

Journey of Reconciliation, 1947 ^[1]

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The Journey of Reconciliation has also been referred to as the "First Freedom Ride."

In 1947 the Congress of Racial Equality & local citizens, black & white, protested bus segregation. Setting out from Washington, D.C., "freedom riders" tested compliance with a U.S. Supreme Court ruling barring segregation on interstate buses. On April 13, riders arrived at local bus station then 20 yards west. A mob attacked one rider. Four others were arrested and sentenced to 30 days on chain gangs.

In the aftermath of World War II, a rising tide of challenges to segregation in the South led to racial tensions. In 1946, the U. S. Supreme Court held that state laws requiring segregation on interstate buses and trains were unconstitutional. However, bus companies across the South simply ignored the order. In the spring of 1947, members of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) decided to test the enforcement of court's decision by sending teams of bus riders through the Upper South to challenge segregation through non-violent means based on the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. This was the origin of the "Journey of Reconciliation," a precursor to the Freedom Rides of 1960-1961.

On April 9, 1947, eight African American and eight white members of CORE, headed by the organization's leaders, Bayard Rustin and George Houser, set out from Washington, D.C., on Greyhound and Trailways buses staying that evening in Richmond before moving on to Petersburg the following day. On April 11, the Greyhound bus left Petersburg for Raleigh while the Trailways headed to Durham. While passing through Oxford, the Greyhound bus driver sent for the police when Rustin refused to move from his seat in the front of the bus. The police refused to make an arrest, and the bus instead was delayed for forty-five minutes while neither the driver nor Rustin would budge.

The following day both buses arrived in Chapel Hill. That night they met with the Intercollegiate Council for Religion in Life. The council included students from UNC, Duke University, and North Carolina College for Negroes. The next morning several of the riders, black and white, attended services led by the Revend Charles M. Jones at the Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill and met with a delegation of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

As the buses departed Chapel Hill for Greensboro on April 13, four of the riders were arrested, two blacks for refusing to move to the rear of the Trailways bus, and two whites for interfering. The commotion aboard the buses drew a large crowd of spectators, including several white taxi drivers. The men were taken to the police station across the street, with a fifty dollar bond placed on each man. As white rider James Peck got off the bus to pay their bonds, a taxi driver struck him in the head.

Shortly thereafter, the men arrested were reunited in Greensboro with the remaining "freedom riders." Racial tensions only heightened in the aftermath of the riders' exodus. On April 14, Martin Watkins, a white, disabled war veteran and UNC student, was beaten by several taxi drivers for speaking with an African American woman at a bus stop. Watkins pressed charges, but the judge also brought charges against Watkins arguing that he started the fight. Debates raged for nearly a week in both the Daily Tar Heel and Chapel Hill Weekly over the incident and race relations. The "Journey of Reconciliation" continued on, eventually passing back through western North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and then returning to Virginia and Washington, D.C.

In May 1947 those members who had been arrested went on trial and were sentenced. The riders unsuccessfully appealed their sentences. On March 21, 1949, Rustin and two white protesters surrendered at the courthouse in Hillsborough and were sent to segregated chain gangs. Rustin published journal entries about the experience. His writings, as well as the actions of the "Journey" riders in April 1947, in time inspired Rosa Parks' nonviolent protest in 1955 and the Freedom Rides of 1960-1961.

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