

Freedom Riders (1961)



On May 4, 1961, a group of seven African Americans and six whites left Washington, D.C., on a Freedom Ride in two buses bound for New Orleans. Convinced that segregationists in the South would violently protest this exercise of their constitutional right, the Freedom Riders hoped to provoke the federal government into enforcing a Supreme Court decision which prohibited separate facilities (water fountains, bathrooms, etc.) for white riders and for black bus riders.

The Freedom Riders encountered violence in South Carolina, but in Alabama the reaction was much more severe. On May 14, upon stopping outside Anniston to change a slashed tire, one bus was firebombed, and the Freedom Riders were beaten. Arriving in Birmingham, the second bus was similarly attacked, and the passengers beaten. In both cases law enforcement was suspiciously late in responding, and there were suspicions of collusion in that late response. There were 35+ freedom rides over the rest of the year. Though segregation on buses and in bus facilities gradually got the US government to enforce the US Supreme Court decision, it was not until several years later that the first Civil Rights Act was adopted.

My first actual experience of the separate public facilities for blacks and whites was during the 1961-62 school year. I spent that year in a seminary in Memphis, TN at the Christian Brothers' College. Once, me and my fellow seminarians went down to a city in Mississippi to spend a day helping out the family of one of the seminarians on their tree farm and also to go swimming in a nearby lake. As we pulled into town, we saw two water fountains, side by side, in front of a store. Over one water fountain was a sign which said, "Whites Only." Over the other water fountain was a sign which said, "Negroes Only." My thoughts at the time were that this is a goofy idea and how demeaning it was to Negroes to be reminded every day that there was something wrong with them and that they were less than full human beings.

Since I was in a seminary setting, I was not able to become active in demonstrations such as those taking place by the Freedom Riders or as the number of lunch counter sit-ins in southern stores and restaurants started to increase. But I was learning about how much discrimination Negroes suffered in the South.