



ROAD TO EQUALITY - THE 1961 FREEDOM RIDES

A 55th Anniversary Commemoration

Freedom Rides Museum in Montgomery's
Historic Greyhound Bus Station

On May 20-21, The Alabama Historical Commission will commemorate the 55th Anniversary of the 1961 Freedom Rides with a series of special events.

Using artwork, architecture, photographs, and the stories of Freedom Riders, "Travelin' Down Freedom's Main Line" places the Freedom Rides in the context of the movement and its iconic Alabama events. In their own words, riders, young and old, tell about their commitment (or not) to nonviolent direct action. What happened when they told their parents (or didn't) that they were going. What it was like to be in jail. How the rides changed them (or didn't).

The Freedom Rides Museum is in Montgomery's recently restored 1951 Greyhound Bus Station. For the past five years, visitors from all over the world have learned about the Freedom Rides from the award-winning interpretive panels on the exterior of the building.

The opening of the Museum in 2011 provided an opportunity for a deeper immersion in the richly layered history surrounding the events that occurred at the bus station. Permanent exhibits add additional information on the Freedom Rides and aids the visitor's understanding of the way in which buildings were designed for racial segregation. For the past 5 years, "Share Your Story", an interactive video exhibit, has captured thoughts and feelings from riders, witnesses, and museum visitors.

The current exhibit, "Road to Equality," features work by artists native to or working in areas along the Freedom Ride route, or whose body of work addresses the struggle for equal rights in America.

These works of selected contemporary artists expands the dialogue the museum has with its visitors. While the permanent exhibits explain to visitors what happened here, the art invites visitors to understand the deeper, lasting legacy and significance of the rides to the modern civil right movement.

BACKGROUND

FREEDOM RIDES MUSEUM

in Montgomery's Historic Greyhound Bus Station

Montgomery played a significant role in the modern civil rights movement. According to historian J. Mills Thornton, III:

The civil rights movement swept across Montgomery in the decade from 1955 to 1965, and left many monuments to its passage — buildings and places perhaps otherwise ordinary but rendered extraordinary by the history made there. The events that occurred in this city during that decade powerfully contributed to developments that changed the entire structure of our national life.

The Greyhound Bus Station is one of those ordinary buildings that has been “rendered extraordinary” by the American struggle for equality in the mid-twentieth century.

When a biracial group of young men and women arrived here on May 20, 1961, they came willing to risk their lives to end racial segregation in interstate travel. Trained in Gandhian nonviolent protest methods, they were met by an angry, police-sanctioned mob. The violence that ensued resulted in a marked turn for the young administration of President John F. Kennedy and for Montgomery’s business community.

On November 1, 1961, new Interstate Commerce Commission regulations went into effect. The Freedom Riders had won an unqualified national victory. No longer did African Americans have to sit separately or use separate waiting rooms and restaurants. Equally significant, the Kennedy administration forcefully sided with the protesters. Washington had sent federal marshals to protect the Riders in Montgomery and enforced existing laws and court decisions against racial discrimination.

The Freedom Rides were a watershed event, “a psychological turning point in our whole struggle,” said Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Freedom Rides Museum stands as a testament to 438 ordinary people who did an extraordinary thing. They risked their lives and their freedom to bring justice to our nation. The Alabama Historical Commission restored the station and installed award-winning interpretive panels on the façade.

The Freedom Rides Museum opened to the public on May 20, 2011 for a 50th anniversary commemoration. For more information go to www.freedomridemuseum.org