2003 Citadel Conference on Civil Rights

Crossing the Rubicon: The Freedom Rides in South Carolina

Derek Charles Catsam, Minnesota State University, Mankato

(Lightly documented and for conference purposes only. Please do not reproduce or cite without author's permission.)

On May 9, 1961 the Freedom Riders left Charlotte and crossed into South Carolina. They had been on the road for just a few days, having passed from Washington to the precipice of the Deep South since May 4. Fifty-seven year-old Frances Bergman, one of two white female Riders, confided in a letter, "Frankly I am scared, but if I feel this way how must the Negro members of the group feel[?] And they are all such fine people – all so different in background yet we meet on this common problem and work as one. This is a thrilling experience and one I would not have missed. Signing off – keep your fingers crossed."[1]

South Carolina marked the group's entrée into the Deep South. The renowned political scientist V.O. Key had written about the "harshness and ceaselessness of race discussion in South Carolina," attributing this to the very high percentage of black South Carolinians.[2] No Progressive Plutocracy, as Key had described North Carolina, or Museum Piece, Key's apt phrase for Virginia, South Carolina was a state where "preoccupation with the Negro stifles political conflict."[3] In other areas of political life there could be dissent aplenty, but not on the issue of race. Where North Carolina and Virginia had a visible and in some ways proud history of moderation on the race question, South Carolina had an apodictic history of race demagoguery second perhaps only to Mississippi's.

---

[1] Frances Bergman to "CORE Friends," May 9, 1961. CORE papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

[2] Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, p. 130.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 131

South Carolina in 1960 was rural and poor. Even among Southern States, which were the poorest in the country and the most denigrated based on most social and economic indicators, South Carolina ranked near the bottom, usually contending for the lowest rung with Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Low Country, Black Belt politicians dominated the state's legislature, leaving representatives from South Carolina's few densely populated pockets with little access to the levers of power. Not surprisingly, this rural control of power gave the neobourbons a stranglehold on the politics of race.[4]

The political climate went hand in hand with the cultural climate of much of South Carolina. Bob Jones University proved to be a bulwark against integration and just about any other form of social advancement among South Carolina's fundamentalist white denizens. The state's political leadership thus spent a good deal of time courting the Jones dynasty and the student body at the fundamentalist stronghold.[5] Other institutions buttressed Bob Jones to support the segregationism made famous by Strom Thurmond, erstwhile Dixiecrat.

Not surprisingly, then, the *Brown* decision created a frisson of fulmination and activity on the part of South Carolina's political elite. As in other states, politicians proved willing to throw out the baby with the bathwater by endangering all of public education in order to prevent even token integration. Even prior to the decision, when the South Carolina component of *Brown* wound its way through the court system for its inevitable showdown with *Plessy*, State Senator L. Marion Gressette headed up a fifteen member committee in the legislature to address ways to confront the onslaught of integration that would be the first such body in the country. The formation of the Gressette Committee came after the legislature had already passed a series of "preparedness measures." These included authorizing local school authorities to lease public school facilities to private interests and placing hurdles before students who wanted to transfer from one school to another, thus giving local officials the ability to prevent black students from transferring to white schools. Gressette's group further engineered the passage of an amendment to the state constitution that took responsibility of providing free public schools from South Carolina. In November 1952 the state's white population passed the amendment by a greater than 2-to-1 majority. The black belt Low Country overwhelmingly supported the amendment. The counties in the Piedmont upcountry did not; five of them actually rejected the amendment, to no avail.[6]

---

[4] See Dewey Grantham, *The Democratic South*, (University of Georgia Press, 1963), p. 88; Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance*, p. 19.

[5] Robert Sherrill has a fascinating chapter, "An Interlude: God and Bob Jones University," in his book *Gothic Politics in the Deep South: Stars of the New Confederacy*, (New York, Grossman Publishers, 1968), 216-234. Long before it became part of the cultural lexicon in the 2000 election, Bob Jones U. served as a rallying place for fundamentalist conservatism in South Carolina.

After *Brown* things got worse. The state was one of the first to pass an interposition resolution.[7] By 1956 the legislature had passed laws to deny state funds to "any school from which, and for any school to which, any pupil may transfer pursuant to, or in consequence of, an order of any court."[8] The legislature further repealed mandatory attendance laws, eliminated tenure for teachers, and further handed almost all control to local authorities.[9] Segregation had been the coin of the realm in the Palmetto State for the duration of the twentieth century and particularly after the onset of World War II. Because the state had mobilized early, there was little need for the emergence of a wholly new policy or set of policies to respond to the new realities *Brown* had wrought.[10] This is especially true since South Carolina had provided much of the impetus for the emergence of the Dixiecrats in 1948, including the party's vigorous, virile presidential nominee, Governor Strom Thurmond.[11] The state's leadership thus spent most of the 1950s ensuring the continued adherence to Jim Crow by further codifying practice into law, tinkering with what worked rather than creating segregation anew.

