

The Freedom Rides of 1961

*"If history were a neighborhood, slavery would be around the corner and the Freedom Rides would be on your doorstep." ~
Mike Wiley, writer & director of "The Parchman Hour"*

Overview

Throughout 1961, more than 400 engaged Americans rode south together on the "Freedom Rides." Young and old, male and female, interracial, and from all over the nation, these peaceful activists risked their lives to challenge segregation laws that were being illegally enforced in public transportation throughout the South. In this lesson, students will learn about this critical period of history, studying the 1961 events within the context of the entire Civil Rights Movement. Through a PowerPoint presentation, deep discussion, examination of primary sources, and watching PBS's documentary, "The Freedom Riders," students will gain an understanding of the role of citizens in shaping our nation's democracy. In culmination, students will work on teams to design a Youth Summit that teaches people their age about the Freedom Rides, as well as inspires them to be active, engaged community members today.

Grade

High School

Essential Questions

- Who were the key players in the Freedom Rides and how would you describe their actions?
- Why do you think the Freedom Rides attracted so many young college students to participate?
- What were volunteers risking by participating in the Freedom Rides?
- Why did the Freedom Rides employ nonviolent direct action?
- What role did the media play in the Freedom Rides? How does media shape our understanding of the issues of our time?
- What did the Freedom Rides accomplish, short-term and long-term?
- What does the story of the Freedom Riders suggest about the role of citizens and community members in shaping democracy?
- When prejudice and racism are supported by custom and/or law, what can be done to create a more inclusive society?

Materials

- "The Freedom Rides of 1961Power Point," available in the Carolina K-12's Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format) at <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2012/04/FreedomRidesPPT.pdf>
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click "View" in the top menu bar of the file, and select "Full Screen Mode"
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to carolinak12@unc.edu
 - **NOTE:** This PowerPoint was created with the expectation that it will be used as a basis for overview and deep discussion (not lecture). It was also created with the understanding that teachers will omit, add, or edit information as they see fit, based on what each particular class already knows or needs to know concerning the Civil Rights Movement.
- Lyrics to *Black, Brown, and White*, by Big Bill Broonzy, attached

- Teachers should find a recording of the song to play for students; this can be done via an internet search of the title and musician
- Key civil rights cases, readings attached (if possible, print each case on a different color of paper):
 - *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946)
 - *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) & *Brown v. Board of Education II* (1955)
 - *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* (1955)
 - *Browder v. Gayle* (1956)
 - *Cooper v. Aaron* (1958)
 - *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960)
- Key civil rights cases response sheet, attached
- Letter from CORE to President, attached
- Honoring the Freedom Riders by Hosting a Youth Summit, assignment sheet attached
 - If you would like a Word file of this assignment for editing, send a request to carolinak12@unc.edu .
- Optional/Additional Resources:
 - “Jail, No Bail”, optional 20 minute documentary that can be shown to provide context for the 1961 Freedom Rides: <http://video.sctv.org/video/1836521874/>
 - PBS’s documentary & educational resources, “Freedom Riders:” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>
 - This site includes a two-hour documentary on the Freedom Rides, a teacher’s guide for using the film in class, shorter clips to integrate within lessons, as well as numerous supplementary resources.
 - Oprah Winfrey’s “Tribute to the Freedom Riders,” which includes clips of her recent interviews with civil rights activists and other resources: <http://www.oprah.com/packages/freedom-riders.html>
 - Map of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation and the 1961 Freedom Rides , attached
 - Teacher Note: Teachers who implemented the Carolina K-12’s lesson “[The Journey of Reconciliation, 1947](#)” prior to this lesson and plotted the 1947 stops on the bulletin-board size map of the Jim Crow south that students created at the beginning of that lesson may want to now add the 1961 Freedom Riders stops onto that same map (using a different color.) This will provide a visual of the Jim Crow laws and culture that were at play in each state layered with the stops of the Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides of 1961. This will also provide a visual of the difference in the two journeys.
 - See the attached “Recommended Resources on the Freedom Rides” for additional readings, radio recordings, etc.

Duration

- 90+ minutes
- The time for teaching about the Freedom Riders can vary greatly depending on how much of the accompanying PowerPoint teachers implement, how much of the PBS documentary on the Freedom Riders teachers choose to show, as well as how much time students are allowed to spend on their Youth Summit assignment.

Preparation

- To appreciate the actions of the Freedom Riders, students must have a firm understanding of the Jim Crow Era and the laws and societal expectations that were at play. A recommended precursor to this lesson is the Carolina K-12’s “[The Journey of Reconciliation, 1947](#),” which begins with a study of Jim Crow laws. Additional lesson plans regarding segregation and the civil rights movement are available in the Carolina K-12’s Database of Civic Resources.
- While Jim Crow and segregation are sensitive topics to discuss with students, it is important for students to explore these historical events and understand how engaged community members fought such injustice. In order to study this history effectively and safely however, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, tolerance, open-mindedness, and civil

conversation. See the Carolina K-12's "Activities" section of the Database of K-12 Resources for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of controversial issues.

- Throughout the study of Jim Crow, segregation, and the civil rights movement, students will encounter racial slurs. Teachers must prepare students in advance that they will encounter such offensive words and concepts. They should likewise be reminded that the point of the lesson is to examine such hate out in the open so that they can learn why it is detrimental to a society, appreciate the sacrifices of those who fought against such hate, and work to be engaged community members themselves who refuse to tolerate aspects of hate today.

Procedure

What Would It Take For You To Leave College?

