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## The Bus Murals of Anniston: Teaching the Freedom Riders History

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## The Bus Murals of Anniston:

### Teaching the Freedom Riders History

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Presentation for ACETA Conference March 9, 2013 held at Samford and the Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, Alabama.

[Many developments have transpired since the presentation of this paper. President Obama designated the Anniston locales the National Historic Site status in January 2017. In conjunction with the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May 2021, several community events were held, and JSU produced a video that aired on APTV. These remarks and the accompanying slide show are preserved here as a record of a preliminary status of the commemorative site and as a call to action for using local resources to teach issues of social justice.]

PBS's American Experience makes available in streaming format its documentary of ***Freedom Riders***. It premiered on air mid-May 2011 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the original journey. With instant web access to the film and with a more detailed photographic slide show of the information panels on Anniston's Bus Murals, I seek to bring my students to an awareness of ways that history, especially the

history of the violence that met the Freedom Riders outside Anniston, deserves revisiting in today's times. The events of Mother's Day, 1961 are important in this context: Students attending Jacksonville State University become exposed to the manner in which depicting events of a half century ago has turned into a recommitment to an unfinished agenda. They see the effort it has taken to confront a contentious past and become empowered to use their own knowledge of racial antagonisms as a vehicle for bridging cultures.

My initial target audience is Freshman Composition, where I normally teach the second level of the course, stressing literature modes of poetry, drama, fiction. I have long had a research project that allows for students to write on one of the pressing social issues--being ethnic in America, the need to be stewards of our environment, the ways we end gender bias, difficulties with our technological world. However, "issues" per se do not enter into the larger class discussion. Rather, I tailor suggestions to particular students and suggest some basic resources in order for students to elect individualized topics for an "I-Search" project. However, the best projects arise from a combination of inspiration and exposure to important models. Thus, from now on, I will explain to students how I learned more about my topic in preparing for my audience today, undertaking further research to accompany my photographs from my first visits to the finished murals. My own "I Search" exploration will demonstrate the imperative of a community confronting its past and show how the city of Anniston turned a hate crime incident into a force for positive change, even as leaders recognized that to broadcast their integrationist intentions publicly was dangerous. Students from the

area know that the problems of Anniston as a post-racial city are by no means solved. Yet the commitment to the project that initiated the bus murals and the organizing work that has planned a phase two of the project, to develop a Freedom Riders Park at the site just outside of town on Route 202 where the bus burning took place can function as an important revitalizing effort.

In my Freshman Composition class, I guide my students to forge a persuasive remedy to situations they see around them. They work with poetry by Langston Hughes, Lucille Clifton, Maya Angelou, and Dudley Randall; I direct them to the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance website. Their primary purpose is to address a problem they have encountered in their own life experience and to use the research about an issue to propose a remedy, a policy change, or an educational imperative. Even though their goal is to develop expertise in traditional print sources through library database access, to carefully document credit where it is due, I find that a visual resource as a starting point demonstrates a situation, or the history of a problem. I will show the current state of the bus murals as public display of historical significance much closer to JSU, one that we can hope begins to mold our citizens of tomorrow.

Tucked into one rather sizeable alley-- with the dumpster for the Classic on Noble Restaurant at a slight distance, at the precise location where the Bus pulled into the Greyhound station --is the principal mural, Gurney Avenue, one block west of Noble, just south of 11th street. Especially impressive are the detailed panels of text and photographs that provide a rich history of that May 14, and the days and years beyond.

Adults who have spent time in the environs of the Anniston press know that *The Anniston Star* has taken a lead in addressing issues, including the sponsorship of scholarships that were deemed by the courts unfair because they gave preferences to minority students. Under the editorship of Brandt Ayers, the paper has studied and proposed a solution to the re-segregation of the city schools, using Richmond, Virginia as model and suggesting a wide area school district. Thus, I think it unfortunate that the only depiction of Ayers' position in the Freedom Riders documentary is in his passionate quotation of the white separatist attitude. From the transcript:

**Brandt Ayers, Journalist** It was a very disconcerting period. It was as if one civilization was just coming unhinged and was free-floating and taking on water. That was that feeling. People in the South felt, 'I'm being asked to live in a different way, I'm asked to have different attitudes, I'm asked to *behave* differently. And as I'm being made to do all of these things, there are people who come on the TV in my own living room and tell me that I'm a redneck, and I'm a racist, and I'm all of these things -- and by God, I'd like to, I'd just like to punch some of those- them damn agitators right in the face! I gotta hate somebody. I got to hate somebody.'

