

Geography

in American History

The Freedom Rides: Movement, Place, and Region

Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders inspired many forms of nonviolent action during the 1960s. Among these were the "freedom rides" of the summer of 1961. On these bus rides through segregated states, courageous protesters braved violent mobs in an effort to force the desegregation of public travel facilities. Although the freedom rides had social and political goals, they cannot be understood without examining geographical factors such as the importance of human movement, characteristics of place, and regional differences.

This essay explains the drama of the freedom rides in the context of geographic themes.

Movement: A Basic Right

Among the most basic freedoms is the freedom of movement. Given this fact, it is easy to see why segregation on public transportation greatly concerned civil rights workers in the 1950s and 1960s. They felt strongly that travel on these transportation systems should not occur in an atmosphere of oppression and fear. Clearly, all citizens should be allowed free access to all seating and travel facilities. The Supreme Court had upheld this right, but in many states it had not been enforced. In 1961 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) determined to put an end to this segregation through nonviolent action. A group of freedom riders, composed of African-Americans and whites, was to travel by bus from Washington, D. C., to New Orleans. The path of the freedom riders is shown on the map on page 14. They would disregard the typical seating arrangement, which required African-Americans to sit in the back of the bus and whites in the front. At rest stops they would disobey segregation laws and sit together in dining areas reserved for whites.

ingrained in the South that the nonviolent freedom riders fully expected to encounter violence from those offended by this bold assertion of African-American rights.

Under the leadership of CORE president James Farmer, two groups of freedom riders set out from Washington on May 4, 1961, using two public bus lines. All went smoothly until they attempted to use an entrance reserved for whites at a bus station in Rock Hill, South Carolina. In a prelude to the violence ahead, two of the riders were beaten.

"You'll Never Make It"

In Atlanta, a visit with Martin Luther King, Jr., on May 13 prepared the freedom riders for the coming struggle. But afterward King spoke privately to an African-American reporter traveling with the riders. "You will never make it through Alabama," he warned him.

The riders had barely crossed the border into Alabama when King's aside proved prophetic. At the bus station in Anniston (see map), a mob of several hundred whites surrounded the bus and slashed its tires; some fifty cars gave chase at high speed as the bus driver tried to move the vehicle and its passengers to safety. When the tires went flat, the mob surrounded the bus, trapping the freedom riders inside. They smashed the bus windows and hurled a firebomb in among the passengers. Smoke and

Places and Customs

The Deep South was chosen as the target area because segregation there was still mandated by state laws. Racial separation was so

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flames swept through the interior. Only after an undercover agent of the Alabama police who had been riding on the bus threatened the mob with his gun could the freedom riders leave the bus—only to be physically attacked by the crowd.

Freedom riders on the second bus line were also assaulted at Anniston. One, a white college professor from Michigan, was beaten so badly that he suffered paralysis as a result of his injuries. The riders continued to Birmingham, Alabama.

In Birmingham the bus was met by a large mob, many of whom were members of the racist Ku Klux Klan. A full-scale riot erupted. After attacking the freedom riders, the mob turned its fury on television and newspaper reporters, as well as innocent bystanders.

Replay in Montgomery

A new team of freedom riders was needed to continue the journey. Volunteers from another civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) boarded a bus in Birmingham six days later, after intensive negotiations between United States Attorney General Robert Kennedy and state and local law enforcement officials to ensure their safety. Under police escort, without stopping and without incident, the bus arrived at the station in Montgomery, Alabama (see map).

Suddenly, police protection disappeared. The police commissioner sat in his car near the station and told a reporter, "We have no intention of standing guard for a bunch of troublemakers coming into our city." In a repeat of the Birmingham riot, freedom riders and reporters were again assaulted. When a Kennedy aide tried to help two female activists, a rioter knocked him unconscious with a pipe. Ten minutes later the police reappeared.

