

INFORMATION PACKET FOR CHAPEL HILL TOWN COUNCIL

PETITION FOR A RESOLUTION OF SUPPORT FOR THE APPLICATION TO BE FILED
 BY THE CHAPEL HILL-CARRBORO NAACP AND THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF
 CHAPEL HILL UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FOR A STATE HISTORICAL MARKER

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Item 1

REQUEST FORM FOR A PROPOSAL TO BE PRESENTED TO THE NORTH CAROLINA
 HIGHWAY HISTORICAL MARKER COMMITTEE: (Please provide the information
 requested. Include extra sheets if space provided on this form is inadequate.)

A. SUBJECT OF PROPOSED MARKER:

1947 Journey of Reconciliation ("First Freedom Ride")

B. SITE TO BE MARKED:

Old Trailways bus station, southwest corner of Columbia St. and Rosemary St. in Chapel Hill

C. PROPOSED LOCATION OF MARKER ON NUMBERED, STATEMAINTAINED
 HIGHWAY: (Be specific. Note whether the site lies within the corporate limits of a city or town.
 A sketch of the location would be useful.)

The marker would be located on the west side of N. Columbia St. between Franklin St. and W.
 Rosmary St. The site is within the Chapel Hill corporate limits.

see attachment A

D. DISTANCE AND DIRECTION FROM THE PROPOSED LOCATION TO THE SITE TO
 BE MARKED: (for example, 100 yards S.E.)

The marker would stand approximately 100 feet south of the old bus station.

E. HISTORICAL SKETCH: (should be documented with primary sources, i.e., original or contemporary records)

see attachment B

F. SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY: (secondary sources may be included)

see attachment C

G. SUBMITTED BY:

Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP
Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist

RETURN ADDRESS:

Research Branch Office of Archives and History 4610 Mail Service Center Raleigh, NC 27699-46101

Item 2

Attachment A, page 1

Request for state historical marker in Chapel Hill to commemorate Journey of Reconciliation ("First Freedom Ride"), April 1947

A

Old Bus Station, site of beatings and arrests

B

Proposed site of historical marker



Item 3

Attachment B

Historical sketch of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation (“First Freedom Ride”), with emphasis on events in Chapel Hill and the statewide significance of those events

Historical Background

The period immediately following World War II was a time of tremendous challenges to Jim Crow throughout the South. Returning black veterans, who had fought to “make the world safe for democracy,” were particularly unwilling to accept continued second class citizenship. Moreover, the federal government became increasingly uncomfortable with overt segregation in the South due to criticism from new African and Asian nations emerging from colonialism. Racial injustice in the US hobbled Cold War competition with the Soviet Union and China for the hearts and minds of these newly emancipated people of color.

In the immediate postwar era, legal challenges to Jim Crow mounted by the NAACP were the main form of black freedom struggle against segregation. These actions resulted in the desegregation of higher education in the South during the early 1950s and the landmark Supreme Court decision of 1954 that struck down “separate but equal,” *Plessy v. Ferguson*. By 1955, the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott shifted the focus of the civil rights struggle toward non-violent direct action and grassroots mobilization. Although Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became the most famous leader of this movement, he did not originate the method of non-violent non-cooperation. That was the achievement of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian struggle for independence from British colonialism during the 1930s and 1940s. Gandhi’s followers in the US were not the leaders of the black freedom movement in the postwar era, nor were the methods of non-violence widely practiced or understood at that time.