The premiere of the documentary was much hyped in our area, with a suggestion that "never before published" images would be shown. Yes, there is color (or colorized) film footage of flames pouring out of the bus. But I was most taken by the account of Janie Forsyth McKinney, then a twelve-year-old who instinctively gave water to the distressed passengers. (Her account in the transcript is powerful; yet her

presence on the Oprah show is even more powerful. In her typical style, Oprah stages a "reunion" between Janie Forsyth McKinney and Hank Thomas. We learn that the KKK held serious discussions about whether and how to punish the young twelve-year-old and her family and that they decided to excuse her for her ignorance of the rules separating the races. Nevertheless, she and her family felt forced to move from the area.)

I had yet to view the Oprah footage, but Janie Forsyth McKinney's account in the PBS film stayed with me. For, when Anniston painter John Will Davis (recently deceased) explained to me that he was only two at the time and his father was not one to enter into a contentious situation, he must have sensed my empathy as I choked up recalling what I knew of the incident from the documentary, that a young white woman who had assisted the victims of the bus incident by bringing them water was essentially forced to leave her home town and take up residence in a new locale. John Davis had become a self-taught painter; he has many famous paintings to his credit. I was pulled to his display of his rendition of Anniston's burning Greyhound bus, shown from the opposite side of the street with respect to the archival photographs. He was signing purchases of his print at the Anniston Museum's craft show last November (2012), He spoke with enthusiasm of the "city within a city" murals project. Sadly, he, died of a heart condition last December shortly before that composite heritage mural was dedicated on West 15th Street.

Much is made in the bus murals of the bravery of the photographer Joe Postiglione, whose photos captured attention world -wide. Presbyterian minister Phil

Noble has called the burning bus photo the most infamous portrait of Anniston. The photo is the cover of Arsenault's massive study of the Freedom Riders that is the principal source for PBS's film. It also makes the cover of the study of two freedom riders, one black, one white, by Ann Bausum, an account prepared for young adults and published by *National Geographic*. The "Burning Bus Photo" is featured in the glossy pages of McWhorter's Pulitzer Prize account, *Carry Me Home*. Indeed, I found it chilling that, when the *Washington Post* covered the fiftieth anniversary with a slide show that included a photo of Muralist Joseph Giri with the Greyhound mural this posted comment from the photographer's son:

From the Washington Post Slide show:

pastalioni

5/9/2011 7:19 AM CDT

I am John Postiglione. My father [took] these photos of bus burning -- 64 total. The KKK came after my family to the point that we had to be protected by the F.B.I. I was spit on called N lover. We had death threats, cars destroyed, and I saw my father hanged in effigy at a KKK meeting as I drove by. It was a hard time for black people, but equally as hard for me. My younger sister Valentyna had to be escorted to school by the F.B.I. One of the leaders of the KKK told my father and younger sister that they were going to murder one of our family members. To verify my comments, you can contact the B.C.R.I. [Birmingham Civil Rights Institute] and ask Wayne Coleman the head of archives. John Postiglione.

Indeed, Postiglione's oral interview, housed at the Civil Rights Institute, is listed as a key credit for the visual and text insets of the murals, and a close study of all the photos at the site shows how important the visual documentary record is. Ironically, the photos disappeared until the law offices of the law firm representing one of the attackers cleared out their offices in 2005. That law firm (Merrill, Merrill Matthews & Allen) donated the photos to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

(An alternate photograph can be seen at a lesson for students from the Teaching Tolerance site. Credited to "Bettmann, CORBIS," this photo shows two male and one female black riders on the ground in the foreground, the bus frame with smoke extinguished and two white males and a black male standing between the bus frame and the foreground shot.)

