

The Freedom Rides of 1961

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Senior Division

Group Performance

Process Paper:

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At the origin of our National History Day project, we were interested in learning more about the power of nonviolence in approaching controversies and debates, and narrowed our search down to the civil rights movement. My previous knowledge of my grandmother and her efforts in the Freedom Rides of 1961 factored into our decision to narrow our topic. The rides were effective tests of earlier rulings of *Irene Morgan v. Virginia* and *Boynton v. Virginia*, which were ineffective in preventing segregation during interstate travel. Factoring into the grander debate of civil rights, the rides were a miraculous moment of success for nonviolent movements toward progress in the fight against segregation and racism.

While conducting our research, we initially looked for the most basic overview of the Freedom Rides of 1961 to establish a timeline. To do this, we utilized secondary sources such as books that outlined personal narratives of riders. Then, in order to understand the direct impacts of the rides, we looked for primary sources such as newspaper articles from across the country in response to the rides. Once we had a clear understanding of the timeline of events, we incorporated the personal narratives into our performance.

We wanted to collaborate with one another, which narrowed our formats to group documentary or performance. We determined that through performance, we could relay an overview of the influence of the Freedom Rides and highlight the individuals who made the efforts possible. We found that a live performance seamlessly integrated the shifts between individuals and the broader movement, as we hoped to humanize the event and draw personal connections to the subject. We organized a performance that shifted from personal narrative to newspaper headlines and narration in order to present the sequence of events within the rides. We found props and determined the costume changes that would distinguish each figure from the next. After many hours of after-school rehearsals, we were ready to present. After presenting our project on four different occasions, we have found confidence and passion within our performance, making the experience all the more enjoyable.

Our historical argument was “Unifying Americans to defend their freedoms within the broader civil rights movement, the Freedom Rides of 1961 effectively tested Supreme Court rulings that desegregated interstate travel; Riders faced severe violence from enraged segregationists in the South, prompting both legal and federal action to maintain justice and ensure diplomacy.”

Inarguably, the struggle for the civil rights of black Americans continues today. The Freedom Rides of 1961, while a single step in the ongoing struggle for civil rights, were a momentous one since they brought direct social and political change. They serve as an example for movements after; its legacy reflected in the modern Black Lives Matter movement, proving that change cannot arise without discomfort or challenging the status quo.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

The Associated Press. "Bi-Racial Buses Attacked, Riders Beaten in Alabama: ALABAMA WHITES FIRE BI-RACIAL BUS." *New York Times (1923-)*, 15 May 1961.
<https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/bi-racial-buses-attacked-riders-beaten-alabama/docview/115430965/se-2?accountid=9675>.

We used this source to present an in-depth look at the bus ride to Anniston that was attacked by a mob with fire bombs via a newspaper announcement. This source was helpful in understanding the immediate outrage caused by the peaceful protests; how inflammatory the rides were to white southerners as nonviolence was met by such extreme violence.

Claude Sitton Special to The New York Times. "U.S. COURT ENJOINS FREEDOM RIDERS IN ALABAMA TRIPS: JUDGE CITES 'UNDUE BURDEN ON INTERSTATE COMMERCE' -- POLICE ALSO CRITICIZED U.S. COURT ENJOINS FREEDOM RIDERS." *New York Times (1923-)*, 03 June 1961.
<https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/u-s-court-enjoins-freedom-riders-alabama-trips/docview/115468314/se-2?accountid=9675>.

We used this newspaper account presenting the reaction of federal judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. 's reaction and decision regarding the attacks of southern whites on the rides to further our argument surrounding the involvement of federal courts as the rides made their way to the national stage. After researching the reactions of local police, the understanding that U.S. courts were drawn into the passionate debate surrounding the effectiveness of the ride furthered our knowledge of the grand influence of the Freedom Rides.

Evening Star. "17 Freedom Riders On Trial in Jackson." *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Washington, D.C.: Lib. of Congress, 29 May 1961.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1961-05-29/ed-1/seq-12/>.

