



## A Note about the Play

Inspired by the men and women who, in 1961, challenged Jim Crow laws by integrating buses and trains across the South, *The Parchman Hour* is a blend of docudrama and historical fiction. Set in Parchman Farm, the South's most notorious prison and the final destination for any Freedom Rider challenging Jim Crow in Mississippi, Wiley's drama provides a partial history of the Freedom Rides; however, the play does not unfold chronologically, nor is it a straightforward rendering of events. Rather, Wiley turns the story of the Freedom Rides into a form of dramatic entertainment that the prisoners use to pass the time. The result of Wiley's technique is two-fold: (1) audiences are entertained by the highly theatricalized, non-traditional mode of storytelling, and (2) audiences gain a deeper insight into how the Freedom Riders kept their spirits aloft while suffering the terrible conditions at Parchman Farm.

### What Were the Freedom Rides?

In the 1940s and 1950s, a series of Supreme Court decisions dismantled the South's Jim Crow laws, making it illegal to mandate segregation in buses, trains, and bus terminals. These rulings, however, remained unenforced into the early 1960s. The Freedom Rides were the brainchild of James Farmer, the head of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In an effort to make the South implement the new law, CORE recruited more than a dozen men and women who were willing to challenge the South's non-compliance by integrating buses and bus stations from northern Virginia to New Orleans. James Farmer called this integrated "Freedom Ride." The riders left Washington,



D.C. on May 4, 1961 and did not encounter any substantial problems until they reached Alabama. In Alabama, they were met with extreme violence and were unable to complete the final leg of their journey. Refusing to throw in the towel, other civil rights groups picked up where CORE left off, sending additional riders into Alabama and Mississippi. Some of these civil rights activists encountered violence while those traveling to Mississippi were sent to prison. Undeterred, Freedom Riders continued to flood the Deep South throughout the summer of 1961. They were ultimately rewarded for their moral courage and sacrifice when the federal government intervened and took down any sign that separated whites and blacks using transportation facilities on November 1, 1961. Because of the Freedom Rides, the color barrier had been broken on transit in the South.

# Timeline of the Freedom Rides

**July 16, 1944:** Eleven years before Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on an Alabama bus, Irene Morgan boards a bus in Virginia and embarks for Baltimore. After finding a seat one row in front of a white couple, she is asked to move by the bus driver. After refusing twice, she is hauled off the bus by a local sheriff and arrested for violating Virginia's Jim Crow transit law.



**October 18, 1944:** Irene Morgan returns to Virginia to argue her case. She pays a \$100 fine for resisting arrest but refuses to pay a \$10 fine for violating Virginia's segregation laws.

**June 6, 1945:** Represented by lawyers from the NAACP, including Thurgood Marshall (the first African-American to serve on the Supreme Court), Morgan is still found guilty by the Virginia Supreme Court.

**June 3, 1946:** The US Supreme Court rules in favor of Morgan, striking down any law that requires passengers to sit in a segregated fashion when travelling between states. This ruling is a great victory; however, it was not enforced in much of the South for more than 15 years.

**April 9, 1947:** Sponsored by CORE and FOR, a civil rights group and a human rights group respectively, the Journey of Reconciliation begins. The Journey of Reconciliation tests whether southern states are willing to enforce the Supreme Court's ruling in the Morgan case. Sixteen men participate in the Journey of Reconciliation. The trip lasts two weeks. For the most part the trip goes without incident, although there are some arrests along the way. The Journey of Reconciliation is one of the first examples of direct action Freedom Rides fourteen years later.



**May 17, 1954:** In a major blow to segregationists, the United States Supreme Court rules unanimously that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. The ruling unleashes turmoil across much of the South. It also shifts the focus of the civil rights struggle from transit to education. The climax of this struggle comes in 1957 when President Eisenhower sends in the army to integrate a school in Little Rock, Arkansas.

**December 1, 1955:** Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks' act sparks a yearlong boycott of the buses in Montgomery. The boycott is led by Martin Luther King Jr., who is twenty-six at the time.

**February 1, 1960:** Four North Carolina A&T freshmen stage a sit-in in Greensboro. The purpose of the sit-in is to protest segregated seating at a lunch counter in Woolworth's. Their sit-in ignites a national movement.

