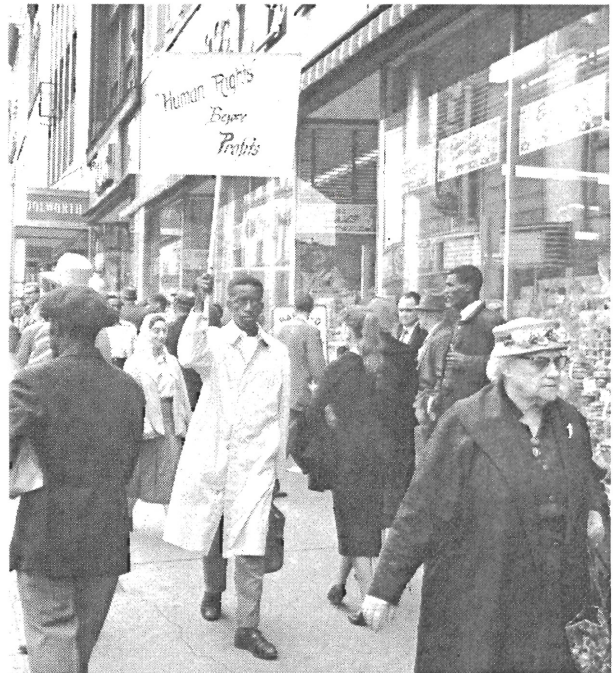


Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

ECONOMIC WITHDRAWAL DURING THE NASHVILLE SIT-INS

For most Americans, the 1950s were years of increasing personal prosperity. The booming economy brought about the growth of suburbs, as homeownership came to symbolize success and respectability in America. Even so, the culture and politics of the "Affluent Society" were shaped mostly by the world's anxiety over the Cold War. This dynamic created several of the most important factors contributing to the rise of American black protest, including the return of black soldiers from foreign service during the Second World War, the growth of an urban black middle class, the growing influence of television and other forms of popular culture, the embarrassment Americans experienced as they tried to present their nation to the world as the paragon of democracy while racial injustice persisted at home, and the political mobilization of northern blacks. These factors brought the nation's social and racial problems more sharply into focus.

After decades of struggles, an open crusade against racial intolerance and discrimination began in the 1950s. At the onset of the modern Civil Rights movement, Montgomery, Alabama, was one of the first cities where economic pressure was used to combat segregationist practices. According to Bruce J. Dierenfield's account in *The Civil Rights Movement*, bus company records indicated that 99% of the usual 30,000 black riders walked, hitchhiked, bicycled, and used car pools to make their way about the city after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Black Montgomery's boycott caused the bus company, downtown businessmen, and the city to lose approximately \$1 million. The economic boycott and a favorable ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the 1956 *Browder v. Gayle* case, desegregating Montgomery's city buses, brought about a major civil rights victory. Infused with an economic component, the Montgomery boycott succeeded in establishing a new form of racial protest based on passive resistance,



Protesters march downtown during the Easter Boycott.
Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room

which soon spread throughout the South and the nation at large.

When black leaders and students in Nashville began their formal sit-in movement, they, too, added an economic prong that devastated downtown merchants and business owners. The Nashville sit-ins, which were the largest and best organized of the sit-ins across the South, began in November and December 1959 when black leaders and students challenged the exclusionary racial policy of downtown eateries in the major department stores. Approximately one month after students began their full-scale movement in February 1960, Fisk University professor Vivian Henderson estimated that blacks in Nashville poured approximately \$50 million a year into the coffers of white businesses. This sum was

particularly significant since many white customers were moving to the suburbs, leaving downtown merchants increasingly economically dependent on Nashville's black population. The Reverend Kelly Miller Smith and Henderson organized a boycott of downtown stores just before Easter, an important shopping holiday. Empowered with their slogan, "No Fashions for Easter," the black community's "economic withdrawal" deprived storeowners of incalculable amounts of business.

By the beginning of April 1960, Nashville department stores were virtually empty as whites also stayed away. Many joined in the boycott as a show of support for the student demonstrators. A few white women mounted their own form of protest by turning in their credit cards at their favorite stores. "No Fashions for Easter" had achieved its goal. In its wake, one store merchant commented, while looking at the deserted downtown streets, "You could roll a bowling ball down Church Street and not hit anyone these days." Black women, through daily phone calls, mobilized the boycott in a display of unity with the students and sustained the "economic withdrawal" for almost seven weeks. Downtown retail merchants lost approximately 20 percent of their business. Downtown's empty streets and empty cash registers caused merchants to seriously consider dismantling Jim Crow customs in Nashville's retail district.

As the student demonstrators continued in their efforts to dismantle the Jim Crow system, Nashville businessmen met behind closed doors to discuss their predicament. As *Time* magazine described them, most of the storeowners were "pocket book integrationists." They were more committed to their bottom line than they were to the city's proscriptive system of racial segregation. Nashville's merchants realized the inevitability of desegregation, but they did not want to become catalysts for social change. However, the disruption of business and the boycott made it economically unsound for them to carry on without coming to some resolution. "It is inevitable," said Fred Harvey, Sr., in a telegram directing his store's treasurer, Greenfield Pitts, to desegregate. Pitts, also chair of the Chamber of Commerce's Retail Merchants Division, and Cain-Sloan President John

Sloan, worked diligently with storeowners to ease Jim Crow out of Nashville's downtown. Relenting under the pressure of the economic boycott, six stores, led by Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, rendered service to Nashville blacks on May 10, 1960.

By the middle of 1960, the Civil Rights movement in Nashville gained momentum as downtown store and restaurant owners surrendered to the economic demand for desegregation. They saw no advantage to losing black trade (and the profits that accompanied it) and provoking continued disruptions. Between 1961 and 1963, protests shifted to movie theatres (by May 1961 theatre owners capitulated), employment practices, downtown hotels, and every other type of public accommodation. By the spring of 1963, Nashville witnessed daily demonstrations against segregation, unfair employment practices, and discrimination against blacks in general. In March, the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference announced a "full-scale-assault" on segregation practices in Nashville. In addition to using marches, leaders and students of the Nashville movement implemented the proven weapon of an Easter economic boycott against downtown merchants and department stores to protest against unfair employment practices. By 1964, segregation had all but disappeared in most of the city's public accommodations. On July 2 of the same year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, one of the nation's most important and most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation.

Department store owners had no excuse for discriminating against black Nashvillians at lunch counters or in the provision of other services, especially when they accepted their dollars for goods and not services. The decrease in dollars flowing into the cash registers of downtown merchants and businessmen helped cause the walls of racial segregation to fall. Nashville blacks effectively used the premise put forth by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932, when they put into action economic and political pressures that "exert[ed] coercion upon the white man's life" and, more importantly, adversely affected his businesses.

--Linda T. Wynn
