

Freedom Riders

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Freedom Riders
National Monument



Firebombed Greyhound bus, near Anniston, AL
Joseph Postiglione

In 1961, a small interracial group of “Freedom Riders” challenged discriminatory laws requiring the separation of races in interstate travel. The Freedom Riders were attacked by white segregationists in Anniston, Alabama, who firebombed the bus. Images of the attack appeared in hundreds of newspapers, shocking the American public and spurring the federal government to issue regulations banning segregation in interstate travel.

Who Were The Freedom Riders?

The Freedom Riders were civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated southern United States in 1961. Their goal was to test if bus station facilities in the Deep South were complying with United States Supreme Court decisions (*Morgan v. Virginia* and *Boynton v. Virginia*) striking down segregation in interstate travel.

Over 400 African American and white Freedom Riders risked their lives on more than 50 freedom rides in 1961. They endured beatings, arrests, and jail time for their decision to travel throughout the segregated South.

Violence Meets Courage

On May 4, 1961, thirteen Freedom Riders split into two groups and boarded a Greyhound bus and a Trailways bus in Washington D.C., bound for New Orleans, Louisiana.

On Sunday, May 14, 1961, the Greyhound bus carrying the first group of Freedom Riders departed Atlanta, Georgia and was met by an angry mob of more than 100 white segregationists, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, at the Greyhound bus station in Anniston, Alabama. The mob threw rocks at the bus, broke windows, and slashed tires.

Belatedly, police officers arrived and cleared a path, allowing the bus to depart with a long line of vehicles in pursuit. Two cars pulled ahead of the bus, forcing it to slow to a crawl. Six miles outside of town, the bus’s slashed tires gave out and the driver stopped on the shoulder of Highway 202 near the Forsyth and Son Grocery Store.

There, with the Freedom Riders onboard, one member of the mob threw a bundle of flaming rags through one of the passenger windows, causing an explosion seconds later. The Freedom Riders struggled to escape as members of the mob attempted to trap them inside the burning bus.

Twelve-year-old Janie Forsyth was standing in front of her father’s grocery store near where the bus had broken down. Upon witnessing people gasping and choking, Janie sprang into action and filled a bucket with water. She began filling glasses and washing the faces of the passengers who had been trapped on the bus. The angry mob watched her heroic efforts.

The Freedom Riders ultimately received little additional aid for their injuries. Later that day, deacons from Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, dispatched by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth rescued the Freedom Riders from the angry mob and drove them to shelter at the church.



Historic Greyhound bus station, Anniston, AL
NPS photo

Photographs seize national attention

A freelance photojournalist, Joseph “Little Joe” Postiglione, captured the scene. Little Joe’s photographs of the burning bus appeared in hundreds of newspapers on Monday morning and became iconic images of the civil rights movement.

The brutal portrayal of segregation in the South shocked many Americans and forced the issue of racial segregation in interstate travel to the forefront of the American conscience.



Passengers react to the firebombed Greyhound bus
Joseph Postiglione

The Fate of the Trailways Bus

While the Greyhound bus was under attack, the second Freedom Riders bus was also traveling to Anniston. When the Trailways bus — which had departed Atlanta an hour after the Greyhound bus — arrived in Anniston the Trailways station was mostly quiet. A group of Klansmen boarded the bus and forcibly segregated the Freedom Riders. With all aboard, the bus left on its two-hour trip to Birmingham during which the Klansmen continued to intimidate

and harass the Freedom Riders. When the Trailways bus arrived in Birmingham, a mob of white men and women attacked the Freedom Riders, reporters, and bystanders with fists, iron pipes, baseball bats, and other weapons. The police department under the charge of Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor was nowhere to be seen. After fifteen minutes of violence, the mob retreated and the police appeared.

Legacy of The Freedom Riders

On May 29, 1961, President John F. Kennedy’s administration announced that it had directed the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to ban segregation in all facilities under its jurisdiction, but the rides continued. Students from all over the country purchased bus tickets to the South and crowded into jails. With the participation of northern students came even more press coverage. On November 1, 1961, the ICC ruling that segregation on interstate buses and facilities was illegal took effect.

Freedom Riders had a lasting impact on the strategy and leaders of the ongoing civil rights movement. Although Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s involvement in the Freedom Rides waned after the federal intervention, the legacy of the rides remained with him. He, and all others involved in the civil rights movement, saw how nonviolent demonstrations could result in violent reactions that attracted national attention and forced federal action.

Visiting Freedom Riders National Monument

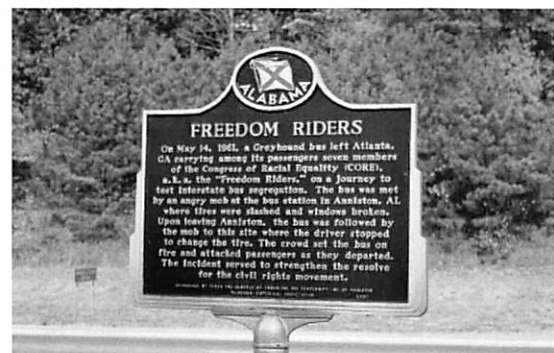
Established on January 12, 2017, Freedom Riders National Monument is part of the National Park System.

There is currently no parking provided at the bus burning site along Old Birmingham Highway. In the interest of safety, there should be no unauthorized parking or pedestrian activity within the right-of-way of State Route 202. Visitors should drive slowly through this residential area and be respectful of private property.

The former Greyhound bus station is currently closed to the public, however visitors may walk to and around the building. The site is part of the Anniston Civil Rights and Heritage Trail, which includes nine sites that are associated with the struggle for civil rights in Anniston.

The national monument will continue to take shape in the coming years. Please visit the following park partner site for visitor information.

Anniston City Hall
1128 Gurnee Avenue
Anniston, AL 36201
Hours of operation: 8 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday




Historical marker at the bus burning site
NPS photo

Stay informed of future developments by visiting the park’s website and social media accounts.

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www.nps.gov/frri

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