The Freedom Riders were a group of civil rights activist that sought to create change by directly challenging Jim Crow laws in southern states. The freedom riders wanted to test the Jim Crow laws based on the Boyton v. Virginia Supreme Court decision which outlawed segregation in public transportation. The Freedom Riders decided to integrate areas which remained segregated and bring National attention to the unconstitutional laws being used in the south.

The ideas to begin the Freedom Rides began with members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). CORE was founded by James Farmer Jr, Georger Houser, James Robinson, and Bernice Fisher. CORE sought to combat racism and segregation in the south by sticking to the principles of non-violence. CORE held its first Freedom Ride on April 10, 1947 which was a two week trip they called the Journey of Reconciliation which traveled through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky which attempted to end segregation in interstate travel. Farmer and CORE sought to once again address the Jim Crow laws in the early 1960s and planned another ride similar to the Journey of Reconciliation which was considered a success and garnered national attention for the group and the cause. Core changed the name of the rides to the Freedom Rides and had their first Freedom Ride which began in Washington DC on May 4, 1961 (Gross, 2006).

The May 4th Freedom Ride was led by Farmer and involved 13 riders, seven black and six white riders, left Washington DC on Trailways and Greyhound busses. The Freedom riders
originally planned to ride through Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi and end the ride with a large rally in New Orleans. The Freedom Riders took extensive training in remaining non-violent and training on how to deal with the racism and difficult conditions they would face in attempting to challenge the status quo in the American South. The Freedom Riders typically placed one black passenger in the Whites only section at the front of the bus. The rest of the riders would pair one white and one black passenger together throughout the bus and the remaining member would follow all the local laws in order to post bail for the other members and be able to contact CORE in case of emergencies (Arsenault, 2005).

While traveling through Virginia and the Carolinas the Freedom Riders faced very few problems. A few of the members were arrested but overall they were very successful and faced very few problems during the first half of their journey. However, when the first group of Freedom Riders that had been riding the Greyhound arrived in Anniston Alabama they faced extreme mob violence by the Ku Klux Klan. The Greyhound bus was attacked the busses windows were broken and the tires slashed. A police escort escorted the bus to just outside city limits and then abandoned the bus on Highway 202 to a large mob consisting mainly of KKK members. Corporals Eli Cowling and Harry Sims were undercover plainclothes agents of the Alabama Highway patrol and riding the same bus as the first set of Freedom Riders though the Freedom Riders had no knowledge that the officers were on the bus with them (Gross, 2006).

When the mob descended on the bus just outside of Anniston Cowling and Sims kept mob members from entering the bus and tried to protect the Freedom Riders and other members of the bus. The bus was then firebombed by members of the mob. The members of the mob attempted to kept the doors of the bus shut and burn the riders alive while trapped on the bus. The Freedom Riders were finally able to exit the bus when members of the mob believed the
bus’ fuel tank would explode. When the Freedom Riders exited the bus they were once again attacked by members of the mob and only the warning shots fired by the two undercover officers kept the mob from lynching the Freedom Riders (Gross, 2006). The Freedom riders were hospitalized for most of the evening but the hospital released the riders for fear of the mob gathering outside the hospital. The Freedom Riders were rescued from the mob at the hospital by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth who organized a car pool of local African Americans to pick up the riders.

When the Trailways bus which carried the remainder of the Freedom Riders participating in the May 4th trip reached Anniston they were attacked and beaten by eight Klansmen. The Freedom Riders faced further violence when they arrived in Birmingham. The Birmingham terminal was filled with KKK members, who were assisted by the local police under the direction of Commissioner Bull Connor, the mob violently attacked the riders with baseball bats, iron pipes and bicycle chains. White Freedom Riders faced an even heavier onslaught of violence for being “sympathizers” and were treated more harshly and violently by the mob violence (Gross, 2006).

Mob members also attacked local reporters and photographers so that news of the violence taking place without local authorities stepping in. The only photos which captured the violence of the mob were published on the front page of the Post-Herald the following morning. The photos showed Gary Thomas Rowe, an FBI informant, and other members of the mob attacking Freedom Rider George Webb. The involvement of a member of the FBI brought further attention to the serious issue of mob violence and a complete disregard for the Supreme Court rulings which outlawed this behavior.
The large scale violence and bus burning was brought to the attention of Robert Kennedy, the US Attorney General. Kennedy wanted the Freedom Riders out of the South and he sent his assistant, John Seigenthaler, to Alabama hoping the Seigenthaler could bring the situation under control. The Freedom Riders desired to continue the Freedom Rides, however after the threat of more extreme violence in Montgomery, the Freedom Riders agreed to fly into New Orleans which was organized by Seigenthaler. The CORE Freedom Riders felt they had brought enough attention to the conditions in the south and felt this was enough success to stop their Freedom Ride.