**December 5, 1960:** In a final blow to segregated transit, the Supreme Court rules in *Boynton vs. Virginia* that it is illegal for bus terminals and train stations to mandate segregated seating. This ruling gives the Freedom Riders what they need to make their 1961 journey completely lawful.

**February 1, 1961:** James Farmer becomes national director of CORE. Soon he and CORE's other leaders begin to plan

“Freedom Ride 1961.” The proposed ride begins in the District of Columbia and culminates with a rally in New Orleans. Its purpose is to test whether or not the South is willing to comply with the recent Supreme Court rulings that buses and bus terminals must be desegregated. Within weeks of Farmer's ascension, CORE begins to receive dozens of applications from individuals interested in participating.

**April 25, 1961:** CORE sends out acceptances to successful applicants, inviting them to D.C. to participate in training six days later.

**May 1, 1961:** 18 riders (12 black and 6 white) plus senior CORE staff arrive for a two-day training session in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the training is to prepare the participants for the journey and to educate them in Gandhian principles of non-violence. Throughout the Freedom Rides, all participants remain non-violent.

**May 4, 1961:** The first Freedom Ride departs Washington, D.C.

**May 7, 1961:** The Freedom Riders complete the Virginia portion of their journey without incident.

**May 8, 1961:** The Freedom Riders experience their first arrest in Charlotte when Joseph Perkins is arrested after he requests a shoeshine, a service reserved only for whites. Perkins is acquitted two days later and quickly rejoins the group.

**May 9, 1961:** The Freedom Riders arrive in South Carolina, their first stop in the Deep South. It is here that they encounter their first act of violence. Three riders (John Lewis, Albert Bigelow, and Genevieve Hughes) are attacked after Lewis, the only African-American of the three, joins them in the white waiting room at the bus terminal. The group does not press charges, and eventually they receive service on the whites' side. The beating is the first time the Freedom Ride receives any national attention.

**May 10, 1961:** Just as Joseph Perkins rejoins the group, two more Freedom Riders, Jim Peck and Hank Thomas, are arrested in Winnsboro, South Carolina for eating together at a restaurant. The charges are quickly dropped; however, Thomas, an African-American, is released in the dead of night and dropped off by the police at a deserted bus station where a band of thugs await him with baseball bats. Only the last second arrival of a local minister allows Thomas to escape in a car. He is shot at as he and the minister flee the scene.

**May 12, 1961:** After taking a day off to recover, the Freedom Riders depart South Carolina and head for Augusta, Georgia.

**May 13, 1961:** The Freedom Riders arrive in Atlanta. That night they have dinner with Martin Luther King Jr. who offers encouragement; however, King expresses a great deal of concern about the next leg of the journey. That night James Farmer's father passes away; as a result, the architect of the Freedom Rides is forced to return home to be with his family. He will later return to the Deep South, but he will miss the trip's most violent and harrowing days.

**May 14, 1961 (Mother's Day):** After traveling safely through Georgia, the Freedom Riders board two buses destined for Birmingham, Alabama. On the way, the first bus makes a scheduled stop in Anniston. When the bus arrives at the station, there is a mob of ruffians with bats and other weapons waiting for them. The mob prevents the riders from disembarking. They even puncture the bus' tires and try to block its exit from the station. Eventually, the driver sees an opening and drives the bus out of the station; however, the bus soon comes to a screeching halt when its tires lose all air. The mob, which is trailing behind, quickly surrounds the bus. They bust open a window and lob in a small exploding device. The device detonates, filling the bus with smoke and forcing passengers to leave the bus and face the rabid mob. Some of the Freedom Riders are badly beaten while others escape to safety (all are eventually transported to Birmingham, thanks to Fred Shuttlesworth, a Birmingham reverend and civil rights activist). When the bus finally explodes, a policeman intervenes and sends the mob home, ending the day's violence in Anniston. A picture of the exploding Greyhound fills the front pages of newspapers the following day. Unaware of the events in Anniston, Freedom Riders on the second bus continue traveling to Birmingham. Outside of Birmingham, however, they are informed of the situation. In spite of the day's events, they decide to sojourn on. When they reach Birmingham's bus terminal, the riders are savagely beaten for fifteen minutes. After fifteen minutes, the police arrive and scatter the mob. Earlier the police had been instructed by Bull Connor, the city's public safety commissioner, not to intervene for fifteen minutes. Some of those beaten suffer permanent brain damage. Along with the picture of the bus in Anniston, pictures of the beaten men and women soon circulate nationally. The Freedom Rides are now the country's most important news story.