---

[6] Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance*, p. 45.
[7] *Ibid.* p. 131.
[8] *Race Relations Law Reporter* I (February, 1956), 241, quoted in *Ibid.* pp. 76-77.
[9] Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance*, p. 77.

Oddly, and perhaps paradoxically, for all of the state's rigorous commitment to segregation, the emergence of hard-core segregationist organizations did not follow. When it came to organized resistance, the best historian of the reign of the Citizens' Council, Neil McMillen, has called South Carolina one of the "weak sisters of the Deep South."[12] Although the Citizens' Councils quickly established dominance among those groups that did emerge, the amount of organization paled when compared with their brethren to the south and west. Part of this can be explained by internal problems within the leadership of resistance groups. And the lack of more respectable groups was largely beside the point in South Carolina. The hard-core segregationists, hooded ku kluxers, and other night riders engaging in acts of sabotage and terrorism under the cover of night could step into those areas that the state itself had not addressed.[13] The state already had such a quotidian culture of resistance particularly among the salons in the state government that such organized groups became superfluous.[14] When the masses are already rallying there is little need for a pep squad.

---

[10] See Bryant Simon, "Race Reactions: African American Organizing, Liberalism, and White Working-Class Politics in Postwar South Carolina," pp. 239-259, *passim* in Dailey, *et. al. Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics From Civil War to Civil Rights*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Bryant reveals that there was a window of opportunity in the 1930s when black and white workers began to mobilize politically across racial lines, but the onset of war coupled with racial demagoguery brought the politics of racism back to the fore. Bryant's essay thus follows in the spirit and historiographical lineage of not one, but two of C. Vann Woodward's traditions – the first being that the South never had an inexorable path of racism and Jim Crow that it must follow, (which Woodward most famously made in *Origins of the New South* and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*) and secondly that uneasy alliances among poor and working-class whites and blacks often suffered failure as a consequence of racial demagoguery (for Woodward the case study came in his biography of Tom Watson). Appropriately, Woodward wrote the introduction for *Jumpin' Jim Crow* and the editors dedicated the collection to him. This was Woodward's last scholarly publication, and it came out after his 1999 death.

[11] On the Dixiecrat revolt see especially Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001) and Frederickson's essay in *Jumpin' Jim Crow*, " 'As a Man I am Interested in State's Rights': Gender, Race and the Family in the Dixiecrat Party, 1948-1950," pp. 260-274. See also Sherrill's chapter "Strom Thurmond: 1948 and All That," in *Gothic Politics in the Deep South*, pp. 235-254, *passim.*

[12] McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, p. 73. McMillen's observations on South Carolina are relatively brief but quite astute in explaining South Carolina's culture of resistance.

And rallying they were. But despite the rage, there was also an active civil rights movement going on in South Carolina. It was small, and with the attention thrust upon Greensboro and other locales, towns and cities such as Rock Hill encountered their own sit-in campaigns away from the glare of all but local media. In the 1940s a local group, South Carolina's Progressive Democratic Party, proved to be one of the most active and effective black political organizations in the region and it served as something of a precursor to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party of 1964.[15] Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the NAACP had small footholds in the state, and it was in Summerton, South Carolina, and not Topeka, Kansas where the Legal Defense Fund began cobbling together the series of cases that would culminate in *Brown v. Board*. By 1960, however, the students took control, engaging in sit-ins throughout the state, including in Orangeburg (where there was substantial violence from both white onlookers and overmatched police), Florence, Columbia, Denmark, Sumter, and most important for what would happen during the Freedom Rides, Rock Hill.[16]

---

[13] See, for example, Tim Tyson "Dynamite and the 'Silent South': A Story From the Second Reconstruction in South Carolina," in Dailey, *et. al. Jumpin' Jim Crow*, pp. 275-297, *passim*.

[14] McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 73-80, *passim*.

[15] Frederickson, " 'As a Man I am Interested in State's Rights': Gender, Race and the Family in the Dixiecrat Party, 1948-1950," p. 264.