1. As a brief warm-up, ask students what their favorite college or university is and what they like about it. Then project slide 2 of the accompanying PowerPoint, "The Civil Rights Movement & the 1961 Freedom Rides," and instruct students to take a few minutes to consider the questions posed:
 - Imagine you were accepted to your favorite college and have made it through a wonderful first semester. You've made new friends and you are keeping up with school work.
 - A few weeks before your exams begin, a fellow student approaches you with a project she/he wants you to participate in. The project would involve you leaving school for an undetermined amount of time.
 - What type of project (if any) would it need to be to convince you to leave? Is there anything that would tempt you to participate to the point that you would risk your collage career?
2. After a few minutes of consideration and writing, ask students to share if there is anything that would tempt them to leave. If so, what would it be and why? What would they be risking by leaving college? If nothing could make them leave, why not? Project slide 3 and share the two quotes by theatre artist Mike Wiley, who created a play about the 1961 Freedom Rides, "The Parchman Hour:"
 - "They tossed their books aside, packed only essentials and finished writing their wills. With only one goal in mind—to fight racial desegregation in interstate bus travel—the young, interracial Freedom Riders accepted the prospect of death as they rode the bus into the racially divided Deep South in 1961."
 - "The Freedom Riders were mostly students...These are 17, 18, 19-year-old students from an array of colleges around the country without regard to their own lives aiming to desegregate interstate bus travels in a nonviolent and active way."
3. Explain to students that in 1961, there were many students who risked their college careers and even their lives to stand up against unjust Jim Crow laws in the South by participating in the 1961 Freedom Rides. Let students know that in this lesson, they will be learning about this crucial history and the impact these people had, many of them teenagers,

Setting the Stage for the 1961 Freedom Rides

4. Transition students back into thinking about the 1950s, when Jim Crow laws and segregation were in full effect, by playing the song *Black, Brown, and White*, by Big Bill Broonzy. (The song can be found on the Internet by searching its title). Also, give students the attached song lyrics to read while they listen. After listening, discuss:
 - What are your first reactions to this song?
 - When do you think it was written/performed? What are the lyrics about?
 - What message is the artist trying to convey? What do you think his purpose was in singing this song?
 - How does this song illustrate life in the Jim Crow South? What types of oppression/discrimination are described in these lyrics?

- How does the content of the lyrics contrast to the style of the song? (Discuss the juxtaposition of the seriousness of the situations Broonzy sings about to the lighthearted way it is sung.) Why do you think Broonzy made this artistic choice?
5. Review the impact of Jim Crow laws, as well as how the period following World War II set the stage for challenges to such unjust laws (see the Carolina K-12's lesson plan "[The Journey of Reconciliation, 1947](#)"). Provide further context by going over [slides 5-12](#) with students, which provide brief summaries of important events such as the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock Nine, the Greensboro Sit-ins, & the Friendship Nine. Prior to this lesson, teachers may wish to use more detailed lessons and resources to explore these events then use these slides as brief review.
 6. Depending on what lessons have been implemented before this one, teachers should edit/omit/add slides as they see fit, as well as tailor discussion with students based on whether the events on [slides 5-12](#) are being discussed for the first time, or discussed as a review. Sample discussion questions may include:
 - How was young, 14-year-old Emmett Till impacted by Jim Crow etiquette/laws?
 - Based on your understanding of the Jim Crow South, why was no one charged with Emmett's murder?
 - Emmett's mother held an open-casket funeral for her son for a particular reason. Why do you think she made this choice?
 - Explain to students that when Emmett's body was taken back to Chicago for burial, his mother was resolute in having an open casket funeral, even though Emmett's head and face was grotesquely deformed. She wanted the world to see the evidence of the suffering he endured, suffering that had gone unpunished.
 - Describe what it took for the Montgomery Bus Boycott to bring about change in transportation segregation. How do you think the African American community felt when the laws/expectations changed?
 - What characteristics does it take in a person to organize/participate in a boycott? What does it take for a boycott to work? Why is this an effective way to bring about change?
 - What type of opposition did boycotters face during the Montgomery Bus Boycott?
 - How might our society be different if the organizers and participants of the bus boycott would not have been such active, involved citizens who persevered those 382 days?
 - What does Parks mean when she says, "...the only tired I was, was tired of giving in?"
 - How do you typically feel before the first day of school? What are some of the things you worry about? Many of us feel very nervous before the first day of school. Consider those normal emotions, coupled with the situation the nine African American students endured in Little Rock when trying to enroll for their first day in a new school. How do you imagine they felt?
 - What does it say regarding the character of the students comprising the "Little Rock Nine" that they were able to walk into that school?
 - How do the Little Rock Nine serve as an example of why we all need to be very aware of what our government officials are up to, as well as participate in the political process?
 - What were the goals of the sit-in movement?
 - How does nonviolent direct action expose injustice? Why was it such an effective strategy for bringing about change during the civil rights movement?
 - What impact did the Greensboro sit-ins have (locally and nationally?)
 - Why is it important to study, remember and honor the actions of civil rights activists such as the Greensboro Four and the Friendship Nine?
 - Why was "Jail No Bail" such a clever strategy?
 - What does it say regarding of the character of the Friendship Nine, that they served a month doing hard labor on a chain gain, sleeping in dangerous conditions in a jail, all to try and fight segregation? Can you imagine doing this yourself?
 - A discussion on historical perspective is important here. It is important for students to understand exactly what activists were risking when challenging Jim Crow. It is important to point out to

students how easy it might be today, given that we are living in a different time and have different rights, to look back and say that we would have risked our lives in the same way activists did in the 50s and 60s. But the question remains, would you *really*?

Jigsaw Activity: Early Civil Rights Cases Show a Disconnect Between Federal, State, & Local Government

