

Freedom Riders

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Freedom Riders
National Monument



In 1961, an interracial group of 13 men and women boarded buses to challenge laws that required races to be separated when traveling between states. They were “Freedom Riders.” On May 14, in Anniston, Alabama, white segregationists firebombed one of the buses in an attempt to stop the Rides. Photos of the attack appeared in hundreds of newspapers, shocking the American public and inspiring over 400 people to leave their homes and participate in over 50 Freedom Rides. Would you get on the bus?

Challenging Segregation

In two separate cases, the US Supreme Court ruled that separating races in interstate travel was unconstitutional. Both decisions inspired action to test compliance with the Supreme Court ruling.

George Houser. It tested the 1946 decision in *Morgan v. Virginia* that ruled segregated bus seating unconstitutional.

The 1961 Freedom Rides tested the 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* ruling that segregation of interstate transportation facilities, including bus terminals, was also unconstitutional.

In 1947, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) conducted the “Journey of Reconciliation” led by Bayard Rustin and

Freedom Riders Travel to Alabama

On May 4, 1961, Freedom Riders boarded a bus in Washington, DC, with the goal of traveling throughout the South and arriving in New Orleans on May 17 for the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Old Birmingham Highway. With passengers still on board, including Freedom Riders, a window was broken and a bundle of flaming rags was thrown on board. Passengers struggled to escape as the mob attempted to trap them inside the burning bus. Moments later, the engine exploded causing the mob to release the doors, allowing the passengers to escape.

On Sunday, May 14, now split onto two buses, the Riders departed Atlanta. The first bus arrived at the Anniston Greyhound Bus Depot and was met by an angry mob, including members of the Ku Klux Klan. The mob attacked the bus and slashed the tires. Eventually the bus was able to depart for Birmingham with the mob following close behind.

Though safe from the flames, Riders were met with iron pipes, bats, and fists as the police stood by. But not everyone stood by and watched. Twelve year old Janie Forsyth sprang into action and brought glasses of water to the passengers.

The slashed tires failed just outside of town, in front of Forsyth & Son Grocery Store on

“The Other Bus”

A second bus departed Atlanta an hour after the Greyhound bus and arrived to a mostly quiet Trailways station in Anniston, AL.

Riders, reporters and bystanders. They used fists, iron pipes, baseball bats, and other weapons.

A group of Klansmen boarded the bus and forced the Black and White Freedom Riders to sit separately. With all aboard, the bus left on its two-hour trip to Birmingham. The Klansmen assaulted the Freedom Riders until the bus arrived in Birmingham, where a mob of White men and women attacked the

As previously arranged by Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor and the Klan, police officers were nowhere to be seen. After fifteen minutes of violence, the mob retreated as the police appeared.

Aftermath and Legacy of The Freedom Rides

The Freedom Riders on the Greyhound Bus received little aid for their injuries. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, from Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, sent deacons to Anniston to aid the Freedom Riders and drive them to shelter at the church.

A freelance photographer captured the events of that Mothers Day 1961. Joseph "Little Joe" Postiglione's images of the burning bus appeared in hundreds of newspapers across the country on Monday morning. They became iconic images of the civil rights movement.

Despite the publicized violence, the rides continued. Activists from all over the country participated in over fifty rides throughout the South. Many even willingly went to jail in Jackson, Mississippi.

On November 1, 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) finally enforced the Supreme Court rulings prohibiting segregation in interstate travel.



Joseph Postiglione

Civil Rights activists used many tactics to effect change but, not everyone agreed on all the tactics. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not participate in the Freedom Rides. But he and others involved in the campaign did see that provoking White Southern violence through nonviolent confrontations had a place. It attracted national attention and forced federal action. What started with 13 people riding buses has changed a nation.

Visiting Freedom Riders National Monument

Established on January 12, 2017, Freedom Riders National Monument is part of the National Park System. The national monument will continue to take shape in the coming years. Be sure to regularly check our website and social media pages for updates and information.

Anniston Greyhound Bus Depot
1031 Gurnee Ave.
Anniston, AL

The site of the bus burning is little more than an empty field next to a busy highway. A marker at the site relates the events of that day.

Greyhound Bus Burn Site
4921 Old Birmingham HWY
Anniston, AL

An interim visitor center, with park information and the National Parks Passport Stamp, is accessible 24 hours a day. It is located at:

Calhoun County Area Chamber & Visitor Center
1330 Quintard Avenue
Anniston, AL 36201
(256) 237-3536

Freedom Riders National Monument
www.nps.gov/frri
frri_information@nps.gov

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