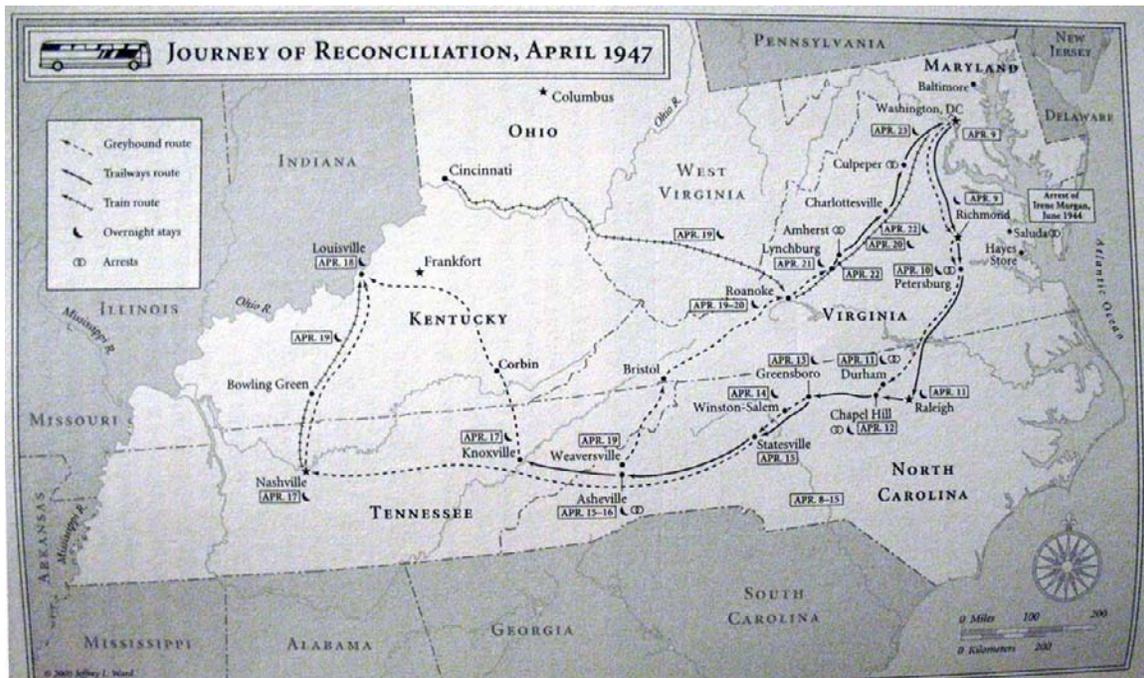
The organization that pioneered non-violence in the US was the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), which gave birth to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942. When the US Supreme Court held that state segregation laws did not apply to interstate bus travel in 1946, it was CORE that decided to test enforcement of the decision and popularize the methods of non-violence. In April 1947, CORE sent interracial teams of bus riders through the Upper South. This was the origin of the “First Freedom Ride.”

Journey of Reconciliation in North Carolina

The Journey of Reconciliation, later called “The First Freedom Ride,” began on April 9, 1947. It was led by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)’s leaders, Bayard Rustin and George Hauser. The First Freedom Riders committed themselves and their bodies to test a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1946 that ruled interstate Jim Crow laws on buses and trains were unconstitutional.



Members of the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947. Left to right: Worth Randle, Wallace Nelson, Ernest Bromley, James Peck, Igal Roodenko, Bayard Rustin, James Felmet, George Houser and Andrew Johnson.
The North Carolina Itinerary of the First Freedom Ride



Petersburg, Va. to Durham, N.C. on 11 April 1947: On the Greyhound bus (CORE tested both Greyhound and Trailways to determine if they were going to obey the Supreme Court's

decision) to Durham, there were no arrests. Peck and Rustin sat up front. About ten miles out of Petersburg the driver told Rustin to move. When Rustin refused, the driver said he would "attend to that at Blackstone." However, after consultation with other drivers at the bus station in Blackstone, he went on to Clarksville. There the group changed buses. At **Oxford, North Carolina**, the driver sent for the police, who refused to make an arrest. Persons waiting to get on at Oxford were delayed for forty-five minutes. A middle-aged Negro schoolteacher was permitted to board and to plead with Rustin to move: "Please move. Don't do this. You'll reach your destination either in front or in back. What difference does it make?" Rustin explained his reason for not moving. Other Negro passengers strongly supported Rustin. One threatened to sue the bus company for the delay.

Raleigh to Durham, North Carolina, 12 April: Lynn and Nelson rode together on the double seat next to the very rear of the **Trailways bus**, and Houser and Roodenko in front of them. The bus was very crowded. The one other Negro passenger, a woman seated across from Nelson, moved to the very rear voluntarily when a white woman got on the bus and there were no seats in front. When two white college men got on, the driver told Nelson and Lynn to move to the rear seat. When they refused on the basis of their interstate passage, he said the matter would be handled in Durham. A white passenger asked the driver if he wanted any help. The driver replied, "No, we don't want to handle it that way." By the time the group reached Durham, the seating arrangement had changed and the driver did not press the matter.