**May 15, 1961:** Despite the previous day's violence, the Freedom Riders elect to continue their journey. They purchase tickets for a 3 o'clock bus to Montgomery. US Attorney General Robert Kennedy takes full responsibility for the Freedom Riders' well-being and begins pressuring Alabama and Greyhound officials to arrange the necessary accommodations; however, even with the backing of the Attorney General and the White House, Greyhound is unable to find a single bus driver willing to transport the Freedom Riders. In the evening, the Freedom Riders wave the white flag and agree to fly to New Orleans so that they will arrive in time for the rally on May 17. Twice they board flights to New Orleans only to be escorted off of the plane after a bomb threat is called in. Finally, a little before midnight the Freedom Riders arrive in New Orleans. Everyone in the US government assumes the crisis is over.

**May 16, 1961:** Diane Nash, John Lewis, and James Bevel, three leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), decide to pick up where the CORE Freedom Riders left off. James Farmer and other civil rights leaders discourage the group from pursuing such a dangerous

course of action, but the young students are not moved. Even Robert Kennedy cannot persuade SNCC to abandon its plans. SNCC selects 10 activists for the journey, and plans for a new group of Freedom Riders to descend on Alabama are set in motion.

**May 17, 1961:** The ten SNCC activists board a Nashville bus and head to Birmingham. The trip south proves relatively uneventful. They arrive in Birmingham and are protected from the mob by a group of policemen. Surrounded by policemen in a closed bus terminal, they optimistically wait for their 5 o'clock bus to Montgomery. Shortly before they are scheduled to depart, Bull Connor arrives and arrests the riders for "their own protection."

**May 18, 1961:** At 11:30 at night, Bull Connor informs the Freedom Riders that he and his officers will be driving them back to Nashville. In a surreal trip, Connor leads a three-car convoy back to Tennessee. He and the other drivers are oddly affable and warm; however, their conversational demeanor masks a darker intent. When the cars cross into Tennessee, the officers deposit the activists at an abandoned train station. Desperate to find shelter in the middle of Klan country, the riders find safety at the home of an elderly couple.

**May 19, 1961:** That afternoon, the Nashville Freedom Riders pile into one car and head back to Birmingham. They are joined by eleven new activists ready to participate in the next leg of the journey. The Freedom Riders again spend the day in a Birmingham bus terminal waiting for a driver to take them to Montgomery, and again no driver materializes. Behind the scenes, the Kennedy administration continues to negotiate with Alabama Governor John Patterson. Late in the evening, they appear to agree that a fleet of police vehicles will accompany the Freedom Riders to Montgomery the next day.

**May 20, 1961:** The Freedom Riders leave early on a bus bound for Montgomery. They are surrounded by police cars, and a government airplane flies overhead. When they reach Montgomery, the fleet peels back, leaving supervision to the Montgomery police department; however, the Montgomery policemen are nowhere in sight. The activists arrive at the Montgomery bus terminal to find it deserted except for a few reporters. They warily get off the bus, and soon an angry mob descends upon them. Just like Birmingham, the mob beats everyone in sight before the cops disperse the crowd 15 minutes later. If possible, the events in Montgomery are even more brutal than the ones in Birmingham and Anniston. For the first time, President Kennedy speaks publicly about the situation. His brother, incensed at the Alabama authorities, excoriates Governor Patterson and begins paving the way for federal intervention in Alabama.

**May 21, 1961:** Led by Martin Luther King Jr., African-Americans in Montgomery gather for a rally at a local church. By evening almost 1500 people are at the rally. An even larger white mob surrounds the church. Upon hearing about the mass gathering, President Kennedy dispatches 600 federal marshals to protect those inside the church. The marshals, however, are not capable of holding the mob at bay, and Kennedy sends in the National Guard. Around 4:30 AM on May 22, the National Guard arrives and shuttles the weary crowd safely back to their homes.