7. Next, point out to students that Jim Crow laws did not go unchallenged in the court system. Review the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision with students:
 - On June 7, 1892, 30-year-old Homer Plessy, a black man, was jailed for sitting in the "White" car of the East Louisiana Railroad. In *Plessy v. The State of Louisiana*, Judge John Howard Ferguson found Plessy guilty for refusing to leave the white car. Plessy did not accept this and appealed to the Supreme Court of Louisiana, who also upheld the decision. Finally, in 1896, Plessy's case was heard by the Supreme Court of the United States. Ask a volunteer to read [slide 13's](#) comments from Justice Henry Brown regarding the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* out loud. Instruct students to silently consider this statement for a moment and then discuss:
 - Based on your understanding of these quotes, how did the Supreme Court rule in *Plessy v. Ferguson*?
 - Why does Justice Brown believe that the Separate Car Act is constitutional? What evidence does he give?
 - According to Justice Brown, if the "colored race" feels inferior riding in a separate car, who is responsible?
8. Explain to students that many civil rights court cases would relate to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. And, even when the courts sometimes made a just decision, they were unfortunately not always enforced by the law. Project [slide 14](#) and explain to students that for further context, they are going to review six court cases involving segregation, all of which occurred before the 1961 Freedom Rides. Tell students they will then teach a group of students about their case in a jigsaw activity. Divide students into six cooperative groups and give each group one of the attached summaries of six civil rights cases on which to focus, as well as a copy of the attached response sheet. Explain to students that they are to carefully read the summary of their case, discuss the details with their group and fill out the summary sheet provided to them. Let students know that each of them must individually have a comprehensive understanding of their group's case, since in the second step of this jigsaw activity they will each be teaching a different group of students about their assigned case, as well as learning about five other cases.
 - **Teacher note:** If possible, print each case on a different color of paper – this will make the transition to the second group easier. Teachers can also break students up into more or less groups than the recommended six; just ensure each group initially works on a different case. Also, while only six case summaries are attached, there are other civil rights cases teachers may want to include in the lesson; teachers are thus encouraged to supplement as they see fit base on particular learning outcomes.
9. Give groups approximately 10-15 minutes to work on their case. After all groups are finished, ask the students to "jigsaw," so that new groups are re-formed with one person representing each case in every group. (If the six cases were copied on different colors of paper, each new group will have at least one person with each color of paper.) Once students are settled in their new groups, have each member take 2-3 minutes to teach their new group members about the case they read about. Students should take notes on each case as they learn from their classmates.
10. After each student in the new groupings has taught their group members about their case, have a volunteer student summarize each of the cases, allowing students to ask any lingering questions they have about each case, and further discuss:
 - What surprises you about these cases?

- How do these cases represent a disconnect between the branches of government (Executive, Legislative, and Judicial) and the levels of government (federal, state, and local)?
- What do you think it took to get these decisions enforced?

11. Project the Judge Learned Hand quote on slide15: “I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it . . .” Tell students you want them to keep this quote in mind as they now turn their attention to the Freedom Rides of 1961.

Introduction to the 1961 Freedom Rides

12. Project slide 17 and handout the attached CORE letter to President Kennedy. Instruct students to take a few moments to read the letter as an introduction to the 1961 Freedom Ride movement. After students have read, discuss as a class:
- According to James Farmer, what are the plans and purpose of the Freedom Ride?
 - Why do you think they are sending an interracial, mixed gender and mixed heritage (2/3 of the group are noted as being southern) group?
 - Why do you think Farmer wrote this letter to the President?
 - Why has he specifically explained that the group is trained in non-violence techniques?
 - What do you think Farmer means when he says that the rides are an “appeal to the best in all Americans?”
 - In what ways does Farmer note that Jim Crow degrades democracy? Why does he classify Jim Crow as a danger to our country?
 - Why do you think he ends with a quote by General Lee?

Exploring the Events of the 1961 Freedom Rides

13. The details of the 1961 Freedom Rides offer numerous important lessons for students to consider. Teachers have several options for conveying this important history to students:
- Slides 18-30 of the accompanying PowerPoint summarize major events concerning the first wave of Freedom Riders, whose journey ended in New Orleans in May of 1961. Slides 32-46 summarize the second wave of Freedom Riders, when students organized by Diane Nash and students from Nashville resumed the rides. Finally, slides 48-53 offer additional information regarding some of the key events that took place after the Freedom Rides, illustrating that the fight for justice continued.
 - **NOTE: This PowerPoint was created with the expectation that it will be used as a basis for overview and deep discussion (not lecture). It was also created with the understanding that teachers will omit, add, or edit information as they see fit, based on what each particular class already knows or needs to know concerning the Civil Rights Movement. To request an editable version of the PowerPoint, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu**
 - PBS recently created a two-hour documentary on the Freedom Riders. The full length documentary and an educational guide for using the documentary in the classroom is available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>.
 - Teachers who choose to show the full length documentary should consider interweaving some of the Carolina K-12’s PowerPoint slides with the documentary. (Students need a basic understanding of the scope and sequence of the rides in order to effectively follow the documentary.)
 - Teachers should not play the documentary straight through; rather the film should be paused at various points so that students can summarize and discuss what they have seen and what they are thinking/feeling. The PBS link offers a Teaching Guide for the film under the “For Teachers” link, inclusive of great overview readings and discussion questions for various sections of the documentary.

- Also located at the PBS site are clips from the documentary, organized by theme. In particular, there is a link to “Teachers Domain” at the PBS site under “For Teachers.” Teachers Domain has created discussion questions for the clips that can be accessed here. Teachers who choose not to show the entire documentary are encouraged to utilize the clips intermingled with the Carolina K-12’s PowerPoint information.
- Oprah Winfrey’s “Tribute to the Freedom Riders” also offers interesting clips of modern day interviews with civil rights activists as well as clips from the PBS documentary that can be shared with students: <http://www.oprah.com/packages/freedom-riders.html>

Honoring the Freedom Riders: Plan a Youth Summit

- 14.** Once students have learned about the Freedom Rides and have a basic understanding of their place within the Civil Rights Movement, allow students to deepen their understanding by assigning the attached “Honoring the Freedom Riders: Plan a Youth Summit.” In this group activity, students will work together to honor the Freedom Riders and the difference their actions made then and now by planning an educational and inspirational day-long Youth Summit. Go over the assignment sheet in detail with students, ensuring they understand that the purpose of the Summit is to:
- teach people your age about this fascinating and important chapter in the Civil Rights Movement and the history of the nation and the brave people involved, as well as
 - inspire your attendees to be active, engaged community members today.

Teacher notes:

- Determine whether to assign groups or allow students to choose groups, as well as decide how much class time and homework time will be allocated for the project.
- Teachers should also determine the format for turning in the written proposal (does it need to be typed, should it be in a binder, perhaps you want to create a worksheet students will fill out for simplicity, etc.)

Other things to note:

- If you would like a Word file of the assignment sheet for editing, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- The NEH and the Smithsonian actually held a Youth Summit on the Freedom Rides. Should teachers choose to show students aspects of this Summit as an example, it can be accessed at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/nys/national-youth-summit-freedom-rides>
- On the due date of the assignment, teachers should consider having each group present their Summit proposal to the entire class. (Flyers can be posted around the room at the start of class and students can be allowed to do a “gallery walk” as a warm-up, circulating among the flyers for 5 minutes or so.) As each group presents, students should be instructed to take notes on each Summit proposal. At the end of the presentations, the class can vote on which Youth Summit they think would be most effective and why.
- To further student learning, consider implementing a Civil Rights Youth Summit at your school and invite community participation. Possibilities for creating a meaningful event are numerous. For example, local civil rights activists could speak and/or be honored, students could share testimonials of their learning, a screening of the PBS documentary on the Freedom Riders could be shown and followed with a community discussion (perhaps even facilitated by students, etc.)