“Confused Friends”: Rock Hill

South Carolina had followed the same historical pattern as most of the rest of the Southern states when it came to the imposition of racial stratification on interstate transport. The state did not require Jim Crow cars until 1898 and even then some observers thought the rules to be foolish. The Charleston *News and Courier*, for example, wrote, “[A]s we have got on fairly well for a third of a century, including a long period of reconstruction, we can probably get on just as well hereafter without it, and certainly so extreme a measure [as Jim Crow railroad cars] should not be adopted and enforced without added urgent cause.”[17]

South Carolinians found urgency in the cause of segregation, however, and by the middle of the twentieth century the Palmetto State had as tortuous a Jim Crow code as anyplace in the South. By the postwar period there were periodic challenges to the laws on streetcars, trains and buses, but these tests found even less recourse than did those in Virginia and North Carolina, where at least periodically the courts would provide a hint of the impending collapse of separate but equal through decisions chipping away at the doctrine. In what the radical journalist Stetson Kennedy called a “typical” case, 55 year old Negro school teacher Fannye Casanave of South Claiborne, South Carolina, was forcibly removed from a bus by police officers after she refused to move to the back. The police took her to jail in a paddy wagon despite the fact that she was sitting in the section reserved for black patrons. The bus driver had compressed the black section in order to provide more seating for whites. When Casanave refused to move the bus driver announced, "You're in the white section now. You're violating the law; so move, nigger!" before summoning the police.[18]

---

[16] See Southern Regional Council, “The Student Protest Movement, Winter 1960,” pp. xix-xxv, Mitchell Memorial Library, Cox Collection, Box X, #45.

[17] Quoted in Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*, p. 24.

By the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s individuals had lodged a number of complaints, often with the support of the NAACP and the Legal Defense Fund, against South Carolina airports, bus terminals, and rail stations protesting Jim Crow.[19] Thus when the Freedom Riders entered territory beyond which the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation had been willing to go when they crossed into South Carolina, they were not entering a state unfamiliar with challenges to the Jim Crow system of seating and service, though they did enter a state largely unaccustomed to successful challenges to the *status quo*.

Rock Hill, just twenty miles or so south of Charlotte and one of the few communities in the state that had experienced sustained sit-ins as part of the explosion of student activism in the previous year and a quarter, was the first stop in South Carolina. The community had an active group of CORE students who had begun a sit-in campaign on the eve of the first anniversary of the Greensboro sit-in. On January 31, 1961 ten protesters sat down at McCrory's segregated lunch counter. The connecting rod between the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides was CORE field secretary and Freedom Ride planner

---

[18] Kennedy, *Jim Crow Guide*, p. 178.

[19] See NAACP Papers, Group III Box A107, Folder: "General Office File: Discrimination – Airports" and Box A111, Folder: "General Office File: Discrimination, Transportation, General, 1960-1962." These folders contain a number of complaints about segregation and mistreatment in South Carolina and across the South, including at the Charleston and Greenville airports, and on buses in Charleston, Summerville, and Spartanburg.

Thomas Gaither. Gaither had led a student movement in Orangeburg a year earlier and moved on to Rock Hill to try to aid organization there. When Gaither sat in with nine black students from Friendship Junior College at the lunch counter it began a series of events that ratcheted tension to a near breaking point by the arrival of the Freedom Ride.

The presiding judge, Billie D. Hayes, seemed momentarily surprised when a police lieutenant testified that the students had been locked up "three to 15 seconds" after he had ordered them from the premises, but he nonetheless found the group guilty and sentenced them to thirty days of hard labor or a $100 fine. The fine would be $200 if they chose to go forward with an appeal.[20] Nine of the ten chose to serve jail time rather than pay a fine, marking perhaps the first "jail, no bail" tactic for the movement.[21] The group had decided to take this stance at a CORE workshop in Orangeburg the previous December. As Thomas Gaither recounted after his Rock Hill arrest, "the only thing they had to beat us over the head with was a threat of sending us to jail. So we disarmed them by using the only weapon we had left – jail without bail. It was the only practical thing we could do. It upset them quite a bit."[22]

Some of the youngsters' parents were not thrilled by some of the actions of their offspring, and many feared for the safety of their children on a southern road crew. Nonetheless most of the parents came around when they saw the commitment of the group. John Gaines, one of the protesters, recalled that his grandparents, with whom he lived, approached their grandson's activism with trepidation. His grandmother told him that he was being disobedient when he said that he had to go to jail. "But once I got locked up, she was quite changed. She came to the jail and asked me if I was all right, or needed anything." His great grandmother was still mystified when, after trying to bring $200 bail money for Gaines' release, her great-grandson refused the money. She was afraid that the authorities would work him too hard and that he would be unable to handle it. He puzzled her by responding that "it was a privilege for a Negro to go to jail for his rights." As another student concluded, "If requesting first-class citizenship in the South is to be regarded as a crime, then I will gladly go back to jail again. The whole thing has just strengthened my conviction that human suffering can assist social change."[23]

---

[20] "Excerpts from Ted Poston's (*New York Post*) Interview With Rock Hill Students," CORE mailing, Segregation and Integration, Miscellaneous Collection, Acc. # 131, Folder 3, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

[21] Rhoda Lois Blumberg, *Civil Rights: The 1960s Freedom Struggle*, (New York: Twain Publishers, 1991) p. 79.