Durham to Chapel Hill, 12 April: The Freedom Riders' arrival in Chapel Hill was uneventful. They were met at the bus station on Columbia Street by Rev. Charles Jones and several elders of his Presbyterian church. That night they met with students and faculty at the university without incident. On Sunday morning, many of the Freedom Riders, both black and white, attended services at Jones's church, later meeting with a delegation from the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

Departing Chapel Hill for Greensboro, North Carolina, 13 April: Johnson and Felmet were seated in front. The driver asked them to move as soon as he boarded. They were arrested quickly, for the police station was just across the street from the bus station. Felmet did not get up to accompany the police until the officer specifically told him he was under arrest. Because he delayed rising from his seat, he was pulled up bodily and shoved out of the bus. The bus driver distributed witness cards to occupants of the bus. One white woman said: "You don't want me to sign one of those. I'm a damn Yankee, and I think this is an outrage." Rustin and Roodenko, sensing the favorable reaction on the bus, decided they would move to the seat in the front vacated by Johnson and Felmet. Their moving forward caused much discussion by passengers. The driver returned soon, and when Rustin and Roodenko refused to move, they were arrested also. A white woman at the front of the bus, a Southerner, gave her name and address to Rustin as he walked by her. The men were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct, for refusing to obey the bus driver and, in the case of the whites, for interfering with arrest. The men were released on \$50 bonds.



The bus was delayed nearly two hours in Chapel Hill. Cab drivers standing around the bus station were becoming aroused by the events. *[The cab drivers in the photo are not meant to represent the men who attacked the Freedom Riders in April 1947.]* One hit Peck a hard blow on the head, saying, "Coming down here to stir up the niggers." Peck stood quietly looking at them for several moments, but said nothing. Two persons standing by, one Negro and one white, reprimanded the cab driver for his violence. The Negro was told, "You keep out of this." Peck described the incident on Columbia Street: *White cab drivers were hanging around the bus station, with nothing to do. They saw our Trailways bus delayed, and learned the reasons why. Here was something over which they could work out their frustration and boredom. Two ringleaders started haranguing the other drivers. About ten of them started milling around the parked bus. When I got off to put up bail for the two Negroes and two whites in our group who had been arrested, five of the drivers surrounded me. "Coming her to stir up the niggers," snarled a big one with steel-cold grey eyes. With that, he slugged me on the side of the head. I stepped back, looked at him, and asked, "What's the matter?" My failure to retaliate with violence had taken him by surprise.*—James Peck, "Freedom Ride" (1962).

In the police station, some men standing around said: "**They'll never get a bus out of here tonight.**" After bond was set, **Reverend Charles Jones**, a local white Presbyterian minister [who was expelled from the Presbyterian Church, and then helped found the *Community Church of Chapel Hill*], speedily drove the men to his home where white UNC students stood guard for the Freedom Riders. Jones and the Freedom Riders were pursued by two cabs filled with taxi men. As the interracial group reached the front porch of the Jones home, the two cabs pulled up at the curb. Men jumped out, two of them with sticks for weapons; others picked up sizable rocks. They started toward the house, but were called back by one of their number. In a few moments the phone rang, and an anonymous voice said to Jones, "Get those damn niggers out of town or we'll burn your house down. We'll be around to see that they go." The police were notified and arrived in about twenty minutes. The interracial group felt it wise to leave

town before nightfall. Two cars were obtained and the group was driven to Greensboro, by way of Durham, for an evening engagement.

About a month after the Freedom Riders had been attacked, arrested and spirited off to Greensboro, they returned to the Southern Part of Heaven for a trial on 20 May 1947. **Rustin and Roodenko**, represented by **NAACP lawyers Jerry Gates, Henry Taylor, and Ed Avant**, appeared before Chapel Hill Recorder's Court Judge Henry Whitfield. The District Attorney, T. J. Phipps, gave an impassioned argument to Judge Whitfield that **"our nigras wanted Jim Crow,"** and it was the outside agitators coming in that were the cause of all the trouble.

Judge Whitfield agreed, sentenced the Rustin to merely paying court costs, on the grounds that Rustin was **"A poor misled nigra from the North"** and therefore less responsible than the white agitators who should know better. Then Judge Whitfield turned his attention to the Roodenko. **"I presume you're Jewish, Mr. Rodenky. Well it's about time you Jews from New York learned you can't come down here bringing your nigras with you to upset the customs of the South."** With that, Judge Whitfield sentenced Roodenko to 30 days on the chain gang.

