



Freedom Rides of 1961

Excerpted from "[History & Timeline](#)"

The First Ride (1961)

In December of 1960, the Supreme Court rules in the *Boynton v. Virginia* case, that segregation in inter-state travel is illegal, and that as a matter of Federal law integrated travel on inter-state buses and trains is a legal right. Separate white and colored toilets and dining rooms for inter-state travelers are no longer allowed, travelers have the right to use whatever facilities they choose, and sit wherever they wish.

By early '61, the [Rock Hill](#) SC sit-in movement has run into a stone wall of racist resistance, and CORE activist Tom Gaither proposes a "Freedom Ride" through Rock Hill and elsewhere in the Deep South to test and implement the Boynton decision.

On May 4, CORE Director James Farmer leads 13 Freedom Riders (7 Black, 6 white) out of Washington on Greyhound and Trailways buses. The plan is to ride through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Their final destination is New Orleans, Louisiana. Most of the Riders are from CORE — many in their 40s and 50s — and two are young students from SNCC. Little trouble is encountered as they travel through Virginia and North Carolina, but John Lewis, Al Bigelow, and Genevieve Hughes are beaten in Rock Hill, SC, and some of the Riders are arrested in Charlotte NC, and Winnsboro SC.

Anniston & Birmingham AL

White political leaders in Georgia choose not to defy the Supreme Court ruling by arresting the Riders. Nor do they incite racist hysteria or mob violence. The Riders cross Georgia — Augusta - Athens - Atlanta — without incident. But in Alabama and Mississippi, segregationist politicians seize on the Freedom Ride as a political opportunity, railing against integration, "race-mixers," "Communist-plots," the Supreme Court, and the Federal government.

With the cooperation of the cops, on May 15 (Mothers Day), a mob of more than 100 Klansmen ambush the Riders in Anniston AL, attacking the Greyhound bus, smashing the windows, and slashing the tires. The bus tries to flee, but the attackers give chase, halting it on the outskirts of town, then setting it on fire. The mob holds



Freedom Rider bus burned outside of Anniston AL. Birmingham Library photo.

the door shut to burn the Riders alive. The Alabama Highway Patrol has an undercover cop on board. He pulls his gun to force the Klansmen back, and the passengers tumble off the bus — barely escaping with their lives — just before the gas tanks explode. SNCC student Hank Thomas is beaten with a baseball bat to the head while other Riders are assaulted.

When the violence subsides, a 12 year old white girl who lives nearby defies the taunts and insults of the Klansmen to bring water to the bleeding Riders who are still choking from the smoke. For daring to help the injured Riders, she and her family are later ostracized and forced to leave the county.



Birmingham Post photo.

When the Trailways bus reaches Anniston, the mob boards the bus and beats the Riders with fists and clubs. The bus manages to escape Anniston and reach Birmingham where Commissioner of Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor encourages another KKK mob to savagely attack the Riders again, leaving them bloody and battered. At the hospital, Jim Peck of CORE requires 53 stitches to close his wounds. The FBI knows in advance that the two busses are going to be attacked in Anniston and Birmingham, but they do nothing to prevent the violence, do nothing to protect the Riders from assault, do nothing to enforce the Supreme Court ruling.

Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and activists from the [Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights](#) (ACMHR) defy the mobs to rescue the Riders. Shuttlesworth is arrested twice on trumped up charges.

Photos and news reports of the burning bus in Anniston and the mob violence in Birmingham flash around the nation — and around world — to the great embarrassment of the Kennedys. Attorney General Robert Kennedy calls for a “cooling off period” (meaning that CORE should halt the Freedom Ride). He blames “*extremists on both sides*” for the violence. Freedom Movement activists are both dumbfounded and outraged. Yes, clearly, smashing peoples' skulls with baseball bats and trying to burn them alive in a hijacked bus are the acts of extremists. But the nonviolent Freedom Riders are peaceful, and their actions are entirely legal under Federal law. By what measure of justice and common sense can they be labeled “*extremists?*”

The next day, Greyhound and Trailways drivers refuse to drive any bus carrying Freedom Riders. Unable to proceed to Montgomery, the CORE Riders decide to fly to New Orleans to attend a previously scheduled rally at which they are the main speakers. Bomb threats prevent the plane from taking off, and they are harassed by another Klan mob as they wait hour after hour at the airport. Finally, under pressure from Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the airline manages to get a flight off the ground in the dead of night, and the CORE Riders reach New Orleans.