[22] "Excerpts from Ted Poston's (*New York Post*) Interview With Rock Hill Students," CORE mailing, Segregation and Integration, Miscellaneous Collection, Acc. # 131, Folder 3, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

Rock Hill then became a focal point of SNCC strategy. The students picked up the Rock Hill protest from CORE, revealing the sometimes uneasy but inevitable link between competing civil rights organizations. At a February meeting, the small group of students in attendance unanimously chose to support the Rock Hill group, and they dispatched four activists to travel to Rock Hill and attempt to join those in jail. The names of the four who arrived in South Carolina that February read like an honor roll of the student protest movement. Diane Nash, one of Freedom Rider John Lewis' colleagues in the Nashville Movement, Charles Jones of nearby Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, Ruby Doris Smith of Spelman College, and Virginia Union's Charles Sherrod all descended upon Rock Hill to fulfill SNCC executive secretary Ed King's admonition to join their jailed colleagues in sit ins and in the jails. "Only by this type of action can we show that the non-violent movement against segregation is not a local issue for just the individual community, but rather a united movement of all those who believe in equality."[24] This would not be the last time this group of activists, particularly Diane Nash, would synchronize with the Freedom Riders.

---

[23] Quoted in *Ibid*.

The Rock Hill movement largely failed when the arrival and subsequent arrest of the four newcomers did not signal the start of a great student awakening in Rock Hill in 1961 and the city's officials refused to yield to the protests. However, as the historian Clayborne Carson has argued, Rock Hill did reveal "the willingness of activists associated with SNCC to become involved whenever a confrontation with segregationist forces developed." It further "contributed to the process of building a sense of group identity among militant students."[25] This would prove especially important in the weeks to come on the Freedom Rides when student activists would provide a front line phalanx for the continuing struggle. Numan Bartley has gone so far as to argue that the Freedom Rides "provided SNCC with a mission."[26] John Lewis has similarly argued that SNCC demonstrated that it "was organized and aggressive enough to" pull together activists from different protest sites to work together at a flashpoint.[27]

Lewis also noted that the student protest "had the effect of angering the citizens of Rock Hill."[28] This unintended consequence revealed itself on May 9 when the first busload of Freedom Riders debarked from bus at the Greyhound station that afternoon. As Joe Perkins dealt with the legal pillar of segregation in Charlotte, John Lewis and others discovered its twin pillar, the threat of violence, in Rock Hill.

---

[24] Quoted in Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 32.
[25] *Ibid.* p. 32. Rhoda Blumberg and Meier and Rudwick also argue that the Rock Hill sit-ins, though aborted, represented an important moment in providing a model and example for the student struggle.
[26] Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995) p. 306.
[27] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 142.
[28] *Ibid. p. 142.*

Unbeknownst to the Freedom Riders, a third pillar, federal government inaction, was also at work in Washington. On the morning of the arrival in Rock Hill, scant days after Robert Kennedy had made a seemingly unambiguous statement of support for civil rights at the University of Georgia Law School, Presidential Press Secretary Pierre Salinger announced that the administration was backing off from legislative action on the putative Democratic agenda of civil rights. Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver also announced that the President had promised not to use federal force to enforce integration in Georgia.[29] This outraged vigilant civil rights activists, who denounced the President's seeming capriciousness on the issue of civil rights. Roy Wilkins claimed that the President's actions in making such deals amounted to "an offering of a cactus bouquet" to the movement.[30]

None of this had much effect on the Freedom Riders on May 9th. Their concerns were more imminent than government waffling and backroom maneuvering. Upon their arrival, Lewis and the others knew the group was in trouble almost immediately. Local papers had announced the arrival of "CORE tourers" engaged in a "mobile sit-in."[31] The phrase "Freedom Riders" had not yet entered the popular lexicon. Hank Thomas recalls hearing someone announce "here come the niggers."[32]

Lewis walked with Albert Bigelow toward the white waiting room where they ran into young white men pulled directly from central casting. Several of them were recognizable to locals as having recently participated in violence against civil rights activists in Rock Hill.[33] They congregated around the pinball machines and leaned in the doorway, drawing on cigarettes and carrying the insouciant bearing of the aimlessly arrogant. Two of the young men stood guardian over the doorway to the waiting room. Both wore leather jackets and ducktail haircuts. One spoke up as Lewis tried to pass. Pointing to a door with the "colored" sign designating the mandates of Jim Crow, he snarled something to the effect of "other side, nigger."[34]

---

[29] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, pp. 414-415.
[30] Quoted in *ibid*. p. 415.
[31] Rock Hill, SC, *Evening Herald*, May 5, 1961 (first quotation), May 8, 1961 (second quotation). *The Charlotte Observer* had also announced the arrival of the group in Charlotte and in a small article on May 5 the newspaper covered the plans for the group's mass meeting in Rock Hill
[32] Quoted in *The Times-Picayune*, (New Orleans), April 7, 2001.