Then Judge Whitfield considered the cases of the other Black/White pair of Freedom Riders who had been arrested at the Bus Station on Franklin Street, Johnson and Felmet. The Judge made his view of the "customs of the South" even clearer. He sentenced Johnson to \$50 fine and costs; but saved his real sense of a white man betraying his "race" by sentencing Felmet to **6 months** on a chain gang! When the D.A., somewhat embarrassed by the Judge's sentence—which was six times harsher than was allowed by the law—pointed out that one month was the maximum, Judge Whitfield said, **"I can't keep all these things in my little head."**

The Freedom Riders appealed to the Superior Court in Hillsborough. The case was heard by Judge Chester Morris in March 1948. Judge Morris rejected their argument that they were "interstate passengers" and gave them equal opportunity sentences—one month on the chain gang for both the White and Black Freedom Riders. The NAACP lawyers appealed the case to the N.C. Supreme Court. In January 1949, the NC Supreme Court upheld Judge Morris's convictions and the chain gang sentence. Because of money problems, lost evidence (the interstate ticket could not be found), NAACP legal priorities, and differences about how to best build the Movement, the N.C. Supreme Court decision was not appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Freedom Riders, all members of CORE, were heavily influenced by the "poor misled nigra from the North" who had just returned from a 3-month trip to Europe and India, where he had met with Gandhi's son. Rustin argued that if they served their sentence on the chain gang, it would be another form of a "Demonstration to the colored majority of the world of the failures of American democracy." Felmut and Roodenko agreed. Johnson chose to stay in Cincinnati to complete his senior year at the University.

Bayard Rustin, James Felmut, and Igal Roodenko surrendered at the Hillsborough Court House on March 21, 1949 and were transported directly to the Roxboro Chain Gang. With good behavior, they served 22 days. The *"ignorant nigra from the North"* wrote a journal about his experience—"22 Days on a Chain Gang"—which was serialized in the *New York Post* and the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspapers. Their bravery and prophetic ministry led to a legislative investigation of the treatment of prisoners in N.C. Prison Camps. Rustin's writings directly

inspired Ms. Rosa Parks, in 1955, and the Freedom Riders of 1960-61, to challenge Jim Crow segregation on buses and other southern institutions.

The Significance of the Journey of Reconciliation

The 1947 Journey of Reconciliation was among the most important North Carolina civil rights protests before the sit-ins of 1960. This first organized “Freedom Ride” had an impact far beyond its goal of testing the 1946 Supreme Court ruling striking down segregation on interstate bus lines.

Its legacies for North Carolina might be best seen in the following areas:

1. Hundreds of African Americans and their white allies across North Carolina rallied to the defense of the freedom riders at mass meetings in Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, and Chapel Hill. Many of these meetings were held on black and white college campuses, such as St. Augustine’s and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, while others took place in black churches and were sponsored by local NAACP branches. Before packed crowds that were reportedly very enthusiastic, the freedom riders discussed Gandhian nonviolence as a means of ending segregation. Hundreds of other people were exposed to Gandhian nonviolence through the black press’s extensive coverage of the Journey. As the esteemed civil rights historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick later observed: *The Journey served to publicize nonviolent direct action and, thereby, undoubtedly played a part as one of the many events that gradually were to make protest of this type respectable, even fashionable. As [Jim] Peck observed as late as 1954, in his speaking engagements he found the Journey interested audiences more than anything else. Moreover, he added, “through the meetings we held each night during the Journey itself [in the communities where the riders stopped along the way] and through the nationwide publicity which it received, more Negroes than ever before were made aware of the nonviolent technique of CORE.”*¹

White students and religious liberals also played key roles in the Journey of Reconciliation. For instance, after a Chapel Hill mob threatened the bus protestors, students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill volunteered to shuttle them to their next stop in Greensboro and to provide protection for the family of their beleaguered white host, the Rev. Charles Jones.