**May 22, 1961:** The student leaders of the Freedom Rides (Diane Nash, John Lewis, and James Bevel) meet with James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement to discuss the future of the Freedom Rides. By this point, it is clear to everyone that the journey must continue into Mississippi, the most segregated state in the South. The students plead with Farmer and King to join them, but neither agrees. Farmer later decides to board the bus bound for Jackson after a young woman begs him to participate, just as she is boarding the bus.

**May 23, 1961:** The Kennedy administration spends all day trying to broker an agreement with the authorities in Mississippi to ensure the safety of the Freedom Riders. In the final deal, Robert Kennedy agrees to let the Jackson authorities arrest the Freedom Riders on the condition that everyone traveling suffers no physical harm.

**May 24, 1961:** 27 petrified Freedom Riders, some veterans and some first-timers, arrive at the Montgomery bus terminal with a ticket for Jackson, Mississippi. They are certain that the state of Mississippi will be even more hostile than Alabama; however, the trip's events surprise them. Unlike the Alabama authorities, the Mississippi authorities remain with the travelers throughout the trip. They uphold every last detail of the agreement with Robert Kennedy, including the promise to arrest the Freedom Riders on sight in Jackson. The astonishing order of the proceedings in Mississippi masks the deep injustice of the entire affair.

**May 25, 1961 – June 14, 1961:** The Freedom Riders throw a wrench in Kennedy's agreement when they refuse to accept the money that the federal government offers for bail, and over the next three weeks, 16 more groups make Freedom Rides (14 of them to Jackson). Soon the Jackson jailhouses are overpopulated, and a new solution is found.

**June 15, 1961:** The first group of Freedom Riders is transferred from the jails in Jackson to Parchman Farm, Mississippi's most notorious and brutal prison. The authorities in Mississippi hope that this decision will solve the overcrowding in Jackson's jails (during the summer of 1961, 328 people are locked up for challenging Mississippi's segregation laws) and deter future riders from making the trip. From June 15<sup>th</sup> onward, all riders are quickly dispatched to Parchman to serve out their 60-day sentences.

**June 23, 1961:** Female Freedom Riders begin joining their male counterparts at Parchman.

**September 22, 1961:** Prodded by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) issues an edict banning any discrimination on American transportation. Legally, this edict is no different than earlier Supreme Court and ICC rulings; however, unlike those rulings, this edict has the might of the federal government behind it.

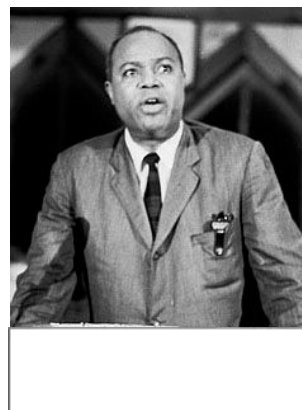
**November 1, 1961:** The ICC's ruling takes effect. Bus terminals all across the Deep South have their "whites" and "colored" signs taken down from restaurants and waiting rooms. By the end of 1962, every bus, train, and terminal is in full compliance with federal law.

Information found in the timeline comes from *Freedom's Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides*.

# Profiles in Courage: Personalities of the Freedom Rides

Between May 4, 1961 and December 10, 1961, 436 people took more than sixty Freedom Rides across the Deep South. They violated customs of the South by sitting in an integrated fashion on buses, trains, and in stations along the way. For their moral courage, these men and women were arrested, beaten, and verbally abused. Out of the 436 Freedom Riders, 230 were black, 204 were white, and 2 were Asian. 326 of the travelers were men while 110 were women, and more than 75 percent of the Freedom Riders were under the age of thirty. Each rider's journey is a story in and of itself, a story filled with bravery and righteousness. Taken together these stories could fill volumes, so what follows are merely the abbreviated stories of a few Freedom Riders, the ones who figure prominently in *The Parchman Hour*.