SNCC Students Resume the Freedom Ride

Though they know they are putting their young lives in deadly peril, activists from the SNCC-affiliated Nashville Student Movement (NSM) won't allow the KKK to defeat the Ride. Student leader Diane Nash tells Rev. Shuttlesworth: “*The students have decided that we can't let violence overcome. We are coming into Birmingham to continue the Freedom Ride.*” Their elders — teachers, community leaders, pastors — are certain they will be killed and try to dissuade them. The students are not deterred.

Ten Riders (8 Black, 2 white) — including John Lewis and Hank Thomas, the two young SNCC members of the original Ride — take bus from Nashville to Birmingham on May 17. When they arrive, they are arrested by “Bull” Connor who transports them in the middle of the night to the Tennessee border and dumps them by the side of the road. They manage to make their way back to Birmingham where more Riders, including Ruby Doris Smith from SNCC in Atlanta, reinforce them.

Now 19 strong (16 Black, 3 white) they return to the Greyhound terminal. Again, the drivers refuse to carry them — *“I have only one life to give, and I’m not going to give it to NAACP or CORE,”* says one driver. All night — hour after hour — the Riders wait for a bus while constantly harassed and besieged by a racist mob led by Robert Shelton, Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan.



The Rev Fred Shuttlesworth with Freedom Riders Charles Butler, Catherine Burks, Lucretia Collins, and Salynn McCollum in the “white” Greyhound terminal waiting room.
Nashville Tennessean photo.

Mobs in Montgomery AL

Under intense public pressure, the Kennedy administration extracts a reluctant promise from Alabama Governor Patterson to protect the Freedom Riders on their journey from Birmingham to Montgomery. Greyhound is forced to provide a driver. On the morning of May 20, the Freedom Ride resumes. Afraid of a Klan ambush, the bus streaks south towards Montgomery at 90 miles an hour escorted by Alabama Highway Patrol cars, their sirens screaming.



Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg after being beaten by Klansmen in Montgomery bus station.

But when the bus reaches the Montgomery city limits the Highway Patrol suddenly disappears. Just before the bus arrives, all the cops who had been guarding the Greyhound terminal also disappear. When the Freedom Riders step off the bus, hundreds of Klansmen swarm over them, screaming *“Get the niggers!”* They attack with baseball bats, broken bottles, and lead pipes. Reporters are beaten and their cameras smashed (which is why no photographs exist of this murderous attack).

Jim Zwerg is beaten to bloody unconsciousness, his teeth knocked out. John Lewis is felled by a wooden crate to the head. When Justice Department official John Seigenthaler tries to rescue two of the women Riders, he too is beaten unconscious and left bloody on the pavement. Acting against orders from his political masters, Alabama Public Safety Director Floyd Mann pulls his revolver and stops the Klansmen who are kicking and stomping Zwerg, Lewis, and William Barbee — probably saving their lives. (When Governor George Wallace [takes office](#) in 1963, he immediately fires Mann, and replaces him with “Colonel” Al Lingo, a rabid segregationist.)

After allowing the Klan its reign of terror, the police finally show up. The mob, now grown to over 1,000, expands outward from the Greyhound terminal attacking Blacks on the street, setting one teenage boy on fire, and burning the Riders' luggage in a bonfire. The cops make no arrests. Instead they serve the Freedom Riders with injunctions blaming them for the violence.