Culminating Discussion

- 15.** To conclude the lesson on the Freedom Rides, discuss:
- Overall, what is your impression of the Freedom Riders? What is the greatest lesson you have learned from studying this period of history?

- Why did the Freedom Rides employ nonviolent direct action? How does nonviolent direct action expose injustice? Why was it such an effective strategy for bringing about change during the civil rights movement?
- Theatre artist Mike Wiley said, “If history were a neighborhood, slavery would be around the corner and the Freedom Rides would be on your doorstep.” What do you think he means?
- In terms of history, segregation took place fairly recently. Some of your own older family members likely were in school during this time. In what ways are we still affected by the repercussions of segregation today?
- What does the story of the Freedom Riders suggest about the role of citizens in shaping democracy? What is the importance of civic engagement? How do you participate in public life?
- Hatred, prejudice, racism, etc. are still problems to be addressed in our society. No matter how far we come, we are always going to encounter ignorance, anger, and hate. How can we all work to ensure that such hatred is not allowed in our communities?
- When prejudice and racism are supported by both custom and law, what can be done to create a more inclusive society?
- How do you explain why there is often so much resistance to change?

Teacher Note: Additional discussion questions can be found in PBS’s educational guide for the Freedom Riders documentary: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>

"Black, Brown, and White"

a song by Big Bill Broonzy

This little song that I'm singin' about,
People, you all know that it's true,
If you're black and gotta work for livin',
Now, this is what they will say to you,
They says: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I was in a place one night,
They was all havin' fun,
They was all buyin' beer and wine,
But they would not sell me none.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I went to an employment office,
I got a number and I got in line,
They called everybody's number,
But they never did call mine.
They said: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

Me and a man was workin' side by side,
Now, this is what it meant:
They was payin' him a dollar an hour,
And they was payin' me fifty cent.
They said: "If you was white,
You'd be alright,
If you was brown,
You could stick around,
But as you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

I helped win sweet victories,
With my plow and hoe,
Now, I want you to tell me, brother,
What you gonna do 'bout the old Jim Crow?
Now, if you is white,
You's alright,
If you's brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back.

Key Civil Rights Cases

Morgan v. Virginia (1946)

In the spring of 1946, Irene Morgan, a black woman, boarded a bus in Virginia to go to Baltimore, Maryland. She was ordered to sit in the back of the bus, as this is what Virginia state law required. She objected, saying that since the bus was an interstate bus, the Virginia law did not apply. Morgan was arrested and fined ten dollars.

Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP took on the case. They argued that since an 1877 Supreme Court decision ruled that it was illegal for a state to forbid segregation, then it was likewise illegal for a state to require it. The United States Supreme Court agreed:

"As no state law can reach beyond its own border nor bar transportation of passengers across its boundaries, diverse seating requirements for the races in interstate journeys result. As there is no federal act dealing with the separation of races in interstate transportation, we must decide the validity of this Virginia statute on the challenge that it interferes with commerce, as a matter of balance between the exercise of the local police power and the need for national uniformity in the regulations for interstate travel. It seems clear to us that seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel require a single, uniform rule to promote and protect national travel. Consequently, we hold the Virginia statute in controversy invalid."

The court did not rule that segregated transportation within the state was unconstitutional. And, while the ruling was a defeat for interstate segregation in written law, it unfortunately did not have an immediate impact. The ruling was ignored. State and local governments throughout the South still enforced segregation and buses still expected passengers to separate into black and white sections.

Morgan's case inspired the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, during which 16 activists from the Chicago-based Congress of Racial Equality rode on interstate buses through the Upper South to test the enforcement of the Supreme Court's ruling. By the end of the Journey, the protesters had conducted over 24 "tests" and endured 12 arrests and dangerous mob violence. However, even after the Journey, segregation in the South still remained.

In 1960, similar history would repeat itself. In *Boynton v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court further extended the *Morgan* ruling to bus terminals used in interstate bus service, stating that segregation was unconstitutional. Once again, a group of students decided to test the Supreme Court ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia* with the Freedom Rides of 1961, also organized by CORE. And, once again, many African Americans were ejected or arrested when they tried to integrate Southern facilities, since state and local law officials refused to obey *Morgan v. Virginia*.

Key Civil Rights Cases

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and Brown v. Board of Education II (1955)

In Topeka, Kansas in the 1950s, schools were segregated by race. Each day, Linda Brown and her sister had to walk through a dangerous railroad switchyard to get to the bus stop for the ride to their all-black elementary school. There was a school closer to the Linda Brown's house, but it was only for white students.

Linda Brown and her family believed that the segregated school system violated the Fourteenth Amendment and represented by the NAACP, took their case to court. For much of the sixty years preceding the *Brown* case, race relations in the U.S. had been dominated by racial segregation. This policy had been endorsed in 1896 by the United States Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which held that as long as the separate facilities for the separate races were equal, segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment ("no State shall... deny to any person... the equal protection of the laws.").

While the federal district court decided that segregation in public education was harmful to black children, it ruled that because all-black schools and all-white schools had similar buildings, transportation, curricula, and teachers, the segregation was legal.

The NAACP appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. Special counsel Thurgood Marshall argued that segregation was unconstitutional because it stigmatized African Americans, thereby denying them the equal protection guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Chief Justice Earl Warren and a unanimous court agreed. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Even though the Court decided that state laws requiring separate but equal schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the court did not order immediate implementation of the decision. In 1955, often called *Brown II*, the decision was made that local district courts in each state would oversee implementation of the 1954 decision "with deliberate speed."

The NAACP urged desegregation to proceed immediately or at least within firm deadlines. However, the states claimed both were impracticable. By 1964, a decade after the first decision, less than 2 percent of formerly segregated school districts had experienced any desegregation whatsoever.