**James Farmer:** Born in 1920, James Farmer, like his father (his father spoke six languages and was the first African-American in Texas to receive a Ph.D.), was a child prodigy. After completing college at 18, Farmer trained to become a minister. It was during Farmer's religious studies that he discovered Gandhi. He became so enthralled with political activism and the way of nonviolence that he abandoned the church and created CORE in 1942. Farmer served as CORE's national director until 1944 before resigning after a series of disagreements with CORE's other top leaders. During the next 17 years, Farmer worked in the labor movement, but in February of 1961, CORE invited him to return as national director. Farmer's first project with CORE was the Freedom



Ride, a term that he coined. Farmer was one of the riders who left Washington on May 4; however, when Farmer's father passed away on May 13, he left the group to be with his family. The death of Farmer's father allowed him to escape the gruesome violence in Alabama. Farmer rejoined the Freedom Riders at their Montgomery rally on May 21, and he, along with Dr. King, met with student organizers the next evening to discuss the future of the Freedom Rides. Although he initially declined to participate in the Mississippi portion of the ride, Farmer changed his mind at the bus terminal when a young woman boarding the bus begged him to join. For his change of heart, Farmer served 60 days in prison, most of them in Parchman. Farmer remained with CORE until 1966. In his later years (Farmer died in 1999), he served in the Nixon administration before becoming a college professor. His legacy, though, will always be the Freedom Rides.



**Stokely Carmichael:** Born in Trinidad and just 19 at the time of the Freedom Rides, Stokely Carmichael was not a major player in the Civil Rights Movement in 1961. Carmichael was part of a little noticed group of Freedom Riders arrested on June 8 in Jackson. Following his arrest, he spent 53 days in Parchman. Carmichael's time in Parchman was formative. In Parchman, prisoners exchanged ideas and political philosophies, and it was during these discussions that Carmichael distinguished himself as a charismatic and witty individual who had great leadership potential. Over the next five years, Carmichael's colorful



personality helped him rise to prominence. In 1966 he became chairman of SNCC (Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee), succeeding John Lewis. However, Carmichael's desire for the spotlight soon alienated him from other members of SNCC, and in 1967 he resigned. Carmichael's departure from SNCC signaled a philosophical shift for him as well. Unlike many of his colleagues in the movement, Carmichael saw nonviolence as one possible tactic, not a binding philosophy. Ultimately, Carmichael cast his lot with less mainstream civil rights groups, and in 1967 he was named "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Black Panther Party. Soon, though, he became disenchanted with the Panthers. He spent most of his later years (Carmichael died in 1998) in a self-imposed exile in Guinea.

**Diane Nash:** Although she was not a Freedom Rider, the Freedom Rides could not have gone on without Diane Nash. Based in Nashville, Nash was very active in the student movement there. In 1960, Nashville became a hotbed for civil rights activity. Led by Nash, students all across the city participated in sit-ins to protest segregation in places of business. That same year, Nash helped create the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When the CORE Freedom Ride stalled in Birmingham, it was the twenty-three-year-old Nash who took the reins and recruited participants for the next Freedom Ride. When James Farmer tried to dissuade her, she was unmoved. When Robert Kennedy's personal assistant called warning her of violence, she flatly told him that all the Freedom Riders had written their wills and were prepared to die for the cause of equality and justice. Throughout the 1960s, Nash was at the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement. She was one of the architects of the Selma marches for voting rights in 1965. Nash was truly one of the greatest heroines of the Civil Rights Era.

**John Lewis:** Along with Diane Nash, John Lewis was a leader in the Nashville student movement and one of the main organizers of the 1960 sit-ins. In 1961 he was selected to be a part of the first Freedom Ride; however, he left early in the trip to interview for a foreign-service project opportunity. He planned to rejoin the Freedom Riders in Birmingham on May 14. Unfortunately, the events of that day brought an end to CORE's Freedom Ride. Back in Nashville, Lewis volunteered to participate in the Freedom Ride that Diane Nash was organizing. Six days later, he was violently beaten and knocked unconscious in a Montgomery bus terminal. Undeterred, Lewis boarded a bus four days later and headed for Jackson. Like Farmer and Carmichael, Lewis served the bulk of his prison sentence in Parchman. After being released from prison, Lewis quickly became one of the key figures in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, he became chairman of SNCC. That same year he was one of the

planners and keynote speakers for the March on Washington (Dr. King was one of the other keynote speakers, and it was here that he delivered his "I Have a Dream Speech"). Lewis led SNCC until 1966. During that time, he played a key role in registering African-American voters in Mississippi and helped lead the Selma to Montgomery marches. Lewis' political career began in 1981 when he joined the Atlanta city council. Five years later he was elected to the US House of Representatives. He has served in Congress since 1987, championing progressive causes for 24 years.