Perhaps as a result of his extensive experience and training in the practice of nonviolent, direct-action protest, Lewis was not afraid or nervous. He responded almost by rote with the justification the group had prepped up in Washington. "I have a right to go here on the grounds of the Supreme Court decision in the *Boynton* case."[35] Despite (or perhaps because of) what James Farmer called Lewis' "ministerial dignity," the young men were not impressed.[36] "Shit on that," one of them replied.[37]

A group of ruffians descended upon Lewis. One of the young men punched Lewis in the side of the head. Another blow struck him square in the face. Before he knew it he had fallen and hard kicks were raining his sides as the taste of blood filled his mouth. At this point, Freedom Rider Albert Bigelow stepped in between the prostrate Lewis and his assailants. The sight of the big, white, ex-navy captain caused the scene to freeze momentarily as the thugs sized up this potential thorn in their sides. Apparently the fact that Bigelow did not look prepared to fight them emboldened the attackers and they began punching Bigelow. They must have been glad that the older man did not fight back, because it took several of their punches to fell him to one knee.

---

[33] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, pp. 118-119. Peck, *CORElator* article, May 1961, p. 2.

[34] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 142. Jim Farmer asserts that the young tough said "Get to the other side, boy, where the niggers go." *Lay Bare the Heart*, p. 199.

[35] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 142. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, p. 199.

[36] Quoted in Forman, *Lay Bare the Heart,* p. 199.

[37] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* p. 142.

Bigelow, who was a strong advocate of the Quaker belief that "there is God in every man," recounted his experience in the bus station assault at a mass meeting later that night. "I think people like" the ones who attacked him in the station "are confused friends." During the beating "I tasted a little this afternoon of what Gandhi called the sweetness of the opponent's violence."[38] Even as his attackers hit him and brought him to one knee he attempted to discuss the matter with the most aggressive of the men. He told Moses Newson of the Baltimore *Afro-American,* "If this man . . . has that of God in him, there must be some way that I can reach it. I've got to understand that the truth as he sees it is just as real to him as my truth is to me. I tried to surprise him with moral justice." Ultimately he wanted to tell his attacker "I understand why you acted as you did but I think we might reach a better understanding to each other by thinking about it. I'd like to enlarge his horizon." Giving it though for a second, Bergman conceded, "under the circumstances, maybe this was not the time to reason with him." But at the same time he truly believed "they will only understand direct-action," which he understood to be the responsibility "to do something you have a right to do, irrespective of the results."[39]

Meanwhile, as Bergman attempted futilely to engage with the rabble, white Freedom Rider Genevieve Hughes became embroiled in the confrontation. As she approached the mass of bodies in an attempt to step in between them and forestall more attacks on her peers, the surging whites knocked Hughes down. This seemed to draw chivalrous reactions from a nearby police officer who, up until that point, had merely been watching the events before him. He began separating the aggressors from their passive victims and said something to the effect of, “All right boys. Y’all have done about enough now. Get on home.”[40] Howard University student Hank Thomas, who was next in line to receive a beating, today recalls, “I didn’t relish it. But we were supposed to act nonchalant, like this doesn’t disturb me. That’s the image we were projecting – my mind is fixed on what I’m supposed to do. The most difficult thing to do is to appear unafraid when you are scared to death.”[41]

---

[38] Quoted in Baltimore *Afro-American*, May 13, 1961.

[39] Quoted in *ibid*.

Almost immediately more police arrived. One officer sympathetically asked if Lewis, Bigelow and Hughes wanted to press charges. By this point Lewis was wobbly but back on his feet, feeling sharp pain above his eyes and on his ribs. He later noted wryly, “my lower lip was bleeding pretty heavily. I’ve always had very sensitive lips. They bleed easily.”[42] Following their Gandhian dictates, the group refused to press charges. Bigelow told the officer, “We don’t think that’s the way to settle these things.”[43] This seemed to leave the officer nonplused. Here he was, having made an offer to help the group bring charges against white men who had visited violence upon them in the name of Jim Crow, and they left him out to dry by refusing what Taylor Branch has called “his politically risky offer.”[44] As Lewis later justified their actions:

> Our struggle was not against one person or against a small group of people like those who attacked us that morning. The struggle was against a *system*, the system that helped produce people like that. We didn’t see these young guys that attacked us that day as the problem. We saw them as victims. The problem was much bigger,

---

[40] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 142. Farmer’s account of the officer’s words differs slightly, albeit inconsequentially.

[41] Quoted in *The Times-Picayune*, (New Orleans), April 7, 2001.

[42] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 143.

[43] Quoted in Rock Hill *Evening Herald*, May 10, 1961.

[44] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 416.