An End and a Beginning

The next day Martin Luther King arrived in Montgomery to lend his support to the cause. He was escorted from the airport by fifty federal marshals sent by Attorney General Kennedy. Along with several other African-

American religious leaders, King spoke at a rally at the First Baptist Church. Before his speech began, however, another riot took place outside the church. Hundreds of federal marshals were only just able to prevent the mob from breaking into the sanctuary. At the last minute, the Alabama National Guard arrived to help enforce order.

On May 24, twelve freedom riders left Montgomery on a bus bound for Jackson, Mississippi. Accompanying them, in addition to sixteen reporters, were six soldiers with fixed bayonets. The bus passed between long lines of National Guard troops. As it left town, the bus was followed by sixteen patrol cars manned by state troopers and soldiers, several Federal Bureau of Investigation vehicles, and twenty cars carrying reporters. Army reconnaissance planes preceded the convoy as it moved through the countryside, while two helicopters provided air cover.

Upon arriving in Jackson, the freedom riders were instantly arrested for breach of the peace and jailed. But the threat of imprisonment did not break the spirit of the movement: the tide of new freedom riders continued.

A Dispute Between Regions

Opponents of the freedom rides pointed out that few of the riders were from Alabama or Mississippi. They claimed that outsiders had no business interfering in the laws and customs of other states. Responded King: "In a democracy and a nation that is tied together . . . as a federal union, can we call anyone an outsider? It is as much my obligation . . . to be concerned by what takes place in Mississippi as it is that of a person who lives in Mississippi."

On September 22, after four months of intensive lobbying by Attorney General Kennedy, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) passed a regulation bolstering enforcement of the right to racially integrated travel facilities. Although CORE president James Farmer temporarily called a halt to the freedom rides, the protests were later resumed to ensure that states would comply with the ICC ruling.

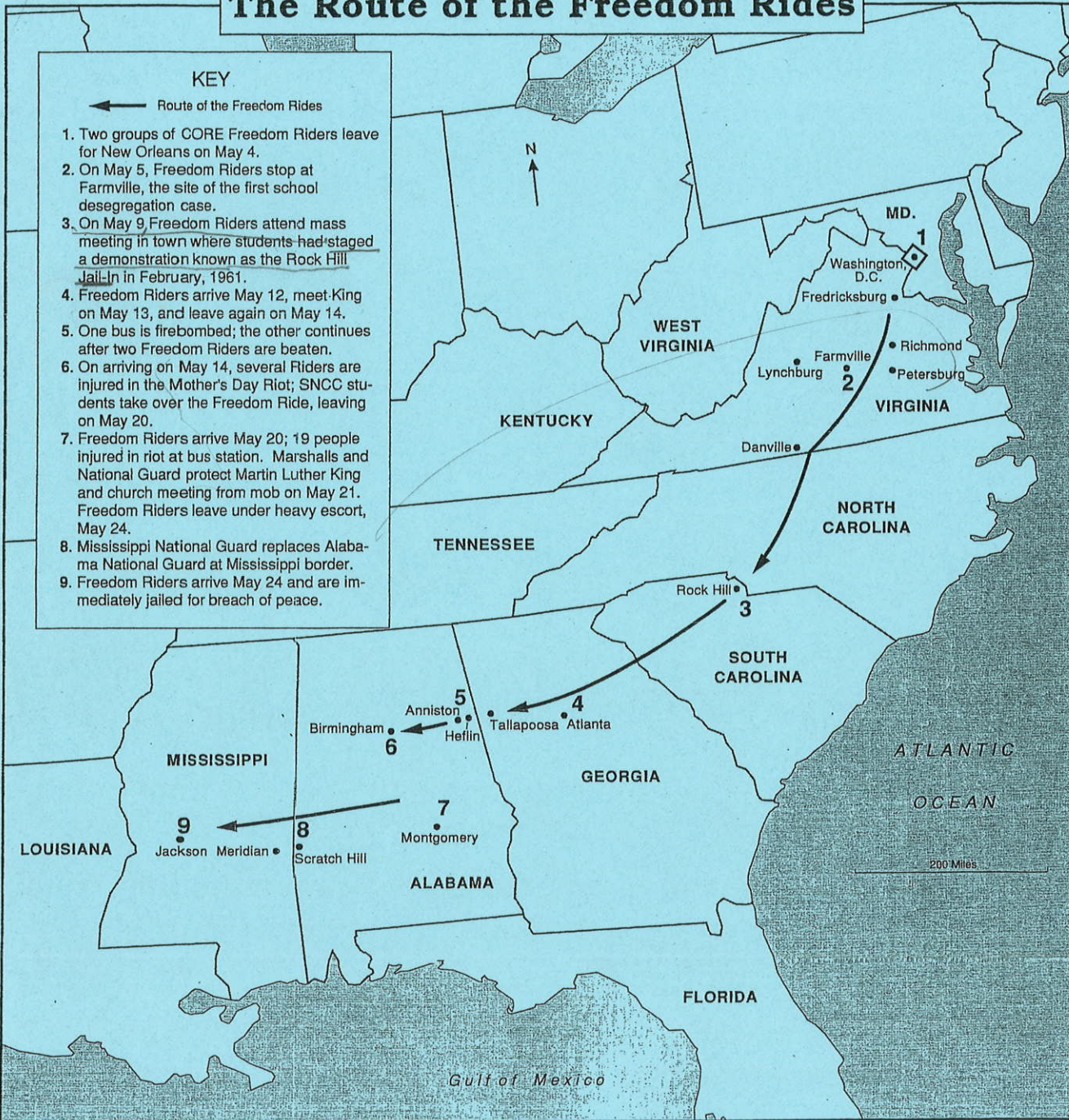
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The Route of the Freedom Rides

