

Who were the Freedom Riders?

Freedom Riders were 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. Confronted by police officers, as well as horrific violence from white protestors, along their routes, they drew international attention to the civil rights movement.

What were the Freedom Rides trying to do?

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.

Black riders traveled to the Jim Crow South, where segregation continued to occur, and attempted to use whites-only restrooms, lunch counters and waiting rooms.

The original group of 13 Freedom Riders, 7 African Americans and 6 whites, left Washington, D.C., on a Greyhound bus on May 4, 1961. Their plan was to reach New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 17 to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which ruled that segregation of the nation’s public schools was unconstitutional.

The group traveled through Virginia and North Carolina, drawing little public notice. The first violent incident occurred on May 12 in Rock Hill, South Carolina. John Lewis, an African American seminary student and member of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), white Freedom Rider and World War II veteran Albert Bigelow, and another African American rider were viciously attacked as they attempted to enter a whites-only waiting area.

When the group reached Atlanta, GA the next day, some of the riders split off onto a Trailways bus.

Bloodshed in Alabama

On May 14, 1961, the Greyhound bus was the first to arrive in Anniston, Alabama. There, an angry mob of about 200 white people surrounded the bus, causing the driver to continue past the bus station.

The mob followed the bus in automobiles, and when the tires on the bus blew out, someone threw a bomb into the bus. The Freedom Riders escaped the bus as it burst into flames, only to be brutally beaten by members of the surrounding mob.

The second bus, a Trailways vehicle, traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, and those riders were also beaten by an angry white mob, many of whom brandished metal pipes. Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor stated that, although he knew the Freedom Riders were arriving and violence awaited them, he posted no police protection at the station because it was Mother’s Day.

Photographs of the burning Greyhound bus and the bloodied riders appeared on the front pages of newspapers throughout the country and around the world the next day, drawing international attention to the Freedom Riders’ cause and the state of race relations in the United States.

Following the widespread violence, CORE officials could not find a bus driver who would agree to transport the integrated group, and they decided to abandon the Freedom Rides. However, Diane Nash, an activist from the SNCC, organized a group of 10 students from Nashville, TN, to continue them.

U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy negotiated with Alabama Governor John Patterson and the bus companies to secure a driver and state protection for the new group of Freedom Riders. The rides resumed on a Greyhound bus departing Birmingham under police escort on May 20.

Federal Marshals Brought In

The violence did not abate and the police abandoned the Greyhound bus just before it arrived at the Montgomery, Alabama, terminal, where a white mob attacked the riders with baseball bats and clubs as they disembarked. Attorney General Kennedy sent 600 federal marshals to the city to stop the violence.

The following night, Martin Luther King Jr. led a service at the First Baptist Church in Montgomery. Attended by more than one thousand supporters of the Freedom Riders, a riot ensued outside the church, and King called Robert Kennedy to ask for protection.

Kennedy summoned the federal marshals, who used teargas to disperse the white mob. Patterson declared martial law in the city and dispatched the National Guard to restore order.

‘Cooling Off’ Period Needed

On May 24, 1961, a group of Freedom Riders departed Montgomery for Jackson, Mississippi where several hundred supporters greeted them. However, those attempting to use the whites-only facilities were arrested for trespassing and taken to the maximum-security penitentiary in Parchman.

That same day, U.S. Attorney General Kennedy issued a statement urging a “cooling off” period in the face of the growing violence:

“A very difficult condition exists now in the states of Mississippi and Alabama. Besides the groups of 'Freedom Riders' traveling through these states, there are curiosity seekers, publicity seekers and others who are seeking to serve their own causes, as well as many persons who are traveling because they must use the interstate carriers to reach their destination.

In this confused situation, there is increasingly possibility that innocent persons may be injured. A mob asks no questions.

A cooling off period is needed. It would be wise for those traveling through these two Sites to delay their trips until the present state of confusion and danger has passed and an atmosphere of reason and normalcy has been restored.”

During the Mississippi hearings, the judge turned and looked at the wall rather than listen to the Freedom Riders’ defense—as had been the case when sit-in participants were arrested for protesting segregated lunch counters in Tennessee. He sentenced the riders to 30 days in jail.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a civil rights organization, appealed the convictions all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which reversed them.

Travel Desegregated

The rides continued over the next several months, and in the fall of 1961, under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations prohibiting segregation in interstate transit terminals.