This newspaper release described the rapid rate of arrivals and arrests of the Freedom Riders; offering insight into southern white reactions, an Alabama school principal quoted by assuring families there would not be a ride on a particular night. We used this information to establish our understanding of the tone of the rides in the south and the ongoing question as to how long the rides would last. The source was helpful in creating an atmosphere for our performance.

“Freedom Riders Bus Attack.” *Bill of Rights Institute*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/freedom-riders>.

This depiction of a Trailways bus in flames after being blown up by a firebomb epitomizes the destructive reaction as a response to the southern Freedom Rides. This source serves as a backdrop to our presentation and a snapshot of the reality of danger facing Freedom Riders of 1961.

IVER PETERSON Special to The New York Times. 1983. "U.S. Held Liable in Beating of 'Freedom Rider' in 1961." *New York Times (1923-)*, 01 June 1961. <https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/u-s-held-liable-beating-freedom-rider-1961/docview/122224816/se-2?accountid=9675>.

This special in the New York Times bolstered our understanding of the legacy of the rides; 22 years after the rides began, the federal government was continually shoved under the spotlight for their aid, and lack thereof, toward the riders. This passage offered information surrounding the involvement of the Klu Klux Klan in infiltrating southern authorities, effectively providing background information for our presentation of the lack of police on scene of many riots. We employed this information in presenting the corruption within the south experienced first-hand by people such as James Peck and Jim Zwerg.

Jackson Advocate. “New York paper Calls for Halt in Freedom Ride’s.” *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Jackson, Mississippi: Lib. of Congress, 10 June 1961. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn79000083/1961-06-10/ed-1/seq-1/>.

We used this source to present the national impact of the freedom rides, offering a broader perspective on opinions regarding the rides, beyond the Dixie South. This particular northern perspective argued that the Rides were causing more trouble than progress and that they had made their point. The source helped us understand the various opinions regarding the rides and their effectiveness in ending the longstanding debate of segregation during interstate travel.

Joplin, Ashleigh, Randolph Smith, and Rhonda Colvin. *John Lewis Reflects on the Freedom Rides and What He Thinks about Today's Protests*. Washington Post, 2017. <https://youtu.be/juzd5zJq-4A>.

This interview with the late John Lewis offered an important insight into the significance of the rides within the broader civil rights movement; Lewis also elaborated on the similarities between the rides and the modern Black Lives Matter movement, offering a basis for our understanding of the significance of the rides. We used this source to craft our presentation of Lewis as a person and a rider, and it increased our understanding of

the exemplary efforts of the Freedom Riders.

McGill, Ralph. "Riders Dramatize Deep Moral Issue." *Boston Globe* (1960-), 22 May 1961. <https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/riders-dramatize-deep-moral-issue/docview/250967373/se-2?accountid=9675>.

Similar to the New York Times opinion on the Freedom Rides, this opinion piece from the Boston Globe shed light on the reactions of northerners to the riotous reactions in the south and weight of the effectiveness of the rides. We used this source to outline the experience of the riders in gaining media attention for their actions and the echoes of outrage with the federal government for not enforcing legislation that integrated interstate travel.

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission photograph of Shirley B. Smith following her arrest for her participation in the Freedom Rides, Jackson, Mississippi, 1961 July 16. 1961, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Hinds County, Mississippi. n.d. . *Civil Rights Digital Library*, crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?query=id:mus_sovcomph_2-55-6-24-1-1-1.

The mugshot of my grandmother enhanced our set for the performance by adding a visual; a face to the story that we were telling. We used this picture as a backdrop to bolster our argument of the legacy of the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the importance of keeping American history alive.

Protest Movement: CORE Freedom Riders: Arrest in Jackson, MS. 1961. MS Box 1115, Folder 2, Item 416, Years of Expansion, 1950-1990: Series 3: Subject Files: Equality Before the Law, 1941-1987. Mudd Library, Princeton University. *The Making of Modern Law: American Civil Liberties Union Papers*. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/HKIIPB198576377/ACLU?u=mlln_b_bpublic&sid=bookmark-ACLU&xid=2a9937b2&pg=9.

This collection of legal documents defending Freedom Riders in their Mississippi Arrest highlighted the extensive social justice process behind the actions of the riders. We utilized this information as context for those arrested in order to get a better picture of the controversy that arose from the actions and subsequent arrests of nonviolent student protesters within the south.