What came after Anniston, after the second bus, the Trailways bus, was met with an angry mob in Birmingham and Bull Connor had arrangements with his police force to let the KKK beat everybody for at least fifteen minutes magnified the scrutiny paid by an inattentive nation? In *Carry Me Home*, Diane McWhorter's account of the events in Birmingham later that day stresses that cameramen in Birmingham quickly learned the routine: either voluntarily open up the camera, forfeiting or exposing the film, or risk the camera being smashed. Despite these tactics, CBS reporter Howard K. Smith managed to get a remarkable story out. The pictures spread, including one of the burning bus in a Russian paper. (The Freedom Riders documentary explains that the Kennedy administration was particularly irked that overseas relations were threatened



because the incident provoked "Shame on America!" rebukes, just when international cold war politics were hopeful of a thaw.)

The press's attention, the photographs of the bus and the beaten riders prompted waves of new recruits to sign up. Though some came from as far away as California, young students from colleges in Nashville, especially Fiske University, comprised the largest portion of the second wave of Freedom Riders. The Kennedys, as the film explains, tasked Justice Department lawyer John Sighthaler to develop a response. He knew, once he heard from Fisk organizer Diane Nash, that all who had signed up and also written their wills, that this was turning into a movement. Sighthaler himself was knocked unconscious in Montgomery. Tense communication between the Kennedys and Governor Patterson finally resulted in Patterson's command to disperse the angry mob that had trapped Freedom Riders and their supporters inside Montgomery's First Baptist Church. But it was clear, according to Arsenault, that the working relationship between states right southern governor and the Federal administration was permanently severed. Eventually it was worked out that Freedom Riders stranded in Montgomery would get police escort to leave the state. Mississippi's governor offered a "non-violent" solution, but it included, for most who poured into Jackson's bus terminals, months of incarceration at the infamous Parchman Prison. Courts were favorable to upholding the rights of the integrationists and by the fall of 1961, the Justice Department ordered an enforcement decree and the Supreme Court overturned convictions.

Anniston leaders formed a bi-racial committee to work behind the scenes.

Violence broke out later, most notably on the very same September 1963 Sunday of the 15th Street Baptist Church bombings, when shots were fired into the car of two black leaders attempting to quietly and peacefully integrate the Library.

I am still learning. I had no knowledge before I committed to work on this project that Irene Morgan was the first Rosa Parks, that the Supreme Court case she won, *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) inspired a first freedom ride and that its organizer James Farmer, as director of Congress of Racial Equality, was on the 1961 ride until the Atlanta stop, when he had to leave the ride due to the death of his father.

Certainly, the depiction of the smoke, the passenger overtaken, even the flames from the bus depicted in John Will Davis's color print are all powerful. But now we can see history in a new context, for the Greyhound mural is framed at the top by the large print heading, "Could YOU get on the bus?" That question pulls us in. It asks if we have the commitment today to confront today's issues. Could we speak up on behalf of another? Could we integrate a self-segregated dining hall? Could we point out that a private remark tinged by racism is just wrong? Could we protest the unconstitutional aspects of a sever immigration law? Or March against Voting Rights restrictions? Could we get on that bus?

Anniston knows it has more to accomplish. A proposal to expand the commemorative history is awaiting full funding. In the past weeks, we've seen progress

move forward: a statue of Rosa Parks was unveiled at the U.S. Capitol. The current chief of Police in Montgomery issued a formal apology to John L. Lewis, and gave him his officer's badge.

Not every student in my class elects the ethnic issues option. Those that do will have very different targeted goals than to rediscover the struggles and triumphs of the Freedom Riders. Yet students who see how learning about the past can be transformative will find their own commitments, and with personal commitment they find empowering ways to convey their own discoveries.

## The "Burning Bus" Murals of Anniston: Teaching the Freedom Riders History.

Joanne E. Gates

Professor in English, Jacksonville State University

### **Resources**

Notes: Only Active Sites as of June 2021 are direct linked.

An inactive site's address is retained for documentation purposes.

#### **ONE:** Print sources

Armstrong, Thomas M., and Natalie R. Bell. *Autobiography of a Freedom Rider: My Life as a Foot Soldier for Civil Rights*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2011.

Arsenault, Raymond. *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Bausum, Ann. *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement*. Forewords by Freedom Riders Congressman John Lewis and Jim Zwerg]. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006. [Call number: E 185.96 .B355 2006]

"Democracy in Action: A Study Guide to Accompany the Film, Freedom Riders." Study Guide to accompany the PBS documentary. PDF pamphlet. Web. 19 Feb. 2013. <<http://freedomriders.facinghistory.org/content/democracy-action-study-guide-accompany-film-freedom-riders>>.

