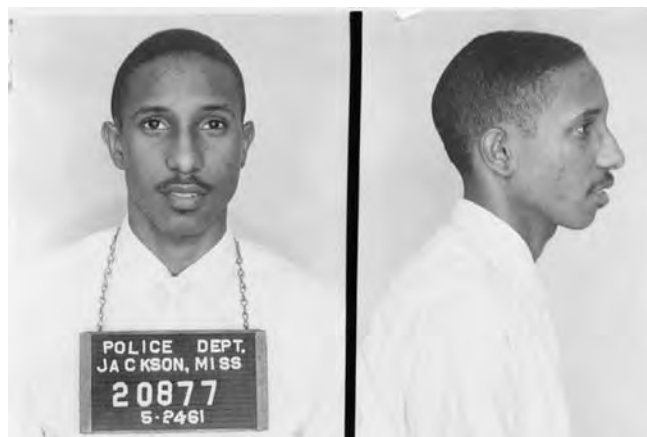


figure who towered over us once he stepped back on the bus, but he said nothing. He had a frown of disappointment on his face, as if disgusted that his call for help had gone unanswered. Abruptly, he sat down, started up the bus and adjusted his seat by ramming it back towards me. The force by which he did this caused his seat to puncture a hole in my suitcase because it had come off its track. If not for my decision to carry on my bag, the trip would have had a painful beginning, because the force of the driver's seat would have assuredly injured my legs.

Only in reflection do some things from the past become clear, but it was quite a statement that a bus driver, the enforcer of the law on the bus, was unable to carry out his duties and will. By a sheer act of God, each time the driver left the bus as we assumed he did to call for help his calls went unanswered. However, it was probably more of fate's blessing that our tickets had us leaving and traveling at night. Had we been traveling in the daylight his calls of help may have been answered. If he was calling the Klan, a group who worked to deliver their versions of rope and fire justice in the night, that if in fact they were being called upon they couldn't get it together to catch two little black boys riding alone throughout their territory.

I remember the ride and as we went further south it grew darker and darker. Each time we stopped along the way the bus driver got off the bus and each time he returned alone, but our anxiety continued to rise as the trip went further and further into the "belly of the beast" that was the Deep South. We arrived in Troy, AL, at a gas station which was posing as a bus station. John's ride had not shown up at the station and I just remember seeing him alone surrounded by the darkness—I pondered his fate as the bus pulled away. That night I wondered if I would ever see my best friend again.

As I continued along the unlighted two-lane highways that crisscrossed the south, my fate too rested in the hands of what was at each stop. Needless to say, I did not sleep on that bus. I was ever-so relieved to finally cross the Ala-



1961, mug shot of Bernard Lafayette Jr.

bama-Florida state line even though the northern part of the state marched to the beat of the "segregation now segregation forever crowd," the further south you went the less of a hold that beat had in the ears of those who heard it. I, also, breathed easier with no word or news that could have involved John (no news was good news). For my pickup, I had contacted Rev. C.K. Steele, president of the local SCLC Chapter in Tallahassee, FL and board member of the National SCLC, and gave him my bus schedule to ensure if anything happened at least one person would know. He could then have the bus driver answer to him and give an account of my whereabouts. Once I saw Rev. Steele at the bus station, I knew my trip was safely over.

Although my destination was Tampa, FL, this journey was only the beginning of a pilgrimage. We had to start planning how we could recruit others to "take this ride to freedom," which would not start until May of 1961, when the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E) launched the Freedom Rides. When the Freedom Rides were started by C.O.R.E and met with violence in Anniston, AL, I dropped out of college with other students from Nashville, who had been involved in the Sit-Ins to desegregate the lunch counters and the

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Stand-Ins to desegregate the movie theaters, to continue the Freedom Rides. I was attacked at the Montgomery, AL bus station and arrested at the Jackson, MS bus station with the first group of Freedom Riders. We were incarcerated in the Mississippi prison system for a total of 39 days. After our release, in a two-week period, James Bevel and I recruited 42 local Mississippi students to be apart of the Freedom Rides and for this we were arrested again in Jackson.

Without any doubt, my journey with John Lewis that Christmas of 1959 testing the segregated bus system was the beginning of the journey and Jackson, MS became the pilgrimage that ended segregation in public interstate transportation throughout the entire nation. sclc



May 24, 1961, with his head still bandaged from a previous beating, a young John Lewis is arrested in Jackson, MS along with 26 other Freedom Riders for the "crime" of riding in the "Whites Only" section of an interstate bus.



Photo Credit: Pam Zappardino

**REV. DR. BERNARD LAFAYETTE JR.:** Is an ordained minister, a longtime civil rights activist, organizer, and an authority on nonviolent social change. He co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960, and was a core leader of the Civil Rights Movement in Nashville, TN, in 1960 and in Selma, AL, in 1965. Lafayette directed the Alabama Voter Registration Project in 1962, and was appointed by Martin Luther King Jr. to be national program administrator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and national coordinator of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

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**PUBLICATIONS:** *The Community Leaders Workbook: The Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation Program: Strategies for Responding to Conflict and Violence*, (1998); and *The Leaders Manual: A Structured Guide and Introduction to Kingian Nonviolence*, co-authored with David Jehnsen, (1995)

**REFERENCES:**

More details regarding the Freedom Riders can be found in:

1. Book by Raymond Arsenault, "Freedom Riders, 1961 and the struggle for Racial Equality," Oxford University Press
2. The film, "Freedom Riders," written, produced and directed by Stanley Nelson, [www.freedomridersfilm.com](http://www.freedomridersfilm.com) (see page 46 of this issue).

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