> and to focus on these individuals would be nothing more than a distraction, a sideshow that would draw attention away from where it belonged, which in this case was the sanctioned system of segregation in the entire South.[45]

After refusing to press charges, the Riders entered the “white” waiting room and received service. Members of the group attended to Lewis’ wounds, applying bandages and attempting to reduce the swelling on his face. A few hours later, when a Trailways bus pulled up to the Oakland Avenue bus terminal that served all non-Greyhound buses, the second, later-arriving group of Freedom Riders, which had missed all of the earlier drama, saw that some of the hoodlums were still gathered in cars. They did not attack the second group, but instead followed them a few blocks as they headed toward Friendship Junior College, the locus of the Rock Hill protests a few months earlier. When they arrived, they saw that the Trailways terminal was locked up and vacant, the result of the company’s response to the Friendship student sit-ins. The next day, after the Freedom Riders had attended mass meetings at the college, the Trailways “white” waiting room was reopened. A group went in and successfully tested the facility. Another group did the same at the Greyhound station. There was no revival of the previous day’s violence.[46] The Freedom Riders had won the Battle of Rock Hill through nonviolent action even though they had suffered the only casualties.

At first it was a relatively hidden battle. The May 10 Rock Hill *Evening Herald* announced in a tiny article at the bottom of page one that no incidents had been reported as the group left bound for points South.[47] However a longer article inside the paper reported that the "bi-racial tourists" announced at a mass meeting in Rock Hill's New Mt. Olivet AME Zion Church the night before that they were unable to use the facilities because "a welcoming committee of hoodlums" had attacked them.[48] In an article in *The Charlotte Observer,* witnesses confirmed the "bus riders' claim."[49]

---

[45] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 143.

[46] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, pp. 118-119. Peck, *CORElator* article, May 1961, p. 2.

[47] Rock Hill *Evening Herald*, May 10, 1961, p.1.

That night the group met with another warm reception. The audience wanted to hear from the newest heroes in the freedom struggle. CORE leader, trip organizer and Rider James Farmer and his Freedom Rider colleague reverend Elton Cox spoke that night. Though still a young man, Cox had established himself as quite a powerful orator who, in Farmer's words, "Brought the 'amens' rising to a crescendo throughout his talks."[50] Moses Newson of the *Afro-American* observed that Cox was, "A natural for this role" of public speaker and "the rostrum would not be the same without him."[51] As a consequence of his impressive speaking style, he had earned the nickname "Beltin' Elton."

Events in Rock Hill began to change the historical status of this little band of bus riders. Violence seemed to have accomplished what a series of letters to a whole range of local, state and national officials as well as to an array of media outlets had not: it drew attention. It garnered press. It raised awareness. In short, the beatings in Rock Hill brought the Freedom Rides to the national stage, where it would play a run that would last several months, and the effects of which would go down in history.

Of course the Rock Hill incident was still relatively minor. The national news media would focus in the next day's papers on Alan Shepherd's orbiting of the Earth in

---

[48] Quoted in *ibid.* in an article inside the newspaper.
[49] *The Charlotte Observer*, May 10, 1961.
[50] Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, pp. 199-200.
[51] Baltimore *Afro-American,* May 13, 1961.

NASA's first manned rocket, another step in the ongoing phase to put a man on the moon. The space program had captured the imagination of Americans and made them reconsider the possible. So too would the Freedom Riders challenge possibility and in so doing inspire Americans in a different, albeit earthbound, way.

"This might be my last day": Winnsboro

On May 10 the Freedom Riders reunited with Joe Perkins after his acquittal for staging a "shoe in" at a shoeshine stand on may 8 in Charlotte. After his bus pulled into Rock Hill, several of the Freedom Riders stepped onto the bus Perkins had taken to meet them, which was bound for points south, to continue the trip. In Charlotte, Recorder's Court Judge Howard B. Arbuckle had asked three questions pertinent to Perkins' case: Was the barber shop part of the bus station, which dealt in interstate commerce? Was Perkins engaged in interstate commerce? Was Perkins refused service strictly because of his race? To all three questions, the judge answered in the affirmative. Perkins' lawyer Thomas Wyche had challenged the arrest on Constitutional grounds. Invoking the *Boynton* decision, Wyche asked Arbuckle to decide upon the question that the court had not decided in *Boynton*, namely whether the state could be prevented from using its police powers to enforce private discrimination. Despite the testimony of Grady N. Williams, the shop's assistant manager, who testified that the shoeshine boy at the stand told Perkins "we don't wait on colored people in the barber shop," Arbuckle punted. He decided that there was not enough evidence to convict Perkins of trespassing.[52]

---

[52] *The Charlotte Observer*, May 11, 1961.