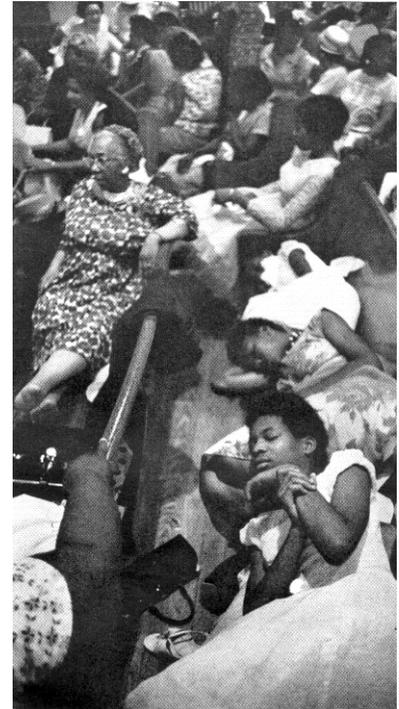
Under the segregation laws, Black cab drivers cannot take white Freedom Riders to the hospital, and white drivers won't. Only the Catholic St. Jude's hospital will treat wounded Riders of any color. From his hospital bed, William Barbee tells reporters: "As soon as we've recovered from this, we'll start again." And from the white side of the segregated hospital, Zwerg agrees, saying: "We are prepared to die."

In Washington, pressure intensifies on the Kennedys. JFK issues a tepid "statement of concern," and Robert Kennedy orders Federal marshals to Alabama to protect interstate commerce. Meanwhile, James Farmer of CORE begins recruiting more Riders to head south.

The following night, Sunday, May 21st, more than 1200 Black citizens pack Reverend Abernathy's 1st Baptist church to honor the Freedom Riders. Dr. King speaks in their support. Outside, a mob of more than 3,000 whites heckle and harass Blacks and the handful of Federal marshals protecting the church. No city or state cops are in sight. Shuttlesworth, down from Birmingham, braves the mob that now completely surrounds the church to escort in James Farmer.

The mob overturns a car and sets it ablaze. The marshals desperately try to protect the church from assault and fire bombs. Inside, the people of Montgomery sing hymns and freedom songs in defiance. As rocks shatter the windows and tear gas seeps in, the children are sent to the basement for protection. Black men draw hidden pistols from their pockets and prepare to defend their families if the mob manages to break down the doors.

Slowly, reluctantly, President Kennedy moves towards committing federal troops, but Governor Patterson forestalls him by declaring martial law and sending in the Alabama National Guard to disperse the mob. The people try to leave the church, but the Alabama National Guard — the "Dixie" Division with the Confederate flag as its shoulder patch — forces them at bayonet point to remain inside the sweltering, tear gas filled building for the entire night.



Surrounded by a huge racist mob, Freedom Ride supporters in Montgomery's First Baptist Church endure a night of tear gas and terror with steadfast courage. *Life Magazine* photo.

Arrests in Jackson

The next day more Freedom Riders from CORE and SNCC arrive in Montgomery.



Photo by Bruce Davidson

Behind their backs and hidden from public view, the Kennedys cut a deal with the governors of Alabama and Mississippi. The governors agree to have their state police and National Guard protect the Riders from mob violence — thereby ending media coverage of bloody lawlessness which is humiliating JFK at home and embarrassing the U.S. around the globe. In return, the Federal government agrees to look the other way and allow the states to illegally — and unconstitutionally — arrest the Freedom Riders even though they are engaged in inter-state commerce protected by the Supreme Court's *Boynton* decision.

On Wednesday morning, May 24, a dozen Freedom Riders board a Trailways bus for the 250 mile journey to Jackson MS. Surrounded by Highway Patrol and National Guard, the bus

heads west on Highway 80 in a caravan of more than 40 vehicles. They pass through Selma at top speed without stopping — there will be no bus-depot rest stops until Jackson seven hours from Montgomery. Meanwhile, back in Montgomery, 14 more Riders board the mid-day Greyhound for Jackson.