Key Civil Rights Cases

Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company (1955)

Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company is a civil rights case based on an incident that occurred in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, on August 1, 1952. Sarah Keys, an African American private in the Women's Army Core, boarded an interstate bus in New Jersey to travel to her home in Washington, NC. She took the fifth seat from the front and traveled without incident until the bus made a stop at the Roanoke Rapids, NC station. At this location, the bus drivers changed and the new driver expected Keys to comply with the Trailways bus company's Jim Crow regulations. The driver told her to give her seat to a white Marine and to head to the back of the bus and sit in the "colored section." At the time of the incident, Jim Crow laws were still being enforced on Southern bus travel, despite the 1946 *Morgan v. Virginia* Supreme Court ruling that was meant to put an end to segregation on interstate buses and interstate transportation facilities.

Keys and her father brought the matter to the attention of the NAACP, who referred the case to a former law student named Dovey Johnson Roundtree. Roundtree herself had also served in the Woman's Army Core and coincidentally, had also been evicted from a Miami, Florida bus in a 1943 incident that was similar to Sarah Keys' experience. Roundtree and her law partner, Julius Winfield Robertson, filed a complaint against Carolina Trailways with the US District Court in Washington, DC.

When the US District Court dismissed the *Keys* complaint in February of 1953, Roundtree and Robertson elected to bring their case before the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). Even though the Interstate Commerce Act banned discrimination, the ICC interpreted the discrimination ban as permitting separate accommodations for the races so long as they were equal. The lawyers hoped ICC would re-evaluate its traditional interpretation of the Interstate Commerce Act, in the same way that the Supreme Court was at the same time re-evaluating its interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment in the famous school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

On September 1, 1953, Sarah Keys became the first black petitioner to bring a complaint before the Commission on a Jim Crow bus matter. Two months later, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The ICC initially chose to ignore the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown* case, rather than be influenced by it when making their own decision on the *Keys* case. In a September 30, 1954 ruling, the ICC stated that *Brown* had no relevance to the conduct of business by a private bus carrier. Citing *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the ICC argued that the non-discrimination language of the Interstate Commerce Act did not prohibit segregation. Roundtree and Robertson filed exceptions to the ICC ruling in which they invoked both the commerce clause of the US Constitution and the Supreme Court's reasoning in *Brown* and applied it explicitly to the area of transportation.

On November 7, 1955, in a historic ruling, the ICC finally condemned 'separate but equal' and ruled that the Interstate Commerce Act actually prohibited segregation:

"We conclude that the assignment of seats on interstate buses, so designated as to imply the inherent inferiority of a traveler solely because of race or color, must be regarded as subjecting the traveler to unjust discrimination, and undue and unreasonable prejudice and disadvantage..."

Interestingly, the *Keys* decision was made public just one week before Rosa Parks' defiance of the city bus segregation laws of the city of Montgomery.

Key Civil Rights Cases

Browder v. Gayle (1956)

Nine months before Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin had actually been the first person to resist bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. (Montgomery's black leaders did not publicize Colvin's pioneering effort because she was a teenager and became pregnant while unmarried. The NAACP leaders worried about using her to represent their movement, given the complicated society of the time.)

However, after the Montgomery bus boycott was successful, civil rights lawyers wanted to be sure that the actual Alabama laws were changed as well. Civil rights attorneys Fred Gray, E.D. Nixon and Clifford Durr searched for the ideal case to use for challenging Montgomery and Alabama's bus segregation laws in the courts. Durr believed that an appeal of Mrs. Rosa Parks' case would just get tied up in the Alabama state courts. The lawyers decided to approach Claudette Colvin, Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, and Mary Louise Smith, who were all women who had been mistreated by the Montgomery bus system. They all agreed to become plaintiffs in a civil action law suit. So, in the end, it was a court case stemming from 15-year-old Colvin's refusal to give up her seat that legally declared bus segregation in Alabama unconstitutional.

On February 1, 1956, Gray filed the case *Browder v. Gayle* in U.S. District Court. (Gayle was the mayor of Montgomery.)

In June 1956 the District Court ruled that "the enforced segregation of Negro and white passengers on motor buses operating in the City of Montgomery violates the Constitution and laws of the United States." The Court agreed that segregation deprived people of equal protection as mandated by the Fourteenth Amendment.

The court further ordered the state of Alabama and city of Montgomery to stop operating segregated buses.

Key Civil Rights Cases

Cooper v. Aaron, 1958

In 1954, the Supreme Court, in the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared that the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution forbade the states from segregating students in their public schools on account of race. In a 1955 follow-up decision (*Brown v. Board of Education II*), states were ordered to integrate their schools "with all deliberate speed." Soon thereafter, the school board of Little Rock, Arkansas, developed a court-approved plan to integrate its segregated school system. However, around the same time, the Arkansas governor and legislature passed new state laws and constitutional amendments outlawing integration in the state.

The Little Rock school board and the state clashed on September 4, 1957, when the Arkansas National Guard, under the direction of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, prevented a group of nine African American students ("The Little Rock Nine") from enrolling at Little Rock's Central High School pursuant to the school board's integration plan. Under threat of violence, a local federal court nevertheless ordered the school board to carry out the plan. The next day, again meeting resistance from the Arkansas National Guard, the U.S. government obtained a legal order to force the Governor to withdraw the state national guard. President Dwight Eisenhower then sent in federal National Guard troops to protect the nine students from mobs. By the end of September, the students were finally able to enter the school and began attending classes there.

In February 1958, the Little Rock school board petitioned the local federal court to approve postponing their integration plan. The board cited "chaos, bedlam and turmoil" that had engulfed Central High School since the African American students enrolled. The court agreed, ordering that the students be removed from the school and that plans for integration be delayed another two and a half years. Acting on behalf of the Little Rock Nine, the NAACP appealed the decision to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, which reversed the lower court's decision and held that the delay would violate the constitutional rights of the African American students. Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed the case in *Cooper v. Aaron* (1958).

The Supreme Court unanimously held that the constitutional rights of the African American students could not be sacrificed for the sake of "order and peace" in public high schools. The African American students would remain at Central High School and the school board's original integration plan must go forward. The Court did not stop there, however, and insisted that the governor and legislature of Arkansas were bound by its orders. It pointed out that the state government is bound to the terms of the U.S. Constitution under the Supremacy and Oath Clauses. The case also noted that because the Supreme Court is the "voice" of the U.S. Constitution the state government is bound to the Supreme Court's decisions and may not change them with state laws, amendments, or orders.