2. After serving three weeks in a state prison camp at Roxboro for his participation in the bus protests, pacifist Bayard Rustin wrote “Twenty-two Days on a Chain Gang.” Rustin’s prison memoir—an unsparing expose of the brutal conditions in the state’s prisons—was serialized in the *New York Post* and the *Baltimore Afro-American* and drew considerable attention in state and beyond. Among the horrors Rustin exposed was the practice of hanging prisoners by their hands for hours. A group of UNC faculty quickly formed a committee to press for reforms and their demands were echoed by protestors across the nation. Under considerable public pressure, Governor Kerr Scott overhauled prison disciplinary procedures and he appointed a prison

¹ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, “The First Freedom Ride,” *Phylon* 30:3 (1969) 213-222.

oversight committee to guard against continued abuses.² The North Carolina chain gang was discontinued in 1949. The 1947 freedom riders were especially pleased about this outcome.

3. The Journey of Reconciliation's greatest significance may be that it served as the model and inspiration for the larger, more dramatic, and successful Freedom Rides of 1961. Many of the key figures in the latter effort had participated to varying degrees in the 1947 protests, including Jim Peck who traveled on both freedom rides. The 1961 riders drew community support from many of the same local NAACP branches as the 1947 protestors and they visited many of the same churches.

Ollie Stewart of the *Baltimore Afro-American* later summed up the Journey's long-term impact: "*History was definitely made. White and colored persons, when the whole thing was explained to them as they sat in their seats on several occasions, will never forget what they heard (or saw). The white couple who went to the very back seat and sat between colored passengers, the white marine who slept while a colored woman sat beside him, the white Southern girl who, when her mother wouldn't take a seat in the rear, exclaimed 'I do not care, I'm tired'—all these people now have an awareness of the problem. The Journey of Reconciliation, with whites and colored traveling and sleeping and eating together, to my way of thinking, made the solution of segregation seem far simpler than it ever had before. I heard one man refer to the group as pioneers. I think he had something there. They wrote a new page in the history of America.*"³

² John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, p. 170

³ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, p. 52.

Item 4

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP and the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist have joined together to petition the State of North Carolina and the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Advisory Committee to erect a marker honoring the Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Riders who arrived in Chapel Hill on April 12, 1947. We request that the Council endorse our petition tonight, so that the endorsement can be included with the application to the State (which is due February 14, 2008).

Resolution of Support

RESOLUTION OF SUPPORT FOR A STATE HISTORICAL MARKER IN CHAPEL HILL HONORING THE 1947 JOURNEY OF RECONCILIATION, THE “FIRST FREEDOM RIDE

WHEREAS, The Chapel Hill Town Council enthusiastically supports the application of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP and the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist for a state historical marker honoring the Journey of Reconciliation, the “First Freedom Ride.” This First Freedom Ride was one of the most important civil rights protests in North Carolina prior to 1960; and

WHEREAS, When the Freedom Riders tried to leave Chapel Hill on a Trailways bus on April 13, they were beaten by white cab drivers, arrested, their lives threatened, and they were forced to flee in the night to Greensboro. Black and white residents of Chapel Hill, particularly UNC students and Rev. Charles Jones, a Presbyterian minister long active in civil rights and a founder of the interracial Community Church of Chapel Hill in 1953, came to the aid of the Freedom Riders. Chapel Hill was the only stop on the Journey of Reconciliation where the Freedom Riders received such significant white support. This demonstration of white anti-racism was a proud moment for racial justice in Chapel Hill and a sign of things to come; and

WHEREAS, The publicity resulting from the beatings and arrests encountered by the Freedom Riders in Chapel Hill elevated the Journey of Reconciliation and the little known Gandhian tactic of non-violence to state and national media prominence and public debate. The First Freedom Ride encouraged justice-loving African Americans and white allies, particularly in Chapel Hill, to increase their efforts to challenge segregation. In this way, the events in Chapel Hill and the Journey of Reconciliation as a whole, helped pave the way for the civil rights movement of the 1960s that ended Jim Crow segregation; and

WHEREAS, The Town of Chapel Hill is dedicated to achieving civil rights, justice, and racial reconciliation. An important part of that commitment involves preserving local black history. Demonstrating the Town’s commitment to racial justice through historical markers and monuments is an essential part of reaching these goals;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the Town of Chapel Hill that we therefore urge the North Carolina Historical Marker Advisory Committee to recommend acceptance of the Freedom Rider historical marker at its next meeting.