When the weary Riders arrive in Jackson and attempt to use “white only” restrooms and lunch counters they are immediately arrested for Breach of Peace and Refusal to Obey an Officer. Says Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett in defense of segregation: *“The Negro is different because God made him different to punish him.”*

From lockup, the Riders announce “Jail No Bail” — they will not pay fines for unconstitutional arrests and illegal convictions — and by staying in jail they keep the issue alive. Each prisoner will remain in jail for 39 days, the maximum time they can serve without losing their right to appeal the unconstitutionality of their arrests, trials, and convictions. After 39 days, they file an appeal and post bond.

Back in Montgomery, a Greyhound from the east arrives with yet another team of Riders including Charles Jones of SNCC and Yale University Chaplain William Sloan Coffin. The Alabama Guardsmen are unable (or unwilling) to prevent a mob from attacking the Riders with thrown rocks and bottles. When SCLC leaders Rev. Shuttlesworth, Rev. Abernathy, Wyatt Tee Walker, and Bernard Lee join them at the bus terminal's “white only” lunch counter, they are all arrested.



Yale Chaplain William Sloan Coffin, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Bernard Lee at the “white only” lunch counter in the Montgomery Trailways terminal just before they are arrested. *Life Magazine* photo.

Freedom Rides Roll Across the South



Freedom Riders arrested in Jackson. *Life Magazine* photo.

The Kennedys again call for a “cooling off period” and condemn the Riders as “unpatriotic” because they embarrass the nation on the world stage. Attorney General Robert Kennedy — the chief law enforcement officer of the land — is quoted as saying that he, *“Does not feel that the Department of Justice can side with one group or the other in disputes over Constitutional rights.”* Civil rights supporters across the nation retort that defending the Constitutional rights of American citizens is part of the department's job, that's why it's called the “Justice” Department.

Defying the Kennedys, CORE, SNCC, and SCLC reject any “cooling off period” and form a Freedom Riders Coordinating Committee to keep the Rides rolling. June — July — August — more than 60 Freedom Rides criss-cross the South (see map below). Most of the rides converge on Jackson, where every Rider is arrested. By the end of the summer, more than 300 have been jailed, including 41 local Jacksonians busted for joining the Riders at segregated lunch counters.

A New Generation of Leaders

Many of the Freedom Riders are moved to Parchman Penitentiary, the Mississippi prison farm notorious for its brutal treatment of inmates — where prison life is described as *“worse than slavery.”* Murders and rapes are common, and the guards use shotguns and leather whips to enforce absolute rule. Mississippi intends to halt the growing Freedom Movement by breaking the Riders' spirit. When the Riders won't stop singing freedom songs their mattresses are removed, forcing them to sleep on hard concrete and steel. It's summer in the Delta, the windows are closed and the fans stopped to create

sweltering, suffocating heat. The riders must endure poisonous hatred, inedible food, and vicious beatings. Fire hoses are used to smash bodies against the steel bars, and the prisoners are tortured with agonizing electric cattle prods. Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) later recalls: *“When [the prod] touched your skin, the pain was sharp and excruciating, at once a jolting shock and a burn. You could actually see (puffs of smoke) and smell (the odor of roasting flesh) your skin burning.”*

Mississippi fails to break the Riders. They emerge from prison — Parchman and Hinds County Jail — stronger and more committed than before. And for many of them, what began as a simple protest has been forged into a vocation, a commitment to freedom and justice that shapes the rest of their lives.

Finally, the Kennedy administration has the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) issue another desegregation order. When the new ICC rule takes effect on November 1st, passengers are permitted to sit wherever they please on the bus, “white” and “colored” signs come down in the terminals, separate drinking fountains, toilets, and waiting rooms are consolidated, and the lunch counters begin serving people regardless of color. In the Deep South states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, a crack has been forced open in the solid wall of segregation.

But rules put to paper in Washington must be enforced on the ground in the South — and that requires men and women of courage to defy generations of custom and a century of terror. The new order is signed on November 1st, and on that same day nine Black students in Albany GA try to use the bus terminal's “white-only” facilities. They are denied. And from that seed of defiance grows the [Albany Movement](#) which goes on to challenge segregation throughout Southwest Georgia.

