

3d – Get On the Bus

In 1961, interracial groups of civil rights activists organized a series of "Freedom Rides" to protest segregation on interstate buses and in bus stations. Segregation had already been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, but the court's rulings were not being enforced.

Like the Black men and women who had staged "ride-ins" on Louisville's streetcars nearly a century before, the Freedom Riders planned to test their court-recognized rights for integrated travel. White protesters would sit in the back of the bus while Black passengers took seats in the front. At bus terminals, both Blacks and Whites would use seating areas, restrooms and other facilities without regard to racial restrictions.

On May 4, 1961, the first group of Freedom Riders set out from Washington, D.C., on what was to be a two-week journey through the heart of the South. But their trip came to an abrupt halt 10 days later at a rest stop in Anniston, Ala., where a mob of 200 Whites attacked the protesters and set their bus on fire.



Freedom Riders attempting to integrate interstate bus lines in the South met with violence in Alabama.

A second bus carrying Freedom Riders, faced a similar fate later that day in Birmingham, Ala. There, another mob savagely beat demonstrators.

Despite the violence, more Freedom Riders followed, and by summer's end the protesters had achieved their goal. The Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations enforcing integration on interstate buses and in terminals.

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