If *Brown v. Board of Education* provided the foundation for school integration in the 1950s and 1960s, *Cooper v. Aaron* provided the muscle. Though *Cooper* simply reiterated constitutional principles that were already accepted, the decision affirmed the power of the federal courts to enforce federal civil rights laws and court decisions against the states, and the role of the Supreme Court in defining what the Constitution requires. As the Court declared, the states' compliance with the principles of civil rights, as articulated by the federal courts, is "indispensable for the protection of the freedoms guaranteed by our fundamental charter for all of us. Our constitutional ideal of equal justice under law is thus made a living truth."

Key Civil Rights Cases

Boynton v. Virginia (1960)

In 1958, Bruce Boynton, an African-American student at the historically black Howard University's Law School in Washington, boarded a Trailways bus for a trip to his home in Montgomery, Alabama. On a stop in Richmond, VA, Boynton sat in the white section of the lunchroom and refused to move to the "colored section." He was arrested for trespassing and fined \$10.

The NAACP took up Boynton's case, which reached the Supreme Court in 1960. Arguing for Boynton, Thurgood Marshall explained that the arrest placed an unreasonable burden on commerce and denied Boynton equal protection of the law by denying him service in the lunchroom. The Justice Department argued that the Interstate Commerce Act forbade "unjust discrimination." The provision read:

It shall be unlawful for any common carrier by motor vehicle engaged in interstate or foreign commerce to make, give, or cause any undue or unreasonable preference or advantage to any particular person . . . to any unjust discrimination or any unjust or unreasonable prejudice or disadvantage in any respect whatsoever . . .

Trailways, which had built the Richmond terminal in 1953, was subject to the law, but the company hired a contractor to operate the dining area. The State argued that unlike Trailways, its contractor was not subject to the act.

The Supreme Court ruled on *Boynton v. Virginia* on December 5, 1960, that interstate passengers were protected by the Interstate Commerce Act and therefore, Boynton had a right to remain in the white section of the dining area. The 7-2 ruling, written by Justice Hugo L. Black stated:

We are not holding that every time a bus stops at a wholly independent roadside restaurant the act applies . . . [but] where circumstances show that the terminal and restaurant operate as an integral part of the bus carrier's transportation service . . . an interstate passenger need not inquire into documents of title or contractual agreements in order to determine whether he has a right to be served without discrimination.

The ruling extended the Supreme Court's ruling in *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* beyond interstate buses and trains, but again the southern States did not enforce the ruling. Similar to the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation's purpose to test the *Morgan v. VA* decision, *Boynton* inspired the 1961 "Freedom Ride," where integrated pairs rode interstate buses side-by-side and dined in terminal lunchrooms together, testing the "color line." Regardless of the US Supreme Court's decision, the Federal Government did not throw its weight behind the decision and segregation remained on buses traveling through the South and in the terminals.

Name: _____

Key Civil Rights Cases

Case Name & Date: _____

What occurrence took place that led to the case?

What was the argument presented to the Court?

What was the Court's decision?

Did the Court's decision make an immediate impact on civil rights? Why or why not?

Letter from CORE to President Kennedy, 1961

a national organization with affiliated local groups working



to abolish racial discrimination by direct, nonviolent methods

Handwritten: Dear Mr. President
GENERAL
H. J. ...

April 26, 1961

Handwritten: THE WHITE HOUSE
APR 27 4 30 PM '61
RECEIVED

25 PARK ROW
NEW YORK 10, NEW YORK
CORPORATE TRUST

Carl Washburn, Inc.
General Counsel

Executive Committee

Robert Kennedy

James Farmer

Bayard Rustin

James A. Bevel

Johnnie P. Wilson

James H. Ray

James M. Bevel

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The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

My dear Mr. President:

We expect you will be interested in our Freedom Ride, 1961. It is designed to forward the completion of integrated bus service and accommodations in the Deep South.

About fifteen CORE members will travel as inter-state passengers on Greyhound and Trailways routes. We leave Washington early in May and, travelling through Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, plan to arrive in New Orleans on Wednesday, May 17th.

The group is interracial. Two-thirds are Southerners. Three are women. We propose to challenge, en route, every form of segregation met by the bus passenger. We are experienced in, and dedicated to, the Gandhian principles of non-violence.

Our plans are entirely open. Further information is available to all.

Freedom Ride is an appeal to the best in all Americans. We travel peaceably to persuade them that Jim Crow betrays democracy. It degrades democracy at home. It debases democracy abroad. We feel that there is no way to overstate the danger that denial of democratic and constitutional rights brings to our beloved country.

And so we feel it our duty to affirm our principles by asserting our rights. With the survival of democracy at stake, there is an imperative, immediate need for acts of self-determination. "Abandon your animosities and make your sons Americans," said Robert E. Lee. Freedom Ride would make that, "All your sons -- NOW!"

Sincerely yours,
James Farmer
James Farmer
National Director

JF:rm
encs.

Honoring the Freedom Riders by Hosting a Youth Summit

"I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it . . ." Judge Learned Hand

Group Members: _____

The 1961 Freedom Rides

In 1961, civil rights activists organized by the Congress of Racial Equality rode interstate buses into the segregated southern United States to test the United States Supreme Court decision *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), which had outlawed racial segregation in restaurants and waiting rooms in terminals serving buses that crossed state lines. Five years prior to the Boynton ruling, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) had issued a ruling in *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* that had explicitly denounced the *Plessy v. Ferguson* doctrine of separate but equal in interstate bus travel, but the ICC had failed to enforce its own ruling, and thus Jim Crow travel laws remained in force throughout the South. The Freedom Riders set out to challenge this status quo by riding various forms of public transportation in the South to challenge local laws or customs that enforced segregation.

From May until November 1961, more than 400 Americans rode south together on the Freedom Rides. The Riders were young and old, male and female, black, white, and Asian, religious and secular, and from the south, north, east and west of the nation. Unlike many protests in the Movement, the Riders were not practicing civil disobedience. They were doing exactly what the Supreme Court said they had a right to do. Freedom Riders bought tickets on buses and trains and traveled into the South, sitting wherever they pleased, as was their right. They knew, however, that Southern segregationists could be counted upon to violate their civil rights, forcing a conflict between the states and the federal government and demanding that an apathetic nation consider the inequality they exposed. The Freedom Riders also knew that this simple act of riding on a bus or train, in violation of a long-held and violently enforced tradition of white supremacy, might very well cost them their lives. The Freedom Riders were not deterred. They were beaten, bombed, harassed, and imprisoned but they changed the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrated the power of individual action to transform the nation.