# The Kennedys, King, and the Freedom Riders

President John Kennedy, US Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. all had a complicated relationship with the Freedom Riders. While each of these men served as passionate advocates for equality, they also had reservations about the tactics being used by the Freedom Riders. These tactical disagreements, especially when they were motivated by political self-interest, made for an uneasy relationship between these powerful men and the students at the forefront of the Freedom Rides. Ultimately, the Kennedys and King lent their full support to the Freedom Riders' mission; however, there were some ruffled feathers along the way.

John Kennedy took office in January of 1961. As a Democrat, Kennedy was reluctant to alienate his base in the heavily Democratic South. At the same time, civil rights was an important pillar of his campaign platform. As president, it was assumed that Kennedy would advance the cause of equality incrementally while refraining from initiating any federal action that would encroach upon the South's way of life. Throughout the early months of his presidency, Kennedy focused almost all of his energy on the Cold War and its accompanying foreign policy issues. It was not until the Freedom Riders' Greyhound bus exploded in Anniston, Alabama that Kennedy began to focus heavily on civil rights and domestic issues. The events in Alabama had become an international news story at the worst possible time. In just a few weeks Kennedy was scheduled to meet with Nikita Khrushchev, the head of the Soviet Union, at a major international summit meeting. America's credibility rested upon its claim that, unlike

communist countries, it preserved equality and justice for all. Consequently, Kennedy had a vested interest in quelling all racially motivated violence as soon as possible. While he sympathized with the Freedom Riders, his primary objective was to make the situation disappear so that America would not suffer any further embarrassment. He delegated this task to his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

In Robert Kennedy's opinion, the Freedom Riders were right for demanding equality, but they were foolish for doing it in such an overt, controversial manner. After the events in Anniston and Birmingham, Kennedy's only priority was evacuating the Freedom Riders to safety as soon as possible, and he used the muscle of the federal government to twist the arms of local officials until the Freedom Riders were assured safe passage out of Alabama. Once the Freedom Riders reached New Orleans, he relaxed and assumed the crisis was over. When he discovered that SNCC would be sending more Freedom Riders to Alabama, Kennedy was incensed. He knew the issue was a public relations disaster for the United States, and he begged Diane Nash, the young woman leading SNCC, to abandon her plans. Once it became clear that the Freedom Riders would not relent, Kennedy pressed John Patterson, Alabama's governor, to grant safe passage to the riders as they journeyed from Birmingham to Montgomery. Patterson was reluctant, but Floyd Mann, his honorable Director of Public Safety, promised Kennedy that the riders would not fall victim to a second round of violence. When the riders left Birmingham with an escort of policemen, Kennedy again assumed the crisis was over; however, he and Mann were double crossed by the Montgomery police, all of whom abandoned the Freedom Riders and left

them defenseless against a rabid mob. Determined to avoid a repeat of Alabama's events in Mississippi, Kennedy brokered a deal with Mississippi senator James Eastland. The gentleman's agreement guaranteed the riders' safety, but in return Kennedy promised that he would not intervene when the Freedom Riders were arrested for violating Jim Crow laws. Many in the civil rights community perceived the deal as a betrayal, but at the time Kennedy was willing to do anything to halt the violence. He also knew that the federal government would pay the riders' bail. What he did not count on was the Freedom Riders refusing bail. The riders' decision to remain jailed as well as the deluge of riders into Mississippi eventually forced Kennedy's hand. He soon realized that the only solution would be to instruct the Interstate Commerce Commission to remove all "whites" and "colored" signs from buses, trains, and stations. The ICC followed Kennedy's directive with remarkable speed and efficiency. By November 1, Kennedy had overseen and enforced the desegregation of the US transit system. For Kennedy this was a tremendous accomplishment; however, it never would have happened if not for the prodding, courage, and obstinacy of the Freedom Riders.