Reginald Stuart Special to The New York Times. "Freedom Riders Find Pride and Pain on 61 Route: Freedom Riders Retrace '61 Journey to Integration 'A Genuine, Good Feeling' Rock Hill, S.C. Anniston, Ala. Filling in the Blanks Birmingham Montgomery." *New York Times* (1923-), 10 May 1981.

<https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/freedom-riders-find-pride-pain-on-61-route/docview/121833717/se-2?accountid=9675>.

We used this source to reflect on the changes enacted after the Freedom Rides of 1961, such as integrated seatings. Reginald Stuart provided a first hand account of the rides, detailing the tense feeling upon entering the state of Alabama during the rides, helping us to understand the outlook of the civil rights protesters and their preparation for conflict.

"Yale Chaplain Raps Kennedy, J. Edgar." *Boston Globe* (1960-), 14 November 1963.

<https://ezproxy.bpl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/yale-chaplain-raps-kennedy-j-edgar/docview/276955020/se-2?accountid=9675>.

Although published in 1963 after the Freedom Rides of 1961 had ended, this article provided insight into the impact of the rides in the greater civil rights movement. The voices of Northerners like the Yale Chaplain calling for the government to take action against segregation illustrated the polarization of those in the North and South. In our presentation it was crucial to acknowledge the division throughout the country to emphasize the long standing debate the rides worked to remedy.

Secondary Sources:

"Activist Shirley S. Anderson." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 16 Sept. 2000,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2000/09/16/activist-shirley-s-anderson/db29d215-f3da-46c5-98af-f6ab6b891400/>.

The obituary of my grandmother, Shirley Smith Anderson, offered valuable information surrounding her career in order to establish a clear connection between past and present within our presentation. Information surrounding her jailing after participating in a Mississippi Freedom Ride allowed us to draw a reach for significance as a conclusion to our performance.

Bausum, Ann. *Freedom Riders John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement*. Washington, D.C: National Geographic, 2006.

We used this book outlining the lives of John Lewis and Jim Zwerg and their contributions to the Freedom Rides in order to establish the timeline for our performance and the pivotal figures in our performance. Utilizing the background information on the lives of Lewis and Zwerg, we learned of the various upbringings and life paths that led riders to join the cause. Furthermore, the book provided a timeline of events at the end which contributed to our planning of the performance timeline.

Hasday, Judy L. "Freedom Riders and Civil Rights Protests." *The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Updated Edition*. Chelsea House, 2017.

online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=9730&itemid=WE52&articleId=358423.

This text offered vital information surrounding the conclusion of the rides, specifically the interaction between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and his warnings to a Mississippi senator leading up to the petition of the ICC. Additionally shedding light on the roles of James Peck and James Farmer, this source proved useful in wrapping up the performance with the ties to reinforced diplomacy by the US government.

McNeese, Tim. "The Freedom Riders." *The Civil Rights Movement, Revised Edition*. Chelsea House, 2019.

online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=9730&itemid=WE52&articleId=466837.

We used this book focusing on the violence encountered on the Freedom Rides through Alabama to create a detailed account of the reception of the civil rights activists throughout the South. The book featured many small narratives that we integrated into our presentation. This account put into perspective the danger that the Freedom Riders battled in their struggle for civil rights.

McWhorter, Diane. "The Enduring Courage of the Freedom Riders." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 61 (2008): 66–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40407321>.

This journal allowed us to place the Freedom Rides into historical context; under the Kennedy presidency, during the civil rights movement and the Cold War. It offered digestible background information leading up to the rides and clear depictions of the who, what, where, when for the earliest rides. We used this information to craft our phone call between Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and provide context for the Kennedy administration's efforts to quell the riots.

"Remembering the 'Freedom Riders,' 50 Years Later." *NPR*, NPR, 5 May 2011,

<https://www.npr.org/2011/05/05/136025553/freedom-riders-risked-their-lives-for-equality>.

This source shed light on the anniversary of the rides and reflections upon their significance. We utilized images from this source to construct the background of our presentation, factoring into the overall atmosphere of distress and courage throughout the rides.