Freedom Rides — Important Points

As Movement veterans, we note the following about the Freedom Rides:

- **When the going gets tough, don't falter — escalate.** By the winter of 1960, the student sit-ins are flagging. Victories have been won in some mid and upper-south college-towns, but in the Deep South little progress has been made. Rather than retreat, the Movement escalates the confrontation. The Freedom Rides directly and publicly challenge segregation in its Deep South strongholds. The Freedom Riders up the stakes by defying the Klan, the Citizens Councils, mob violence, Parchman Prison, and the Federal government.
- **Young people seize the initiative.** At the crucial moment when violence halts the Rides in Birmingham and the adults of CORE hesitate, it is the young, SNCC-affiliated students in Nashville who pick up the torch and carry the Rides forward against the advice of Dr. King and most other adult leaders who fear (with good reason) that they will be killed. Says beloved Nashville leader Rev. Kelly Miller Smith: *“They've all grown up. One day they're children, nervous about going to jail for the first time in Nashville, and the next day they're going off to Birmingham, and Jackson Mississippi. I've watched them for a year, and they've grown up in front of me.”* The young, now-former students, intuitively grasp what is to become a cornerstone of SNCC philosophy — that only through crossing the line into danger can change be made, and the greater the risk the greater the change. The time for caution and safety has passed, now it's time to put your body on the line.



Nashville Freedom Riders Rip Patton (left) and Bernard LaFayette (aisle) with Jim Lawson seated behind them on the bus headed into Jackson MS *Life Magazine* photo.

- **Courage and determination trump violence.** After the Rides, it becomes a bedrock principle of the Freedom Movement that violence and repression cannot — must not ever — be allowed to deter an action or suppress a struggle. That the response to violent repression has to be determination to continue regardless. Even when Movement supporters disagree with the original action, they rally in support if it encounters violent repression. In 1966, for example, all Movement organizations and leaders oppose the [Meredith Mississippi March Against Fear](#). But when James Meredith is gunned down on the highway south of Memphis, every organization and leader mobilizes to continue his march to Jackson.

- **The Rides inspire the Black population.** If segregation is a frozen iceberg in the Deep South, the Freedom Rides are a blow from an ice-pick that begins to crack the block. The Riders defy the worst that the Councils, the Klan, and the cops can do — deadly violence & hard prison — and they emerge undaunted. Poor Blacks have no money for restaurants and lunch counters, but Blacks from all walks of life ride the buses. And when the rides force the media to expose the true depths of southern racism they advance the long, slow process of breaking down the isolation and fear that have kept people in political and economic bondage for generations.



Hattye Gatson, a rural resident of Holmes County, tells an interviewer: *“I was working at a private home during the time and would turn on the TV and see all the riots, and I just couldn't wait to get involved. And I was glad when they came through, because that's what I wanted to do. And that's what I said I wanted to be: a Freedom Rider.”* She becomes a voting-rights activist in the Mississippi Delta, and for years thereafter Mississippi Blacks refer to all civil rights activists as “Freedom Riders.”