KEY

← Route of the Freedom Rides

1. Two groups of CORE Freedom Riders leave for New Orleans on May 4.
2. On May 5, Freedom Riders stop at Farmville, the site of the first school desegregation case.
3. On May 9 Freedom Riders attend mass meeting in town where students had staged a demonstration known as the Rock Hill Jail-in in February, 1961.
4. Freedom Riders arrive May 12, meet King on May 13, and leave again on May 14.
5. One bus is firebombed; the other continues after two Freedom Riders are beaten.
6. On arriving on May 14, several Riders are injured in the Mother's Day Riot; SNCC students take over the Freedom Ride, leaving on May 20.
7. Freedom Riders arrive May 20; 19 people injured in riot at bus station. Marshalls and National Guard protect Martin Luther King and church meeting from mob on May 21. Freedom Riders leave under heavy escort, May 24.
8. Mississippi National Guard replaces Alabama National Guard at Mississippi border.
9. Freedom Riders arrive May 24 and are immediately jailed for breach of peace.



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Questions to Think About

Use the information in the essay and the map to answer the following questions. Answer the critical thinking questions on an additional sheet of paper.

Understanding Geography

1. Developing Locational Skills and Understanding Name three of the cities through which freedom riders passed before reaching Rock Hill, South Carolina.

2. Developing an Awareness of Place Why did CORE choose the Deep South as a testing ground for its freedom rides?

3. Understanding Human Movement Why did civil rights activists especially wish to desegregate public travel facilities?

4. Understanding Regions What objection did opponents of desegregation raise to the freedom rides?

Thinking Critically

1. Distinguishing False from Accurate Images Photographs taken of the burning bus in Anniston, Alabama, and of the rioting in Birmingham appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world, projecting a powerful image of American racism. What counterbalancing images from the drama of the freedom rides might have portrayed American concern for equality, peace, law, and order?

2. Drawing Inferences Why, do you suppose, did the freedom riders make a point of stopping in Farmville, Virginia, and Rock Hill, South Carolina?

3. Recognizing Ideologies Why, do you suppose, was police protection lacking when the freedom riders arrived at Montgomery?

4. Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment Do you agree or disagree with King's opinion about "outsiders" working to change laws and customs in states other than their own? Explain your views.