Source: http://smithsonianconference.org/freedomrides/wpcontent/uploads/2011/02/Freedom_Rides_Teacher_Guide.pdf

Your Project Assignment

In order to honor the Freedom Riders and the difference their actions made then and now, you will work on a team to plan an educational and inspirational day-long Youth Summit. The ultimate purpose of your Summit is to:

- 1) teach people your age about this fascinating and important chapter in the Civil Rights Movement and the history of the nation and the brave people involved, as well as
- 2) inspire your attendees to be active, engaged community members today.

How you choose to accomplish these two goals, and what specific themes you choose to highlight and organize your Summit around (i.e. freedom, change, courage, etc.), are up to your team. Be visionary and be creative!

Your Youth Summit Proposal

Begin by brainstorming ideas for your Youth Summit. How can you design an educational, inspirational and fun day that not only teaches people your age about the importance of the Freedom Rides and the courage and dedication the Freedom Riders exhibited, but also inspires youth to participate in society today? What people might you invite to speak and/or present sessions at the Summit? What events might the day hold?

What will it take to show people your age just how important and amazing this history is, and how relevant it is to us today?

As you begin to make decisions, you will draft a proposal for your Youth Summit. On the due date, you will turn in a final proposal that includes the following information. (While your proposal can include additional information, it **MUST** include each heading noted below in bold.)

- **Title of Your Summit:**
 - Create a title that is creative and will interest people enough to attend your event, but also gives a person an idea of what the Summit is about. (For example, “Rollin’ for Freedom: How the 1961 Freedom Rides is Important to YOU”)

- **Youth Summit Purpose and Relevant Themes:**
 - You have been given a required Summit purpose, but how this actually plays out at your event is up to you. What themes are related to the Freedom Rides that you want your Summit to focus on? (i.e. fighting for your rights, change, freedom, democracy, courage, etc.) Provide a one or more paragraph summary of the purpose of the Summit in your own words, including a description of relevant themes that will be addressed throughout the day.

- **Schedule of Events:**
 - What events will take place at your summit and what is the purpose of each of these events? (What will participants get out of each experience?) Events that are often included at conferences and summits include:
 - Keynote address
 - Panel of speakers
 - Motivational speaker
 - Performances of music
 - Dramatic readings
 - Art displays
 - Film screening
 - Service activity
 - You can include any combination of these typical events, or also include your own creative ideas. How will you make this day interesting, engaging and inspirational?

- **Who will speak at your Youth Summit?**
 - Related to your schedule of events, who will present/speak at your Youth Summit? If you are having a keynote address for example, you need to specifically explain who will deliver it and why.
 - Research the Freedom Riders, civil rights movement leaders and government officials who were actually involved in the 1961 events and choose at least 3 people who will participate at some point in your schedule of events. Go to <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/people> to meet many of the people involved in the 1961 events.
 - You must include a bio for each of these 3 speakers (at least a paragraph or more) and specifically note what they will do on the day of the Summit and what you believe they will add to the day. (What will participants get out of hearing this person speak or interacting with them in some way?) The three bios must be in your own words and include the information you think is most important. (Don’t just tell us all about the person’s life – tell us what they did that you feel is most interesting and important.)
 - In addition, you must identify 1 modern speaker who will participate in the Youth Summit by discussing a modern civil rights issue that relates to the 1960s issues, or to the themes you have selected. You can choose anyone you like, from an activist to a government official, or even a movie

star who is civically active— as long as you can justify how that person can help inspire attendees to fight for justice today.

- For the purposes of this proposal, you can assume that you have an unlimited budget and thus can include anyone you choose from around the world on the day’s agenda. Be sure you can justify their participation, however.

- **Marketing**

- Why should youth attend this Youth Summit? Why do they need to know about and care about this history? Why is this relevant to today? Create a paragraph convincing people to attend and explain what they will get out of attending.

- **Follow-Up/Take Away**

- What do you want attendees to do after leaving (volunteer, vote, etc.) and how will this Summit inspire attendees to do this? To figure this out, you might want to ask yourselves, “What’s wrong with the world? What can we do to change it?”

Youth Summit Flyer

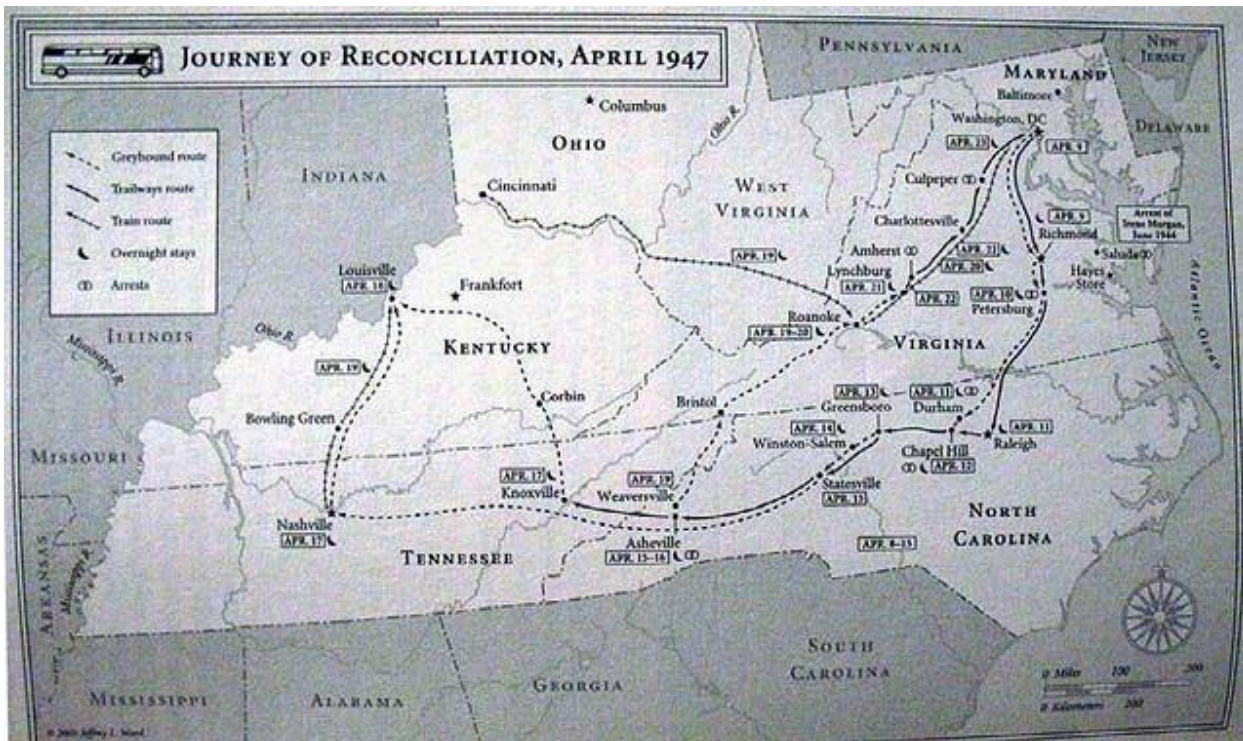
After you have finalized your plans for the Youth Summit, create a flyer advertising your summit. Imagine that the flyer will be posted around schools, colleges, and other places where young people hang out. The flyer should contain appropriate information and be designed in such a way that it makes youth want to come to your Youth Summit. Your final flyer must include:

- Text that conveys information about the Youth Summit: Title, date, location, text that gives perspective attendees an idea of the day’s purpose and what to expect , and a primary source quote that relates to the Summit’s theme/purpose, etc.
- Visual design that catches perspective attendees’ attention: This might include drawings, colors, symbols, actual images from the 1960s, etc.

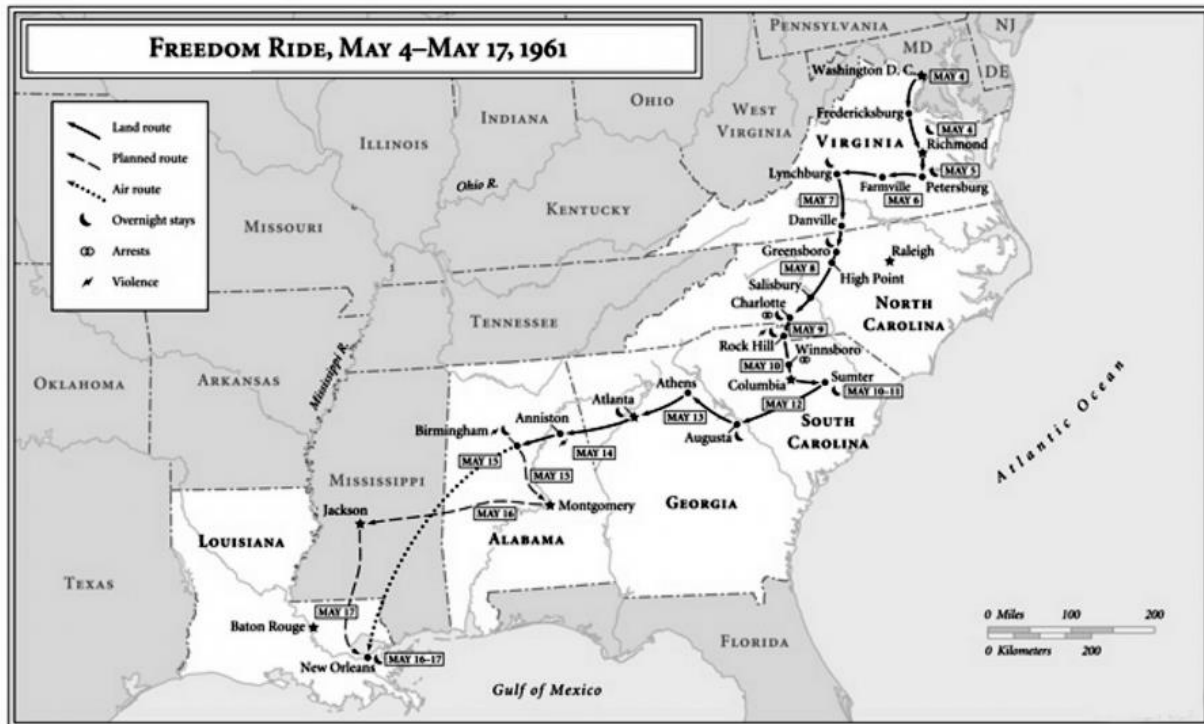
Your Youth Summit Proposal and Flyer are due on: _____

What questions do you have regarding this assignment?

Journey of Reconciliation, 1947



Freedom Rides, 1961



Recommended Resources on the Freedom Rides

- Derek Charles Catsam, *Freedom's Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides*.
- Blair Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*
- David Halberstam, *The Children*
- Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years 1954-63*
- Eric Etheridge, *Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders*
 - Book's website with additional materials: <http://breachofpeace.com/blog/>
- John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*
- Kwame Ture, *Ready for Revolution*
- Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*
 - An excerpt from this book is available through NPR at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5149667>
- iBiblio, "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC): 1960 – 1966"
 - <http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/rides.html>
- "Civil Rights: The Freedom Riders" photo essay, *Life Magazine*
 - <http://www.life.com/gallery/23102/image/50551214/civil-rights-the-freedom-riders#index/0>
- Dr. King and the Freedom Rides photos, *Life Magazine*:
<http://time.com/3633907/martin-luther-king-jr-and-the-freedom-riders-rare-and-classic-photos/>
- NPR Staff, "Freedom Riders Reflect on 50th Anniversary"
 - <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/04/135985034/freedom-riders-reflect-on-50th-anniversary>
- Calvin Trillin, "Back on the Bus," *New Yorker*. 25 Jul 2011: p. 36 – 42.
 - As of October 3, 2011, this article can be found at these two websites:
 - <http://tinyurl.com/6g9pooj>
 - <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2011-07-25#folio=036>
- PBS, "The American Experience: The Freedom Riders," directed by Stanley Nelson
 - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/about>
 - An interview with Stanley Nelson: http://www.democracynow.org/2010/2/1/the_freedom_riders
- Get On the Bus: The Freedom Riders of 1961:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5149667>