Etheridge, Eric. *Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders*. Preface by Roger Wilkins; foreword by Diane McWhorter. New York: Atlas & Co., 2008.

"Freedom Riders Park." Prospectus at JSU's Environmental Policy and Information Center (EPIC). Web. 4 Feb. 2004. <[http://www.jsu.edu/epic/freedom\\_riders\\_park.html](http://www.jsu.edu/epic/freedom_riders_park.html)>. Check for availability in Archive.org's Wayback machine. But look for updates, as this site now has National Historic Site status.

Ling, Peter J. "Tracing the Movement's Path." Review of Arsenault's *Freedom Riders*. *Reviews in American History* 35.2 (June 2007): 289-296. *JSTOR Database*. Web 5 Mar. 2013. <[www.jstor.org/stable/30031652](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30031652)>.

McWhorter, Diane. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. New York, et al.: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

McWhorter, Diane. *A Dream of Freedom*. Forward by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Scholastic, 2004.

Noble, Phil. *Beyond the Burning Bus: The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town*. Montgomery: New South Books, 2003.

Price, Sean. "Let the Freedom Rides Roll Through Your Class." Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. 21 Apr. 2011. Web. 1. Mar. 2013.

<<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/let-freedom-rides-roll-through-your-class>>.

Printout version available with list of linked resources. Now located at

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/let-the-freedom-rides-roll-through-your-class>

Sprayberry, Gary. "Mural Celebrates the Once-bustling History of West 15th Street."

*Anniston Star*. 9 Dec. 2012. Web. 19 Feb. 2013.

<[http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full\\_story/21074425/article-Mural-celebrates-the--once-bustling-history-of-West-15th-Street?instance=1st\\_right](http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full_story/21074425/article-Mural-celebrates-the--once-bustling-history-of-West-15th-Street?instance=1st_right)>.

Sprayberry, Gary S. (Gary Shane). "Town Among the Trees": Paternalism, Class, and Civil Rights in Aniston, Alabama, 1872 to present." Dissertation. 2003.

"Using Photographs to Teach Social Justice: Confronting Unjust Practices."

*Tolerance.org*. n.d. Web. 1 Mar. 2013. <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/using-photographs-teach-social-justice-confronting-unjust-pr>. Active at this address:

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/lessons/using-photographs-to-teach-social-justice-confronting-unjust-practices>

Williams, Erin. "Historic Hues: Local Artist John Will Davis Explores Black History in Exhibit." *Anniston Star*. 16 Sept. 2011. Web. 19 Feb. 2013.

<[http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full\\_story/15537774/article-Historic-hues--Local-artist-John-Will-Davis-explores-black-history-in-exhibit?instance=home\\_lifestyle](http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full_story/15537774/article-Historic-hues--Local-artist-John-Will-Davis-explores-black-history-in-exhibit?instance=home_lifestyle)>. Updated to this address, but behind a paywall, [https://www.annistonstar.com/features/entertainment/historic-hues-local-artist-john-will-davis-explores-black-history-in-exhibit/article\\_7871fd41-1cf5-544a-a79c-acc168f30b60.html](https://www.annistonstar.com/features/entertainment/historic-hues-local-artist-john-will-davis-explores-black-history-in-exhibit/article_7871fd41-1cf5-544a-a79c-acc168f30b60.html).

## **TWO: Freedom Riders Links and Web Resources**

(Current as of early Spring 2013) Not alphabetical: in order of significance:

Official site of PBS Freedom Riders, where the video streams, with bonus features, link to the complete Roster, and selected chapter viewing:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/watch>

Oprah Freedom Riders Program at her website: Oprah Freedom Riders Program, includes extra clips including interview with historian Raymond Arsenault, <http://www.oprah.com/packages/freedom-riders.html>

Oprah materials also available at: <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Oprah-Honors-Freedom-Riders>

Oprah Freedom Riders Program in 4 parts (not from an official site).

