A future congressman who couldn't get into Troy State University

In 1957, John Lewis, a black resident of Pike County, applied for admission to Troy State University. As you will see from reading the first of two items attached, he was never admitted.

He consulted Martin Luther King Jr. and considered challenging Troy's discriminatory admission practices. But Lewis backed off because of his parents' concerns. Their concerns, as described in this passage from Lewis' memoir, will show you the racial climate in Pike County before the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s.

Lewis became an activist in the civil rights movement. "The Race Beat" quotes him as saying that news coverage helped the movement.

Today he is a congressman from Atlanta. The second item attached describes an award that Lewis received from Troy University in 2006. It mentions that the university awarded him an honorary degree in 1989.

The first item here comes from the 1999 book "Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement" by John Lewis and Michael D’Orso. The second item is from Troy Today, a university publication for faculty and staff.
It was that sense of mission, of involvement, of awareness that others were putting themselves on the line for the cause—the high school showdown in Little Rock, Arkansas, was happening the fall of my freshman year—that moved me to do my part. I remember praying for those brave children in Little Rock as I gathered the courage to go to the president’s office at American Baptist and tell him I wanted to start an on-campus chapter of the NAACP.

I had been surprised to learn that the school had no such chapter. One of my classmates, an older student named Harold Cox, had taken me with him into Nashville to several meetings of a local youth chapter of the group. It seemed so natural for there to be a branch right on campus.

But the president disagreed. His name was Turner—Dr. Maynard P. Turner Jr. He had come from Kansas City only a year or so before, and he was in a tough position, very beholden to the white Southern Baptist Convention, which had a strong hand in both funding and directing the college. ABT could ill afford to lose the support of that organization; the college was operating on a shoestring budget as it was. It has always operated on shoestrings, ever since its creation in 1924. It still operates that way today.

Dr. Turner was very gracious with me, polite and attentive, but my notion was out of the question. Taking such a step would make it appear that the school was sanctioning the civil rights movement, and that, Dr. Turner told me, was something the college could simply not afford to do.

Looking back, I don’t know where I thought I was going to find the time to bring the NAACP to ABT. Dr. Turner’s refusal was enough to discourage me that fall, but by the end of that first semester I was stirred even more to take action, to put myself in the path of history. I wanted to be involved. I didn’t want to stand on the sidelines anymore.

That was when I decided to apply as a transfer student to Troy State University.

I didn’t particularly want to go to Troy State. I was happy at ABT. But I had thought of Troy a lot. Ever since I had watched Autherine Lucy attempt so courageously to integrate the University of Alabama, I had thought about the fact that Troy State, the closest college to where I was raised, to where my family still lived, allowed no black students inside its doors. Just as I had chafed during my entire childhood at the sight of white schoolchildren enjoying facilities and opportunities so far beyond what was available to me, now I felt a searing sense that it was simply, inherently wrong that a black student could not attend Troy State. Call that the thesis. And the antithesis? I would become the first black student to step through those doors.

And so, during that Christmas break of 1957, I sent an application along with a copy of my transcripts to Troy, by registered mail.

I got no reply. One month passed, then two, so I took another step. I wrote a letter to Dr. King.

No one knew what I was doing. I didn’t discuss it with any of my classmates. Nor did I mention it to my parents or my sisters and brothers. There was nothing to discuss. This was something I simply had to do. I had no doubt about it.

Soon after I mailed that letter, in which I introduced myself and described my situation, I received a reply from a man named Fred Gray. I knew who Fred Gray was. Everyone knew Fred Gray. He had represented Rosa Parks during the bus boycott and now he was Dr. King’s attorney. Mr. Gray asked me for more details. Over the course of the next several weeks I exchanged a series of letters with both him and with the minister of Montgomery’s First Baptist Church (Colored), the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy. We spoke on the telephone as well.

Finally, late that spring, Gray and Abernathy wrote to tell me that Dr. King wanted to meet with me. We set a date at the beginning of the summer, when I would be home from school. They mailed me a Greyhound ticket to make the trip.

I was overwhelmed. I was actually going to meet Martin Luther King Jr. I kept telling myself to be calm, that fate was moving now, that I was in the hands of that Spirit of History. But I was still nervous. I had only just turned eighteen. I was a baby, really. And now I had an appointment with destiny.

The weeks leading up to that meeting seemed to crawl by. I finished my final exams, packed my trunk, said goodbye to my friends at ABT and boarded the bus home to my family.