That was a victory of sorts for Perkins and the Freedom Ride. Perkins left Charlotte that afternoon with Ed Blankenheim, who had accompanied the accused for support and in keeping with the Freedom Ride policy of making sure that anyone who was arrested or otherwise in trouble had someone with them for whatever help they may have been able to provide. The two met up with the Freedom Ride in Rock Hill several hours after the big events of the day. Perkins' arrest had marked the first casualty of the Ride and he was welcomed back to the group with a warm, inquisitive reception

In the meantime, John Lewis was confronted with a dilemma as the Freedom Ride moved on from Rock Hill. After students at Friendship College found a medical kit and put band aids over Lewis' eyes, he prepared to continue the journey rather than check into a local hospital. He was sore, but committed to the mission they had set for themselves. Bigelow concurred. Upon Lewis' arrival at Friendship, however, he received an unexpected telegram. It came from the American Friends Service Committee, who'd tracked him down by making calls to Nashville. He had almost forgotten, but he had applied for a foreign-service project in Africa through them. The telegram informed Lewis that he was a finalist for the two-year fellowship. He would have to leave immediately for an interview in Philadelphia, using a money order that the Quakers had sent with his telegram.

He had to decide quickly. The interview process would take three days. He would be able to rejoin the Freedom Ride on Mother's Day, May 14th, so most of the journey would still lie ahead of the group. Given that he relished the opportunity to work in South East Africa and that he would be able to rejoin the trip soon, he decided to go ahead with the interview.[53] The next morning, after what Taylor Branch has called "soldierly farewells," a Friendship student reversed Lewis' course, taking him back to Charlotte to the airport where an Eastern Airlines flight would shuttle him to Philadelphia.[54]

His interview went well. He also had to have a physical, which he passed, although the doctors had questions about the cuts and bruises. At the end of his interview he received the news. He had been accepted for the program, but he would not be going to Africa. Instead he had been assigned to India. The program would begin at the end of that summer. Although he was initially disappointed not to be going to Africa, he realized that there was a certain symmetry to his being sent to Africa, home not only of Gandhi's non-violent resistance, but also a place where Lewis' mentor Jim Lawson had lived and worked after winning the same fellowship in 1954. He accepted the assignment and headed down to Nashville en route to rejoin the Freedom Ride in Alabama.[55] He had missed epochal events.

In the interim there had been a great deal more excitement, starting in Chester, a brief stopover between Rock Hill and their next destination, Sumter. As a result of the brouhaha in Rock Hill the day before, the doors of the waiting room in Chester had been hastily festooned with "closed" signs. The group had intended to eat lunch at this stop, but instead they continued on, making an impromptu respite in Winnsboro, which Jim

---

[53] He had hoped to work in what is now Tanzania. See Lewis' recollection in Hampton and Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom*, p. 77.

[54] Lewis, *Walking With the Wind,* pp. 143-144.

[55] *Ibid.* p. 144. Quotation from Branch, *Parting the Waters,* p. 416.

Peck called "an ultrasegregationist little town." The events in Winnsboro "happened so quickly," according to Peck, "it seemed like a film being rolled too fast."[56]

Upon leaving the bus, Peck followed Henry Thomas to the white lunchroom where they both sat at the counter. A waitress told Thomas to "go around to the other side."[57] Almost immediately after Thomas refused, the restaurant proprietor rushed off to call the police, who arrived within minutes. One of the officers stepped up to Thomas and told him "Come with me, boy!"[58] This marked the first arrest for sitting in at a terminal lunch counter on the Freedom Ride. When Peck tried to intervene, he too was placed under arrest. It all happened so quickly that the rest of the riders did not immediately react. However Frances Bergman, the designated observer of the day's attempt, "got off the bus and faced the hate filled town alone" in order to find out what was to happen to Thomas and Peck.[59] At one point she was told "to get out of town" after inquiring about the arrests.[60] She forged on nonetheless.

In jail the two were separated. They were not allowed to communicate with one another while they waited several hours to find out the charges against them. The arresting officers were not even sure about whether to post charges, and if so, what charges to make against the civil rights activists. The officer who initially took Thomas into custody wanted to throw the book at the two right away. The officer who drove them to jail, however, thought it best to wait until they consulted with the police chief. The driver prevailed. The Winnsboro police eventually levied a trespassing charge against

---

[56] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, p. 121. Peck, *Corelator* article, p. 2. In the article Peck describes Winnsboro as being "as ultra-segregationist as Alabama."

[57] Baltimore *Afro-American*, May 13, 1961.

[58] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, p. 121. Peck, *Corelator* article, p. 2.

[59] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, p. 121. Peck, *Corelator* article, p. 2.

[60] Baltimore *Afro-American*, May 13, 1961.