Part 1: [http://youtu.be/R-fHj\\_qfuDg](http://youtu.be/R-fHj_qfuDg) | part 2: <http://youtu.be/bRvganYwj0g> |  
part 3: <http://youtu.be/qTfqGLv1EZw> | part 4: <http://youtu.be/2UAmjKoJRUU>  
[No longer active]

"The Freedom Riders History." A good five-minute overview video of the full Freedom Riders campaign from *Smithsonian Magazine*: Still active June 2021,  
<http://youtu.be/1zBY6gkpbTg>

"Freedom Riders Recount Ala. Attack 50 Yrs. Later." CBS News. May 14, 2011 4:10 PM.  
This news account is a 3 min. 27 sec. video of Hank Thomas and others revisiting Anniston fifty years after. Also clips of Mural construction and remarks by Giri and Anniston councilman.  
<<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7366086n>>. Web 26. Feb. 2013.

### **THREE: Wider Resources: Websites**

*Eyes on the Prize*, episode 3 "ain't scared of your jails" concerns freedom riders.

Copyright Issues block this on YouTube, but the series streams through JSU Library. Link to Episode Three in the catalog,  
<http://jaxcat.jsu.edu/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=1958724>

*Breach of Peace*. Website promoting Etheridge's book and return of Freedom Riders to Mississippi, 2010. The website features a video with an audio clip of "Buses are a comin." Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon records the protest song with Flint Michigan choir. Blog postings record other highlights. Still active June 2021:  
<http://breachofpeace.com/blog/?p=368>

"50 years after the Freedom Riders." *Washington Post* Coverage of the film with slide shows: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/50-years-after-the-freedom-riders/2011/05/06/AF2d1cKG\\_gallery.html#photo=16](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/50-years-after-the-freedom-riders/2011/05/06/AF2d1cKG_gallery.html#photo=16) Slide 16 is of muralist Joseph Giri. Also notice slide 11 of mural outside Freedom Riders Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

Included in this Slide Show, 1 comment:

pastalioni

5/9/2011 7:19 AM CDT

I am John Postiglione. My father these photos of bus burning 64 total. The KKK came after my family to the point that we had to be protected by the F.B.I. I was spit on called N lover. We had death threats, cars destroyed and I saw my father hanged in effigy at a KKK meeting as I drove by. It was a hard time for black people, but equally as hard for me. My younger sister Valentyna had to be escorted to school by the F.B.I. One of the leaders of the KKK told my father and younger sister that they were going to murder one of our family members. To verify my comments, you can contact the B.C.R.I. and ask Wayne Coleman the head of archives. John Postiglione [slightly edited for spacing and spelling]

"Freedom Riders Remembered Fifty Years Later. *Christian Science Monitor* also has a slide show and trailer for PBS film:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2011/0505/Freedom-Riders-remembered-50-years-later-VIDEO>



*Mine Eyes Have Seen: Anniston's Place in Civil Rights History*. Produced by Anniston Museum of Natural History. DVD 2012. Available at Museum Store. In association with Vital Productions. Also now on YouTube in Three Parts. Part One:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVG47w2bhiw>

Mural Dedication, Anniston. WEAC TV 24. 14 Dec. 2012. News story:

<http://www.tv24.tv/news/?newsID=13873#>. Video:

[http://www.tv24.tv/videoPlayer/?video=/uploadedFiles/File/news\\_Other\\_1355546151.flv](http://www.tv24.tv/videoPlayer/?video=/uploadedFiles/File/news_Other_1355546151.flv)

Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance site is rich with resources, kits, access to magazine issues, the mix it up program. Originally:

<http://www.tolerance.org/> Now renamed: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/>

Spike Lee's HBO Documentary *4 Little Girls* 1.42.27 Available in two formats at JSU Library (streaming and DVD). Also at Amazon.

*You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow*. Film by Robin Washington on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, inspired by Irene Morgan's resistance to segregation that was the foundation of the Supreme Court Case, *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946),  
<http://www.robinwashington.com/jimcrow/>.

Clips of the Robin Washington documentary are available from:

Encyclopedia Virginia. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. 4 minutes. Still available, June 2021:

[http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media\\_player?mets\\_filename=evm00000831mets.xml](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00000831mets.xml)

Chapel Hill North Carolina Excerpt of 9:38. Still available June 2021,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W46I5WW5Ujg>