Soon thereafter, late one a Saturday morning, I climbed onto another bus, this one bound for Montgomery. My father had driven me to the station in Troy, and though he knew what I was doing and where I was going, he didn’t say a word about it. No mention of Montgomery. No mention of Dr. King. My father was never much of a talker. I know I picked up some of my quietness and shyness from him. The only words he spoke that morning were before we left home. "Bob," he said, "I think it’s time for me to take you to the station." That was all. We rode in silence.

During that bus ride to Montgomery I thought of what I would say to Dr. King. I rehearsed this sentence and that, but nothing stuck. I was anything but calm.

Mr. Gray had given me directions to his office, which was a short walk from the Montgomery station. I’d written the address, 113 Monroe Street, on the piece of paper I held in my hand.

When I knocked on the door, a slender man, about five ten, wearing a nice suit, answered.
"And I presume you're John Lewis," he said, offering his hand.

"Yes, sir," I answered. "Attorney Gray?"

He nodded, grabbed his hat and his briefcase, stepped out, shut the door behind him and strode past me toward the street. I was excited. I'd never met a black attorney before. I'd never met a white attorney either.

"We're going to drive over to the church," he said.

That would be First Baptist, the Reverend Abernathy's church. When we arrived, Mr. Gray led me down a long staircase to the basement pastor's office. The room was paneled, with one window high up near the ceiling. Sitting inside were two men, one large and dark—the Reverend Abernathy—the other younger, very relaxed, very congenial—Dr. King.

It was King who spoke first, rising behind the desk and smiling across it at me.

"So you're John Lewis," he said, lifting an eyebrow. "The boy from Troy."

Gray and Abernathy chuckled softly.

"I just want to meet the boy from Troy," King said again.

Then Abernathy joined in.

"Who is this young man who wants to desegregate Troy State?" he asked.

I didn't say a word. I was petrified. These men, this moment, this whole thing that was happening, was bigger than life to me. They were checking me out, clearly, and I had no idea what they saw. I had no sense of myself at that moment. I was mesmerized, just listening, just trying to take it all in.

Dr. King and Abernathy did almost all the talking. I don't recall Fred Gray saying a word. King sat behind the large pastor's desk, Abernathy sat to the side, and I sat beside Gray, facing both of them. They questioned me about my background, where I came from, how I'd been raised, who had raised me, and I told them. They asked whether I was truly aware of what I was getting into here. They wanted to know how prepared I was for what I would face, and how committed I was to stick it out. If I took this step, they told me, it was imperative that I stay the course. Better to not begin this at all, they told me, if there was a chance I might quit. There could be no backing out.

I understood, I told them. And I was ready.

"You know, John," said Dr. King, "if you do this, something could happen to you."

He seemed genuinely concerned, troubled even. I remember wondering at that moment—and this was something I would think about again many times over the coming years—how heavy, how terrifying the responsibility must have felt to him for all the people he inspired to take up this struggle.

"It's not just you who could be hurt, John," he continued. "Your parents could be harassed. They could lose work, lose their jobs. They could be assaulted. Your home could be attacked. The farm could be burned."
I was heartbroken, but I didn’t argue. This was their decision, not mine.

I needed their blessing, and they couldn’t give it. As disappointed as I was, I understood. It was one thing to decide that this was my fight, but I had no right to make it theirs. And so, late that summer, I wrote Dr. King a letter explaining that I had decided to return to Nashville. That was a hard letter to write. I was leaving behind the man in Montgomery whom I thought would change my life. Little did I know that the man who would truly turn my world around was waiting for me in Nashville.

His name was Lawson. Jim Lawson.

When I came back to Nashville in the fall of 1958, it felt like a different place than it had been the year before. There was a sense of urgency and awareness spreading among my classmates and friends, and indeed, among black students throughout the city. There was a growing feeling that this movement for civil rights needed—no, demanded—our involvement. This wasn’t even just an American movement anymore. Amazing changes were happening in Africa, where Ghana had won its independence a year earlier opening the door to a black African liberation movement that would soon sweep away much of the centuries-old colonial rule by European powers like Britain, Belgium, Portugal and France.

Zaire, Somalia, Nigeria, the Congo—freedom was stirring in all these places, and we couldn’t help being thrilled. Thrilled, but also a little bit ashamed. Here were black people thousands of miles away achieving liberation and independence from nations that had ruled them for centuries, and we still didn’t have those rights in a country that was supposed to be free. Black Africans on their native continent were raising their own national flag for the first time in history, and we couldn’t even get a hamburger and a Coke at a soda fountain. Here we were, in the capital of the state of Tennessee, and there was only one movie theater that would allow us to enter, and that was by way of the balcony. There was something wrong with that, something terribly wrong.