- **Politicians and power-elites foment the racism and violence.** The Riders encounter no violence or arrests in Georgia because the Georgia power structure chooses not to whip up hate and fear. The violence and arrests occur in South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi where powerful politicians such as Senator Strom Thurmond and Governors Patterson and Barnett seek political advantage by fanning the flames of racism. The White Citizens Council and Ku Klux Klan are just as strong in Georgia as in the other Deep South states, but absent encouragement from the power-elites they do not mobilize mobs. And absent Council and Klan demagoguery and threats, ordinary white citizens do not spontaneously erupt into violence because Blacks and whites sit together on a bus or at a lunch counter.
- **The Rides expose the hollowness of JFK's “freedom” rhetoric.** Just weeks before the Rides begin, President Kennedy proclaims his commitment to justice for American Blacks. But the truth is that he is mainly interested in foreign affairs, particularly the Cold War against Communism. Media stories of racial strife in the South embarrass him before other world leaders and undercut America's posture as leader of the “Free World.” In Africa and Asia, the U.S. is competing with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of the new nations emerging out of anti-colonial struggles, and TV images of racism and repression in the South put the lie to Washington's “freedom” sales pitch. Domestically, segregationist Southern Democrats control Congress, and Kennedy fears that if he antagonizes the South they will cripple his legislative agenda and thwart his plans to double the size of the U.S. military. He also believes that he cannot be re-elected in 1964 without support from the white-only Democratic Party in the South. As far as JFK is concerned, the Freedom Rides are, in his words: “A pain in the ass.” And to the growing Freedom Movement, the Kennedys' opposition, and their refusal to enforce Federal law and Constitutional protections, is a betrayal — the Kennedys are part of the problem, not part of the solution.
- **Emergence of the big-three.** The Freedom Rides brings to public prominence the “big-three,” organizations that will shape the Movement in the years to come: CORE, SCLC, and SNCC. They are grouped together as the direct-action and community-organizing wing of the Movement in comparison to the litigation & legislation wing led by the NAACP.

- **Effect on CORE.** Little known to the general public before the Freedom Rides, CORE and its leader James Farmer are propelled into the public spotlight. CORE quickly becomes the largest and most important direct-action civil rights organization outside the South, with active chapters in almost every major Northern city. And in the South, new CORE chapters are formed in the Carolinas, Florida, and Louisiana.
- **Effect on SNCC.** Before the Freedom Rides, SNCC as an organization is little known outside Movement circles. The public and press are aware of the various student sit-in movements, but know little of SNCC as an organization. In his book, *In Struggle, SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*, Clayborne Carson, writes:

"At the end of 1960 SNCC was still a loosely organized committee of part-time student activists, uncertain of their roles in the southern struggle and generally conventional in their political orientations. Yet within months, SNCC became a cadre of full-time organizers and protesters. Its militant identity was forged during the 'freedom rides,' a series of assaults on southern segregation that for the first time brought student protesters into conflict with the Kennedy administration."

Or, as one Movement veteran succinctly put it: "S.N.C.C. became SNICK!"

- **A new direction for SNCC.** The combined results of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides convince some in SNCC that a strategy of voter registration and community organization is needed. They conclude that breaking the power of the all-white Democratic Party of the southern states is fundamental to ending segregation and creating equal opportunity. Local Black community leaders also believe that voter registration is a key to freedom, and their arguments are central to many SNCC activists. Others in SNCC are committed to continuing direct-action as SNCC's primary strategy. SNCC resolves to do both.



SNCC staff meeting, Alabama, 1962. From left: Reggie Robinson, Bill Hansen, Rutha Harris, Charles Jones, unidentified (behind Charles), Cordell Reagan, Ruby Doris Robinson, unidentified. Highlander Center photo.

- **A new generation of leaders emerges from jail.** As the searing, white-heat of forge-fire hardens iron into steel, so does the gut-wrenching courage it takes to willingly face mob violence harden college students into life-long social activists such as Diane Nash. And serving time in Mississippi's worst prisons forges bonds of commitment and shared determination that can never be broken. Out of Parchman and Hinds County Jails step young men and women whose names will become Movement legend in the coming years of struggle: Zev Aelony, James Bevel, Travis Britt, Paul Brooks, Catherine Burks, Stokely Carmichael, Doris Castle, Dave Dennis, Dion Diamond, Jim Farmer, Mimi Feingold, Jim Forman, Genevieve Hughes, Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis, Charles Jones, Bill Mahoney, Landy McNair, Cordell Reagan, Charles Sherrod, Jerome Smith, Ruby Doris Smith, Joan Trumpaur, Hank Thomas, the Thompson sisters (Alice, Jean, & Shirley), C.T. Vivian, and many, many others.

See the "[History & Timeline](#)" for descriptions and analyses of other Freedom Movement events and struggles.