

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## RIDING FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE: NASHVILLE STUDENT ACTIVISTS AND THE 1961 FREEDOM RIDES

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On May 17, 2006, the Freedom Riders from Nashville and those cognizant of the modern Civil Rights movement timeline will pause to remember and commemorate the forty-fifth anniversary of the Nashville student activists' entrance into the Freedom Rides of 1961. Because of their heroic actions and refusal to relent to the demands of government officials, the Kennedy administration ultimately directed the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations prohibiting racial segregation in all transportation facilities. The Freedom Rides were not a new tactic of the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. Fourteen years earlier, in 1947, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) organized and implemented the interracial Journey of Reconciliation throughout the upper South to test the United States Supreme Court decision in the *Morgan v. Virginia* (38 U.S. 373 [1946]) case, which mandated interstate bus desegregation.

As in 1947, the May 1961 Freedom Rides tested another Supreme Court decision, *Boynton v. Virginia* (364 U.S. 454 [1960]), which extended the Court's 1946 directive to all interstate transportation facilities, including terminals, waiting rooms, restaurants, and other amenities. The Court's decision made it unconstitutional to racially segregate waiting rooms, restrooms, and lunch counters. The South, known for its racial rigidity, often dismissed Supreme Court decisions as they related to racial desegregation. James Farmer and CORE were determined to make sure that both the South and the new Kennedy administration recognized that the Court's decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* could not be disregarded. While the 1947 and the 1961 rides were comparable in that they both tested decisions handed down by the nation's highest court, John Lewis asserts that the 1961 rides had been designed to be more cogent, bolder, and to move further into the deep

South in his *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. Lewis states, "It would be a bolder title as well—nothing so tame and accommodating as 'reconciliation'—which is how Farmer came up with the phrase 'Freedom Ride.' There was a tone of demand in that phrase, a sense of proclamation, of no more waiting."

Although not the progenitors of the Freedom Rides of the 1960s, Nashville's student activists, under the leadership of Diane Judith Nash, became their driving force. On May 4, 1961, CORE sent two buses and an assembly of 13 Freedom Riders (seven black men, three white men, and three white women) on what was supposed to be a two-week trip, traveling through the deep South from Washington, D. C., to New Orleans, to test their right to intermingle blacks and whites in the region's bus stations. CORE officials notified the United States Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of their schedule, which was also transmitted to local police forces in Alabama and through them to the Ku Klux Klan. The interracial group encountered only a few problems during their first week of travel. However, when they reached Anniston, Alabama, on that fateful May 14, the Freedom Riders met a vicious horde of more than 100 angry whites, who brutally beat them and fire bombed the bus. In Birmingham, a mob toting iron pipes and other weapons greeted the riders where they were battered, knocked unconscious, and hospitalized. While the violence garnered national and international attention, it also caused Farmer to terminate the ride.

Despite the Kennedy administration's prodding them to abort their plans to ride to New Orleans, Nash and the Nashville student contingent moved into action upon hearing the news about the assault on Freedom Riders. They felt the ride must continue. In their opinion, the movement's future was at stake. If the rides were terminated, as Diane Nash said, "it would prove that vio-

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lence could overcome nonviolence.” The students comprehended the importance of continuing the Freedom Rides after the Alabama attacks and that the Klan could not be left triumphant to claim control of the streets. On May 17, 1961, recruits left Nashville for Birmingham, Alabama, on the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Court’s unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

When the Nashville contingent of students arrived in Birmingham, Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Conner, the city’s racially intolerant chief of police, ordered the new Freedom Riders taken to the Birmingham jail. The following night, he released them at the Tennessee-Alabama state line. Within days, they regrouped and rejoined the route at Montgomery, undeterred by the mob violence in Birmingham or the threat of it that mounted as they approached Montgomery, when the law enforcement presence that had accompanied their trip suddenly fell away at the city line. It was in Montgomery, the “Cradle of the Confederacy,” that the Freedom Riders rode into the national and international consciousness as the media broadcast the mayhem perpetrated upon them by a mob of Klan members and other angry whites. These merciless attacks on those riding for freedom and justice forced the national government to act.

As stated in Mary L. Dudziak’s, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, “President Kennedy was angered by the Freedom Riders’ persistence.” In *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Richard Reeves asserts that he was disconcerted

in some measure because the viciousness against the Freedom Riders was “exactly the kind of the thing the Communists used to make the United States look bad around the world.” Embarrassed by the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Kennedy was preparing to meet Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union for the first time at summit conference in Vienna. It was his hope to draw attention away from the Bay of Pigs and establish himself as a global leader. The Freedom Riders obstructed these aims. According to Harris Wofford’s, *Of Kennedy and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*, Kennedy “supported every American’s right to stand up or sit down for his rights—but not to ride for them in the spring of 1961.”

The students’ single-mindedness to carry on the Freedom Rides had major consequences for the southern Civil Rights movement. The Freedom Rides continued for the next four months with student activists in the forefront. While segregationists’ vindictive show of aggression only served to make the tightly-knit group of trained student activists more resolute to bring down the nation’s bastions of racial segregation, it also forced the federal government into action. On September 22, 1961, in response to the Freedom Rides and under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission promulgated regulations eliminating racial segregation in train and bus terminals. These regulations went into effect on November 1, 1961.

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