However, members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee led by Diane Nash decided that violence should not be the reason the Freedom Rides came to a halt. Nash organized a new set of Freedom Riders to continue the Freedom Rides, 10 new riders mainly students from black colleges such as Fisk University set out to continue the Freedom Rides. This new set of Freedom Riders faced increasing mob violence and a new set of challenges because bus drivers refused to drive the Freedom riders because of the mob violence in Alabama. The Greyhound Company and the Governor of Alabama then provided the Freedom Riders with a driver and police protection because of pressures from the Kennedy administration.

Unfortunately, this did not provide greater safety or protection for the Freedom Riders. When the bus reached the Montgomery city limits the Highway Patrol abandoned the Freedom Riders who were once again attacked by a large mob at the bus station on South Court Street. The mob violence was once again barely captured because local reporters and photographers were also attacked during the mob violence. John Siegenthaler, the Kennedy Administration official, was also attacked during the May 20th attack in Montgomery and was left wounded and
unconscious on the street. Local ambulances refused to take Freedom Riders to the hospital and the Freedom Riders need to be rescued once again by the local black population.

The Freedom Riders were honored the following day by the local black population in a ceremony held at Reverend Abernathy’s First Baptist Church. Abernathy, was a well respected civil rights activist who spoke at the ceremony which also included, Dr. Martin Luther King, Fred Shuttlesworth and James Farmer. The church was later surrounded by a mob of 3,000 people waiting to attack the Freedom Riders and the people within the church. Under more pressure from the Kennedy administration Governor Patterson placed the city under Marshall Law and the Alabama National Guard was called in to disperse the mob (Arsenault, 2005).

When the Freedom Riders arrived in Mississippi they were immediately jailed under the direction of the Kennedy Administration and the Mississippi state government to end embarrassing media coverage of the mob violence occurring in the south. The Freedom Riders were sent to “Parchman Farm” an infamous Mississippi State Penitentiary (Freedom Riders, 2011). This set the stage for following Freedom Rides which took the same route and members were also jailed when they arrived in Mississippi. Subsequently, almost 300 Freedom Riders were jailed during the course of the Freedom Rides (Freedom Riders, 2011).

The Freedom Rides brought national attention to the conditions faced by African Americans in the South and allowed the Nation and the International media to understand the extreme racism that African Americans faced. The media coverage brought embarrassment to the nation and forced the Kennedy Administration to consider the Civil Rights issues in the United States and the greater purpose of the Civil Rights Movement.
Activities

1) Photographs from the Freedom Rides:

Show students pictures from Freedom Rides such as the pictures shown below. Do not tell the students where the pictures are from allow the students 10 minutes to observe the pictures and then write about what they think has taken place. Allow students to draw their own conclusions about the event taking place. Have the students share their ideas about what they believe has taken place and compare their ideas with their classmates. Finally explain to students each of the images and begin a discussion on the Freedom Riders.

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2) Freedom Riders Movie:

Have students watch the PBS American Experience Freedom Riders. Students should then write a two page essay focusing on one aspect of the Freedom Rides such as, the non-violent movement, student participation in the Freedom Rides, or The Freedom Rides and how the related to the American Civil Rights Movement. Students should take notes during the film viewing to use in their essays. Students may also view the
film at [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/) for more information or to cover points they may have missed.

3) Civil Rights groups Research projects:

Students should write a 3-5 page paper on the major groups affecting the American Civil Rights Movement. Students may write about groups including Student Non-violent coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Montgomery Improvement Association, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) or another active Civil Rights group during this time period. Students may focus on the impact of and individual group or the impact of multiple groups and how these groups shaped the American Civil Rights Movement. Students should use multiple sources and discuss ways in which these groups created positive change.

4) Timeline Presentation:

Students should work in groups of 2-4 students to create a timeline using multiple visual aids to show the impact of the Civil Rights groups on the American Civil Rights Movement. Students may use art, poetry, music and other visual aids to create a timeline. Students will then provide a 15 minute group presentation to the class about the group they have chosen to cover. Students should highlight positive impacts by the groups and should also discuss some of the adversities these groups face.

5) Research Project on Freedom Rides:
Students may choose a book from the list below and write a 5 page paper. This paper should discuss the impact of the Freedom Rides on the author as well as the overall impact of the Freedom rides on the American Civil Rights Movement. Students should also discuss the nature of the non-violent protest used by the Freedom Riders and the positive and negative impacts of their protests.

Book List:

**Freedom Riders**: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the front lines of the civil rights movement / by Ann Bausum. Year: 2006


**The freedom riders**: Deborah Kent. Deborah Kent Year: 1993


Book List Provided by Columbus Metropolitan Library

6) Reflection Paper:

Students should write a 2-3 page reflection paper about the topics covered in the Freedom Rides units. Students may choose to write about the Freedom Rides, Civil Rights Groups or the Timeline project. Students should highlight new information they learned and how this information changed the knowledge about the Freedom Rides and the American Civil Rights Movement.
Bibliography