Thomas and booked Peck for disorderly conduct and interfering with arrest. They were initially held on $100 bond each for trial the next day, though Winnsboro police and Fairfield County's sheriff's office denied that any arrests had taken place.[61] In keeping with the 'Jail-no bail" policy of their Rock Hill cohort, the two refused to post bond. The police had also discovered the small bottle of liquor that Peck had recently purchased in Charlotte. They charged him with violating an obscure and little-enforced prohibition against possessing an open container of alcohol not possessing required South Carolina tax stamps.[62] Apparently local officials had realized that recent Supreme Court dictates would cause their case too much difficulty and so they dropped all but Peck's charges for the tax stamp violation.[63]

The circumstances of their releases, however, differed considerably. Perhaps in an effort to scare him, the police released Thomas in the dead of night. Segregationists in car and on foot still patrolled the town. Thomas was a little concerned by his release and the circumstances surrounding it. He would later recall how, "All those old movies I had seen about blacks being taken out of southern jails in the middle of the night, they began to come back to me."[64] When Thomas asked the police where they were going, one responded something to the effect of "well, you wanted to go to the bus station to get out of town, didn't you? So we're taking you there."[65] It was too late for him to catch a bus, and the station was about to close upon his arrival. Gangs of surly white men were assembled at the bus station when he returned there, many more than should have been at a bus station nearing closing time and with no buses set to arrive or depart late at night. Thomas recalled the situation he confronted many years later. "In front of the bus station was a crowd of good ol' boys and I was supposed to be the entertainment for the night. The police took off. I didn't see any guns, but they had sticks and baseball bats. That's when the moment of truth hit me: this might be my last day." [66] When he showed reluctance to get out of the cruiser, one of the cops tapped his gun, as is to tell Thomas he had no say in the matter.[67] Apparently the law and the lawless had brokered a deal in which Thomas would be given up to send a message to those who would mount a challenge to Jim Crow in Winnsboro. Thomas somehow managed to collect himself, and with the crowd watching in disbelief, he walked back to the waiting room that had been the scene of his previous transgression and he purchased a candy bar. He explained to Moses Newson, "There was a great deal of pride in it. When I got out of that car everybody was watching to see which way I would go."[68]

---

[61] *Charlotte Observer*, May 11, 1961.
[62] Baltimore *Afro-American*, May 13, 1961. *Charlotte Observer*, May 12, 1961.
[63] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, p. 121-122. Peck, *Corelator* article, p. 2.
[64] Quoted in *The Times-Picayune*, (New Orleans), April 7, 2001. Thomas mistakenly conflates the incident in Rock Hill and the incident in Winnsboro. Nonetheless there is no reason to doubt the basic contours of his recollections, which jibe with the writings and memories of Jim Peck.
[65] Quoted in Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 257. Halberstam too places the incident in Rock Hill, among his many errors of fact and interpretation. I use Halberstam only as a source for quotations from participants whom he interviewed.

Fortunately for Thomas he had something of a guardian angel watching over him in the form of a local black minister who had been following him since his arrest at the behest of CORE. Almost as soon as the police left Thomas to his fate at the bus station, the minister pulled up and told Thomas to get in the car. "He didn't have to tell me twice. That brave man – Rev. Ivey – he was the only thing that saved me. We hightailed it out of there. We expected gunshots any second, but they didn't come. He told me to stay down. I did."[69] Ivey, who was active in local civil rights circles, got Thomas to Sumter unscathed and relieved. Thus was a potential disaster averted, as the situation had all of the makings of a Deep South lynching under cover of darkness and with the tacit consent of local authorities.

---

[66] Quoted in *The Times-Picayune*, (New Orleans), April 7, 2001.
[67] Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 257.
[68] Quoted in Baltimore *Afro-American*, May 13, 1961.

Peck's release was less harrowing. Although one of the segregationists had parked his car so that his lights shone directly into Peck's cell, the white activist did not run the gantlet that Thomas had faced. Police kept him in custody until dawn, at which point a car load of people, including Farmer, Jim McCain, and Attorney Ernest A. Finney Jr. drove over from McCain's Sumter home to pick him up and post the $100 bond for his liquor violation. His case was never heard in the magistrate's court. Meanwhile Thomas had arrived at McCain's house earlier, and so when Peck returned the two men shared a meaningful handshake.[70]

After these frightening incidents the group was relieved to take a scheduled day off in Sumter on May 11. The entire group, minus John Lewis, was finally together again, at Morris Brown College, where they were quartered during their layover. Morris Brown was a historically black college. Attempts to integrate the Sumter station did not materialize because of the chaos that had dispersed the group and made a test risky and logistically difficult. Although most of the events had slipped under the national radar, the Freedom Ride had proven the catalyst for volatile reaction that its participants had expected in Washington. On Friday, May 12 the group boarded buses headed for Georgia. Their solemn moods matched the realization of how much had changed since the relatively easy days in Virginia less than a week earlier. They were now in the Deep South.

---

[69] Quoted in *The Times-Picayune*, (New Orleans), April 7, 2001.

[70] Peck, *Freedom Ride*, p. 123.