By the fall of ’58 my eyes were opening in many ways. Like most college freshmen, I had spent my first year focused primarily on the campus itself, or acclimating myself to life at ABT, to my job and my studies. But now, as I came back for my second year, I started seeing and understanding the city that surrounded me, a city that was already beginning to tremble with the same racial tension that was rising throughout the South.

Nashville at that time was an odd mix of racial progressiveness on the one hand and conflict and intolerance on the other. Its geographic location—a place where...
An icon of the U.S. civil rights movement urged Troy University students Monday to continue to fight for freedom and peace around the world.

U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Georgia) visited the University Oct. 2 to receive the Hall-Waters Prize. The Hall-Waters Prize is endowed by TROY alumnus Dr. Wade Hall, an author, former member of the faculty at the University of Florida and professor emeritus of English at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY.

Dr. Hall, a native of Bullock County, endowed the prize as a memorial to his parents, Wade Hall Sr. and Sarah Elizabeth Waters Hall. The award is presented annually to a person who has made significant contributions to Southern heritage and culture in history, literature or the arts.

Lewis, who grew up less than 15 miles from Troy in rural Pike County, talked about his rise from the hardscrabble life as a sharecropper’s son to a lofty see PRIZE, Page 3

‘Thinker’ artist recognized in ceremony

Troy University officially recognized the artist and donor of its two-ton ‘Thinker’ statue today.

Mr. Huo Baozhu, the artist and president of De Run International Trading Co., Ltd., of Xi’an, China, made the donation of the sculpture to the University in 2004, but was unable to schedule a visit to the campus until this month. The statue sits along University Avenue amid the magnolias near the Shackleford Quad and adjacent to the Rotary International Center. Speaking through an interpreter, Mr. Huo praised the University for its leadership in establishing a relationship with the People’s Republic of China and its universities. In particular he praised the University’s 1-2-1 Sino-American Dual Degree Program, pioneered by TROY and now used by universities nation wide as a model for education.

“Troy University has done more than just education, it brings the world closer together,” Mr. Huo said.

Since Mr. Huo’s donation of the statue, he has also donated a see THINKER, Page 3
set of bronze terra cotta warriors to the University. Those warriors will be placed in the new student housing complex when it’s completed. Also planned is the donation of a set of bronze deer that will adorn a new park on campus, according to Dr. Jack Hawkins Jr., TROY’s chancellor. Dr. Hawkins first met Mr. Huo on a trip to China in 2002.

“He emphasized his interest in fostering a strong relationship between China and the USA,” Dr. Hawkins said.

“China is an emerging world power with 1.3 billion people and the fastest growing economy in the world at 9 percent a year over the last 25 years,” Dr. Hawkins said. “China is also important to Troy University, as we have more than 250 students from there enrolled on our campus.”

position as leader of the civil rights movements and confidant of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Due to institutionalized racial segregation in the late 1950s, Lewis did not attend Troy State College, instead leaving his family’s Pike County farm for Nashville and American Baptist Theological Seminary and Fisk University. Lewis played a role in the watershed events of the 1960s civil rights movement, such as “Bloody Sunday” and the Selma-to-Montgomery March, the “Freedom Rides” and the march on Washington, where he shared the podium with Dr. King and the famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

“Of the 10 people who spoke that day, I am the last one around,” he said.

Despite suffering for his beliefs in equality for all races—Lewis was arrested more than 40 times and was beaten on several occasions—the Georgia congressman urged Troy University students to tackle their problems with hope and optimism. He also encouraged them to carry on the mission of the civil rights movement by advocating freedom and equality for all peoples of the world.

“Never, ever give up. Never, ever give in. Never get lost in a sea of despair,” Lewis said. “Colleagues have asked me why I am not bitter. I have told them over and over again that hate is too heavy a burden to bear.”

More than 250 students heard Lewis’s remarks in the Trojan Center ballrooms, honoring him with two standing ovations. Many of these students have been studying Lewis’s memoir of the civil rights movement “Walking with the Wind” in their English classes in preparation for his visit.

Dr. Wade Hall introduced Lewis as a “fighter on the front lines of a good war, with danger and destruction always lurking.” He praised Lewis for his service in Congress and his continued leadership in the fight for human rights.

Chancellor Jack Hawkins Jr. welcomed Lewis home to Troy and pointed out that many changes have taken place at Troy University since Lewis tried to enroll in the late 1950s. For example, African-American students make up 22 percent of the enrollment on the Troy Campus and last year Troy University worldwide awarded diplomas to more than 2,000 African-American students.

Dr. Hawkins also pointed out that the Hall-Waters Prize is not the first honor Rep. Lewis has received from TROY, as the University awarded him the honorary doctor of laws degree in 1989.