By 1961 Martin Luther King Jr. was the undisputed face of the Civil Rights Movement. He was the movement's most eloquent and passionate orator. In 1955, at the age of 26, he successfully engineered a year-long boycott of Montgomery buses, and in 1957, King created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a civil rights group that he led until his death in 1968. By May of 1961, he was revered by all who believed in the civil rights cause; however, his response to the Freedom Rides left some young activists disenchanted. King first met the Freedom Riders in Atlanta on May 13. King praised the group for its courage and touted his role on CORE's advisory board; however, after the Freedom Riders left, King pulled aside Simeon Booker, a journalist traveling with the group, and told him that the group would never make it out of Alabama. This was the first time King showed any reservations about the Freedom Rides. Over the next week, King remained a cheerleader for the Freedom Riders before taking center stage after the violence in Montgomery. Against the objections of the Kennedys, King returned to Montgomery and led a rally of 1500 people, including the Freedom Riders, on May 21. A mob even larger than the crowd inside eventually surrounded the church where the rally was being held. Feeling threatened by the unruly mob that was being feebly restrained by a group of poorly trained federal marshals, King convinced Robert Kennedy to send in the National Guard. King was yet again a hero as the National Guard safely shuttled 1500 people home at 4:30 in the morning. The following day, however, King lost some of his luster with the Freedom Riders. Pressured by Diane Nash and other students leading the Freedom Rides, King refused to join them on the next leg of the journey. He cited the fact that he was on probation, a silly excuse since virtually all of the Freedom Riders were on probation, before snapping, "I think I should choose the time and place of my Golgotha." By comparing himself to Jesus, King alienated many of the students and earned the derisive nickname "De Lawd." More importantly, his caution diminished his stature in the eyes of some of the Freedom Riders and pointed to a larger rift that would take place over the next few years. At only 31, King had already become part of the more cautious old guard.

These critiques, if they can even be called that, of the Kennedys and King are in no way meant to diminish the role that these men played in advancing the cause of civil rights. Certainly, the Kennedys and King held an unwavering belief that all men are created equal; however, they did not always agree with younger civil rights activists on how to achieve equality, and at times, like during the Freedom Rides, these disagreements brought out the flaws in these great men.

# Textual References

## Alan Shepard and the Mercury

When the Freedom Rides began, Alan Shepard, an astronaut in the Mercury program, was the main news story in the US. On May 5, 1961 he became the first American and the second man to enter space.

## “All of them wins, even in ’57, was on account of McGuire cheatin’.”

This is a reference to Frank McGuire’s 1957 UNC basketball team. That team went undefeated and won the national championship. McGuire left UNC in 1961 after a number of cheating allegations surfaced.

## Art Heyman, Larry Brown, and the Duke-UNC Brawl

In February of 1961, a major brawl took place during a Duke-UNC basketball game. The fight began when Heyman, Duke’s star player, fouled Larry Brown. Brown threw a punch at Heyman, and pandemonium ensued. That game is still one of the most famous games in the rivalry.

## Bernard Lafayette

Along with James Bevel, Diane Nash, and John Lewis, Lafayette was a leader of SNCC in Nashville. He was a participant in the Freedom Rides. He was arrested 27 times for his participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

## Booker T. Washington

Spokesperson for the African-American community during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Washington was an extraordinary author and orator; however, his moderate positions on civil rights drew criticism from some in the African-American community.

## Bull Connor

Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham. Even by Southern standards, Bull Connor’s racism was extreme. Connor ordered his policeman to leave the Freedom Riders unprotected when they arrived to face a mob at the Birmingham bus terminal. In 1963, he also used fire hoses and K-9 attack dogs against peaceful civil rights demonstrators.

## CORE (Congress of Racial Equality)

Created in 1942 by James Farmer and others, CORE was instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement. Their main contribution was sponsoring the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947 and the first Freedom Ride in 1961.

## Frederick Douglass

An African-American leader of the abolitionist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Douglass was the most passionate and eloquent opponent of slavery.

**Emmett Till**

A 14-year-old boy murdered by two men after he was thought to be flirting with a white woman. Till's brutal 1955 murder (his murderers were acquitted) was a major catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement.

**Governor Patterson**

John Patterson was governor of Alabama during the Freedom Rides. Throughout the process, he remained uncooperative, refusing to answer Robert Kennedy's calls and lying about his desire to keep the Freedom Riders safe.

**Janie Forsyth**

A young white girl who witnessed the violence just outside of Anniston. She offered water to two of the Freedom Riders who were struggling to breathe after inhaling a large amount of smoke.

**Johnny Horton**

Very successful country musician in the 1950s. Died in 1960.

**Lawson (James Lawson)**

James Lawson (Referred to as Lawson in *The Parchman Hour*) was a mentor to the students in the Nashville Movement. He was a leading advocate for nonviolence.

**NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)**

Unlike other civil rights groups, the NAACP was more concerned with the legal aspects of the struggle and less concerned with the direct action component. Throughout the Freedom Rides, they made sure that the activists had the necessary legal support.

**Nonviolent Direct Action**

Nonviolent direct action was the philosophical cornerstone of the Freedom Rides. Inspired by Gandhi, the architects of the Freedom Rides believed that they could best accomplish their objective by avoiding violence. This philosophy would later be challenged by men like Stokely Carmichael and groups like the Black Panthers, but in the early part of the 1960s, all civil rights groups and leaders were advocating for peaceful, direct protests.

**SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference)**

Martin Luther King's civil rights group. It was very important to those in CORE and SNCC that King's group not take credit for the Freedom Rides. Even though all three groups shared a common goal, there were frequent turf wars; and the groups competed for notoriety and funding.

**SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee)**

SNCC was created in 1960. It was an outgrowth of the student sit-ins taking place that year. In 1961, SNCC was a key player in the Freedom Rides. After CORE discontinued its Freedom Ride in





# Maps of the Freedom Rides

## FIRST FREEDOM RIDE

## ALL 1961 FREEDOM RIDES

Maps printed in Raymond Arsenault's *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*.

# Freedom Songs: Music of the Movement

It is impossible to talk about the Civil Rights Movement and the Freedom Rides without mentioning the songs that played such an integral role in African-Americans' struggle for equality. Wherever Freedom Riders went, they sang. They sang on buses, in train stations and bus terminals, and in jails. For them, song reflected their resolve and their commitment to equality. It also infuriated their jailers, for it was through music that the Freedom Riders demonstrated that their spirit could not be broken no matter what trials and travails they encountered along the way. While some songs were composed specifically for the historical moment, many of the Freedom Songs were either renditions or adaptations of Negro spirituals; as a result, the music testified to the righteousness of the singers' cause. Included here are lyrics to some of the most common Freedom Songs.

## Hallelujah I'm a Traveling

I read in the news the Supreme Court has said  
"Listen here, Mr. Jim Crow, it's time you was dead."  
Hallelujah, I'm a travelin', hallelujah, ain't it fine?  
Hallelujah, I'm a-traveling down freedom's main line!

I'm paying my fare on the Greyhound bus line.  
I'm riding the front seat to Nashville this time.  
Hallelujah, I'm a travelin', hallelujah, ain't it fine?  
Hallelujah, I'm a-traveling down freedom's main line!

*Audio to song can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj0ieJfsGYg>*

## We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,  
We shall overcome someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall overcome someday.

The Lord will see us through, the Lord will see us through,  
The Lord will see us through someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall overcome someday.

*Audio to song can be found at: [http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/music/audio/qt/we\\_shall\\_overcome.html](http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/music/audio/qt/we_shall_overcome.html)*



# Discussion Questions and Activities

1. Think about the set and costume design for the production. What does the set say about the world in which these characters live? How do the characters' costumes reveal their situation? What do you think is the primary function of the set and costume design?
2. To some extent, *The Parchman Hour* is a play within a play. The prisoners are performing the story of their own journey. Why do you think Wiley uses this particular device instead of simply telling the story of the Freedom Rides?
3. What are the differences between Lewis' and Carmichael's political philosophies? Who do you agree with? Why?
4. What is the role of music in the production? How did it change your experience?
5. When the Freedom Rides were causing violence throughout Alabama, the Kennedy administration issued a call for a "cooling-off period." Some in the movement, including Dr. King and James Farmer, even briefly considered discontinuing the Freedom Rides. With the prospect of extreme violence, would you advocate sending more riders on the journey or would you wait for things to quiet down before going forward? Why would you make this choice?
6. Who are the Freedom Riders of today?
7. With the threat of prison and violence, could you have boarded a bus in 1961 to protest segregation in the South? Is there any situation where you would put yourself at risk to protest injustice?
8. Before boarding a bus on May 4, the Freedom Riders participated in two days of training to prepare themselves for the journey. Imagine you are designing a training session for the Freedom Rides. What activities would you lead? What topics would you cover?
9. Supplementary materials: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>, *American Experience: Freedom Riders* (110 minute DVD), and *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs* (CD).